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## The Oracle of the Pig's Head

Taylor L. Denton

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Taylor L. Denton

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Louisiana State University

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# THE ORACLE OF THE PIG'S HEAD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by  
Taylor Denton  
B.A., University of Colorado Boulder, 2020  
May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

*The Oracle of the Pig's Head* is a collection of two poems, a short story, and a novel centered around themes of the role of the feminine body in society, monstrosity, disgust, divinity, and human impact on the environment. Inspired by other works of eco-criticism, gothic literature, surrealism, Appalachian folklore, and Greco-Roman mythology, this collection explores how marginalized bodies interact in a world forever altered by climate change.

Denton is primarily interested in how severe climate change has influenced not only human's overall relationship to the environment, but also how writers are meant to engage with a world riddled with the effects of global warming. In particular, Denton examines how feminized bodies, people of color, and queer bodies, are culturally positioned in relation to the natural world and the environment. Denton also analyzes concepts of 'disgust' and 'monstrosity' through the lens of the 'beastly' or 'untamed' natural environment, and how these elements have been demonized in a late-stage capitalist structure.

Inspired by the works of Carson McCullers, Madeline Miller, Anne Carson, John Cassavetes, Shirley Jackson, Leo Tolstoy, Euripides, as well as American folklorists, Denton's stories utilize the conventions of myth to craft a mythology of their own. Through the use of animal imagery and an emphasis on the environment as the ultimate storyteller, the characters in *The Oracle of the Pig's Head* must reckon with one of society's most prevalent questions - what does it mean to be human?

## AN INVOCATION TO BLESS THIS THESIS

Praise to divine Mistress Artemis,

She of the wolves and of the deer.

Blood-soaked high-priestess of the bear's jaw.

She of the hunt and of the fire.

Swift running archer who haunts the wilds and roams in the night.

She who dwells at the mountain peak.

She of the Earth and the Heavens

Her home is the womb and grave.

Bestower of death with showering arrows.

Strong-voiced worker from afar who whispers, "Kneel or be knelt."

Empress who bears sword and reins on her golden throne.

She of the lake, the marsh, and the harbor.

Far-shooter.

Lightbringer.

Dawn-breaker.

The stag and the hunter and the arrow as it flies.

The crescent moon, her silver bow Night is sweetest

when she rides on its back.

Beast. Death. Maiden. Feral child. Holy mother.

Singer of divine songs and leader of the dance

Which drives men to madness

Sweet-garlanded lady of the white bird, the toad, and the berry seed.

Whose hymns only beasts can sing.

She who grows the forest and she who sets is a blaze.

Bright goddess, beloved and loving.

Willow-bound and royal of cedar, walnut, and laurel.

Guardian who stands before the door.

Goddess queen of beasts and nymphs.

I call to you, as child to mother.

For green earth trembles beneath your feet

In your wake,

you leave mountains breathless.

And I, the stag, I welcome your arrow.

# FROM THE MOON AND MOUNT KYNTHOS

## Part 1: Recognition

I do not recall being born, just as I will not recall my death when it occurs. I only know that one day I was here and am still here. My mother was the one to name me. She said that I arrived at night when the moon shone in through her window. She swore to me, she swore, and that came from Mount Kynthos. She swore that I came from the temples of Zeus and Athena and named me for that place. Cynthia. That is my name and it arrived on a shard of moonlight.

If my name arrived in the moonlight, I must have arrived from there as well.

I am here just as my mother is here, and her mother who came before her. We are here and not in Greece, not at Mount Kynthos where the temples of Zeus and Athena still wait for me to return. And we are not on the moon. When I talk to my mother, we do not speak of how we arrived at this place. We never discuss it. I do not know how. Does she? I cannot know. I only know that I am here, suspended and held together by gravity. When I close my eyes, I am in the air and float above my house. I am in the sky above my house. I am the sky above my house.

When I look down, I am pulled back to Earth. I fall until I am in my bed and then I am awake. I am in my bedroom and I am a child again. ‘Almost a woman’ is what they promise me. The walls are a soft pink, the off-gray carpet is still downy from when my mother vacuumed earlier in the week. I am home. I am alone.

“Cynthia, get up, sweetie. You’re going to be late for school.” I  
am awake.

I blink and swallow. I can feel the saliva running down my throat and into my stomach. I have a body, and it aches. My mother runs her long, slender fingers over my forehead. Her skin is cool against mine and I am reminded that I came from somewhere within her. I arrived from



her, and now we are at a distance and we can never again close like that. If she is in the sky and I am in the sky then we are many millions of miles away.

My mother crinkles her brow. “You’re a little hot. Do you feel sick?”

I shrug. “No. A little off, maybe. I don’t know.”

My mother inhales through her nose slowly. “‘Off’ how?”

I tilt my head. “Do you remember telling me that I came here on a moonbeam? From Mount Kynthos?”

She looks taken aback for a moment. “I - yes. I remember. Stay here, honey, I’m going to take your temperature.”

I stared at her for a moment before nodding. She stands and leaves, and I remember that I am from a country, a large country that swallows land whole and spits out rotten air. America. I am American. If I am American, then I am not from Greece. I am not from Mount Kynthos, and neither Zeus nor Athena are waiting for me. And...I am not from the moon.

This cannot be.

This will not stand.

A nauseating faintness comes over me. My body cannot contain this. My body cannot survive this heat. I think for a moment that I might vomit. I do not. I lift my hands up in front of me. I have hands. I have a body. It is so easy to forget.

When my mother returns, she carries a white thermometer in one hand and a steaming mug in the other. She places the cool tip of the instrument in my mouth. The chill burns against the inside of my lips. She places the mug down on the bedside table and strokes her hand over

my hair. We wait. I stare at her while she waits with me. When the thermometer beeps, she sighs and purses her lips.

“You *do* have a fever, honey. I want you to sip on this once it cools a little,” she says, gesturing to the mug. “I’ve got to go into work in a minute, but I’ll try to get off at lunchtime. You just need to rest, and I’ll pick up something from the pharmacy on the way back. That sound alright?”

I try to listen. I do not succeed.

“Alright.”

She smiles and bends down to kiss my head. For a moment, I remember. I remember what it used to feel like to be one with her - as though I were still in the sky next to the same moon that birthed me. The moon should have left me inside. It was cool there. There was no heat, no pain in my gut and no ache in my spine. No fever.

I cannot be here. How did I get here?

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you,” I reply.

She leaves, and again I am alone and alive in my bedroom. When she shuts the door, my eyes float toward the ceiling.

If this is where I have always been, then there can be no going back to sleep. When I awaken, every morning, I will always be here and must stay awake with that knowledge. I know now that this is how it has always been. It has always been this infecting sickness that keeps us

bound to this place. There are others outside of this house, and they have always known that this is the way things are. There is no name I can give this fever; there is no earthly way to describe it.

This fever exists only to cannibalize itself. Does it not understand that my destruction will mean its destruction as well? This sickness: it has a mind. I can feel it pulsing through me.

Does it not know? Can it not feel its own death weighing down upon it as I begin to succumb?

Does it not know?

The fever begins to breathe; long, slow, echoing gasps within me. And for a moment, I am not myself. I am not Cynthia of the moon and Mount Kynthos. I am on a ship and I know only that there is a way out. For a moment, their fear penetrates me. It burns, this fever, and spreads a gnawing ache throughout my body. A body cannot contain this kind of pain. And then, for a moment, I see a distant horizon where I can break this fever and cross the ocean back toward the moon. But it lasts only a moment, this jubilation. It is small, it is not echoing. No matter what, no matter where I go on this Earthly plane, there will always be this fever. I will never feel this fleeting joy in full; this knowledge that there might be a way out. Hope has long since passed, and I am left in its wake. The fever knows. The fever wishes only to torment me; break me down until we are both devoured.

How did I get here? How do I get out?

How do I get out?

How do I make it across the sea to where the moon beckons the tides?

## Part 2: Realization

If I am from the moon, and if it was the night sky that made me - condensed me into something taut and pulsating, then it is this place alone that is making me sick. Not the moon.

Not the sky. It is this place that fills me with fever and makes my skin too hot to touch. It boils me from the inside out. The flesh of stars and moons do not become riddled with pain. Their skin is the stuff of the eternal. If I am from that place, then it is to that place I shall return. It is too that place that I *must* return. It is there that this fever can be cured and broken. It is there that my mother and I can fuse together as we once were. It is there that I will come home.

I feel tears well in my eyes as the thought settles upon me. I continue to stare up at the ceiling as water slowly trickles down past my temples and onto the pillow below me. How can I break through this ceiling? Like my fever, this white paint, bubbled and risen up like pimpled skin, keeps me from going back from my real home. It keeps me from the moon and holds me down. I would burn this white paint if I could. I would tear this fever apart with my bare hands and leave it bloody and raw on the ground before me.

I groan without meaning to as I slide from the bed. My feet tremble as they make an impact with the push carpet below me. The carpet is not my enemy as the ceiling is. The carpet grounds me. The carpet keeps me from falling away into the very core of the Earth, which lies in wait and seeks to devour me.

My head spins and swims as I rise fully. I waver on my unsteady legs, my stomach churning with sickness and bile again before I reach for the mug of tea that my mother left. It will replenish the water that I allowed to escape from my eyes. I cannot cry again. Nothing of me can remain here once I leave. Nothing can be left behind. When I return home, it must be all of

me that arrives - or as much of me is still left and has not been burned by the fever. A sudden, unexpected swell of excitement rises within me. This is it. This has to be it.

It is the journey there that will be perilous. Once we are out, that is when it will be safe to cry again if the urge still strikes. Did I used to cry while I lived inside the moon? I cannot recall.

My mother might know. I will ask when she returns. If my mother does not come with me, I know it will feel like death when I have to leave her. But this cannot stand. This cannot last. This must be undone and with it, I must be undone. That is the only way that the fever will break. This place is not worth the fever. It is not worth the pain. Supernovas are revolutionary.

If I myself had the power to do so, I would pull this fever from myself until it is outside of me and formed into the pulsating, raw, bloody mass I know it to be. I would force it to stare at itself in my bedroom mirror. I would make it bear witness to its own hideousness. And then, I would drive my nails into it as though they were knives. I would need nothing else save for what my body can provide me. I would tear this mass to shreds. I would keep it alive until the last possible moment so that it could feel its own pain. If I had the power, I would bring together all of those who must live with this fever in their bodies. There are so many more of us than the fever, and perhaps it could break with all of our collective might. I would do this by the night of the moon, and Zeus and Athena would look down in witness. However, although we outnumber the fever, the fever has spread us too thin. How can we fight when the fever has delved so far into our flesh and blood and bones? How do I call out to the others who have known this suffering? Where can I find us? I love you - where are you?

I blink, and the thought of purging the fever fades from me. No. I cannot falter now. I have my plan. I need my plan.

Have I truly only remembered all of this today? How have I survived in this place of sickness which seeks to infect me and poison me from within me? The killing may be loud, but

the act of the killing is steady and quiet. And who will judge a fever? Who will stop it from entering my room? It is too silent to follow and the scent that seeps from its very core cannot be tracked. I must keep this in my stomach and my chest and my spine and through my fingers and my head. Where is the cure? Who will rid me of it?

How have I lived with the fever for so long?

The tea had gone lukewarm by the time I remember that I am holding the mug. The tea cannot drive the sickness from me. Soon, the tea will have grown cold entirely. I cannot leave this room to make more; not yet. Not until I know my plan and not until my mother arrives. I cannot set out before she knows.

My mother too has felt this fever. We both carry it all though us. The house, the soft carpet and the pink walls - she built it all to try and keep me safe, but it was doomed from the beginning. Not even the house can stop the fever. She did what she could to keep the virus from infecting me, but nothing could stop it. Nothing can remove it from my veins.

I need to leave.

I need to go home.

### **Part 3: Escape**

My mother returns, as she promised, at lunchtime. She sighs and smiles when she sees me standing upright by the edge of my bed. She does not know what is about to happen.

“What are you doing up?”

I need to tell her. I need to tell her carefully.

“I’m breaking my fever.”

My mother does not stop smiling, though her brows crinkle. “How are you going to do that without medicine?”

“I have the medicine.”

“So do I,” she replies, holding up a white bag from the pharmacy. “Did you get all the tea down?”

I swallow. The sound is too loud. It echoes from all four corners of the room, bouncing off the pink walls, the plush carpet, and bubbled ceiling.

I cannot yet tell her that there are too many of me. A split occurred, I cannot recall when, and it has torn me asunder. I cannot tell her that I have needed to keep part of me hidden, buried underneath the body I now possess. This hidden, secret being is not named Cynthia. She has no name and she is not long for this world. The Cynthia I have needed to become has been for the benefit of my mother and for those who live outside of this house. They needed me to grow and function as a girl named Cynthia ought to function. But it is the other one of me who could not remain silent. She has no name and has been denied air and light for all my short years. It is her that my mother now faces; not just the Cynthia who will be expected to attend school tomorrow. There are too many of us within me now. I wish I could keep them secret. I’m glad that I no longer can.

“It’ll still be here,” I whisper. I wish I could have said it louder. “It won’t take it away, not now. Not anymore.”

My mother’s smile begins to fade. “Sweetheart, what are -”

“Did you mean it when you used to say that I came from the moon?” I asked. My voice breaks and I hate it. I hate that I cannot control my body, that I cannot control what happens to it. I hate the way this fever has infected all of me. “Did you mean it about Mount Kynthos?”

Perhaps that is where we can make the escape - from that mountaintop, where I first landed. Where the moon left us to fend for ourselves.

My mother paused for a moment before nodding. “Yes. I meant it.”

She does not sound steady. She sounds nervous. She ought to be. The fever is already in the house. We need to get it out. “Did you try to stop it? Did you try to stop it from happening?”

My mother shook her head. “Stop what?”

I begin to shake. My eyes start to water. I want to rip them from their sockets and hurl them on the carpet or at the pink wall. I want to tell myself to stop. I want to rip myself apart until the fever leaks out of me and evaporates into the air.

“I -” I halt, my voice wavering and refusing to steady. Damn the moon and damn the sky for leaving me here. Damn my mother for not stopping them. “We have to go home. I have to go home.”

“Baby, you *are* home.”

“There’s sickness here.”

“Cynthia -” My name means ‘from Mount Kynthos.’ Woman from the moon. That’s what my mother told me.



“I don’t want to be here,” I say. It comes out as a whimper. “I remember how it felt - in the sky where I used to be...”

I remember how it felt and what it used to be like before the fever infected me -

I remember...

Don’t I? Don’t I remember the moon and the way it felt to be born from the night sky? I must remember. If I cannot, then there is only this. This is only the fever, and the pink walls, and the ugly ceiling that keeps me from ascending from this room. This cannot be all there is; a sickness with no cure. No. I deserve more. My mother deserves more. This place is not for us.

This place is trying to kill me. If we could just be cool again...

When I cry, I cannot see my mother before me. She is lost to the veil of water. My body defiles me, the fever defiles my body.

I want to go home.

Stars need to die. No star can survive the pull of gravity; it must buckle. That is the way; that has to be the way. Stars cannot survive gravity just as I cannot survive this fever. Dead stars reveal what is beneath; what is real. Supernovas must occur for the black hole to be birthed. Supernovas must occur for the vivid, condensed bodies of neutron stars to form. There must be a death. There must be a death.

#### **Part 4: Freedom**

When I feel myself breathing again, I smell my mother’s perfume. I feel her shirt dampen beneath my cheek. I feel her arms encircle me. I feel her hand against my hair. I am crying. I am crying loudly, leaving rivers of myself behind. I am still here, in my room, in my house. I am still surrounded by the pink walls and the soft carpet and the ugly, popcorn ceiling. I am home. I

cannot go home. My mother's hand runs down my back. I tuck my face into the crook of her neck. She smells the same way she always has. Always. Zeus and Athena just smell like stone. Molded, gray stone. There is nothing gray in my mother - perhaps there is nothing gray in me.

“Cynthia, honey, just breathe. Just breathe.”

I shake my head. If I cannot break this ceiling, if I cannot tear this house apart, then I am doomed. We are doomed.

The event horizon is passing me. The event horizon has passed. The star, myself, the stars outside of myself that still hang in the sky, they have all experienced it. They have all felt it. I have felt it, too. My mother has felt it, even if she cannot say it to me. How, then, has she survived? Has she tried to leave, like me? Why did she stay?

I cling to her. I cling to her as I collapse. The gravity is too much. It pulls me under and suffocates me. It will kill me; no one can survive it. But nothing will come from this death - no black holes and no neutron stars.

My mother takes me into her lap. She rocks me as she did when I was a child - too young to remember, and yet I do.

“Cynthia, the fever will break. You're home, and the fever won't last forever.” I gasp and breathe out again. It comes out shuddering.

“It's in me,” I say. “It'll always be in me.”

My mother hums softly. “But you can still survive it.”

“But I can't -”

“You will survive it.”

I open my eyes, blinking against the water.

“It isn’t worth it,” I say. “It can’t be worth it.”

“You don’t know that yet.”

“I know enough.” My words come out bitter and harsh against my mother’s skin. If I could just make it back to the sky...

“Nothing has left you,” she tells me. “That isn’t how it works. It’s all still there. You haven’t lost it; the fever won’t kill you. I won’t let it. It’ll break, and you’ll still be alive when it does.”

I blink, and for the first time I can see again. “I...I can’t find my way back. I don’t know where I am.”

“You’re home. You’re with me. You’re here, you’re alive, and you’re still breathing. You’re here.”

I breathe, taking in my mother’s perfume. It is the same perfume she has always worn, the same perfume she will continue to wear. The perfume is within my nose and it fills my lungs and echoes throughout my body. I love her. She loves me. She is here and I am here, too.

I blink and realize for the first time today that the fever does not burn through me like fire any longer. It has not broken; I can still feel its hot fingers reaching up through my throat and past my eyes. But it does not threaten to reduce me to ash as it once did; not where my mother touches me. I realize that this must be the only thing that keeps the fever at bay. She keeps the

fever at bay. She holds me against her in the wake of all this pain and all this sickness and she does not flinch. She allows my flesh, warm as it is, to melt against hers. Is this, then, how she has survived for so long? It must be. I love her. She loves me. There is nothing that the fever can do to change that; so, it must be this. This must be what survives the fever's heat. I love you, mother. I love you.

I angle my head, and the popcorn ceiling comes back into view. There is a sky beyond that ceiling. When the night comes, the moon will rise above my head - just beyond my ceiling and just over my house. It will be there tonight as I sleep.

When will the fever break? I do not know. I can never know. But I am here. I am here and so is the fever - but so is the moon and so is the sky. We are all together, and that has to be enough. Because I cannot be here and also in the sky; and the sky cannot take me back. I would not survive it. It is not possible to return to the sky and still exist.

No...I am here. I am here.

## LUKE 12:24

ebony feathers cannot reap what has not been sown. down  
by the glowing sun who burns away old flesh.

made by who? they ask and  
there is no answer.

black beaks break open  
and take you in. all of you.

your tumors your clotted blood your filthy innards  
your rotting meat

it is here, on this mossy bed of the Earth's floor where  
you will be loved

the velvet of your skin the bright hue of your eye the  
sweet smell of your hair the soft color of your cheek

where you will be love love loved for the  
last time

winged harbingers arrive on echoes from somewhere  
beyond your sight

they dine on the core of you, melted open by the too-  
hot sun

they wait until nightfall they take  
your eyes tenderly

from your face they take  
your eyes first

they have seen you you are worthy  
of their hunger

they continue to feast

## THE ORACLE OF THE PIG'S HEAD

The wind kisses my cheeks gently, lifting my hair up off my shoulders. I watch the leaves in the trees as they moan and creak, whispering to each other. The sky is a soft blue, contrasted by the startling white of the clouds. I take a large breath inward and then allow it to seep out through my lips.

“Restless, aren’t they?” Tabitha says behind me.

“Mmm.”

I look back, watching Tabitha as she throws dirtied clothes into her bucket filled with soapy water.

“The forest seems uneasy. Disturbed,” I say. “Do you feel it?” She nods, her lips twisting up in a half-smile.

“I do. The trees have been that way for some time. The Stag must be trying to tell us something, sending us a message.”

I stiffened and my lips purse. *Nobody has seen The Stag in two decades. How do you even know it’s still out there?*

“Yes, I suppose that might be it,” I mutter.

Tabitha glances at me as she churns the filthy clothing up with a staff, her brow cocked. A sly smile lingers on her face.

“You don’t believe, do you? In The Stag?”

My lips part, my eyes widening. “What? Of course, I do. Everyone does.”

“Why lie to me now?” she questions, glancing away.

“I do not.”

She continues to spin the clothing. “Faith is always shaken at times like this, it is natural.

But do not lie. Lies like that cannot be sustained.”

My heart sinks, it drops down to the very pit of my stomach. That was hardly an idle comment, and she knew it. A small spark of resentment ignites within my chest.

“Do you need help with the washing?” I ask, my voice all at once small.

She shakes her head and scoffs.

“I am old, not weak,” she tells me.

My eyes cut down, my head cocking. In spite of myself, I grin for the first time that day. I look up at her again, taking in her brown skin; wrinkled and worn. Her body is delicate now, far more than it was even two years ago. Though I can still see the muscles underneath the folds of the flesh, shadows of her once-strong body. She was the great beauty of the village in her time, and one can extract the remnants of that young woman through her sculpted jawline and raised cheekbones.

“If you’re sure,” I say. “Then I’ll head back home.”

I uncross my arms, walking toward her. She stops her work for a moment, and I move forward so my forehead comes to rest against hers. Our eyelids flutter closed as we stand in silence. A few moments pass before I break away, and our ritual ends.

I take a hard breath inward, turning my back to begin the trek back to my house.

“I’ll see you soon, doe,” she calls behind me.

I flick my head to the side, raising my arm to wave.



When I was a child, the quiet walk back from Tabitha's house to mine felt eerie and unsettling. It seemed as though the trees were watching him, silent and waiting. I was always on edge, a tiny rat gnawed away at the back of my head. I was terrified that I would cross paths with some manner of spirit or demon. Yet, the older I become, the more I understand the silence. The more I respect it. The fear does not stop, I've simply learned to accept the dangers of the forest.

I look around, bending my neck and listening for sound. The only noise is the quiet singing of the river as it lazily travels and the wind humming through the trees. This part of the day is hot, brimming over with moist, humid air. Most everything is asleep, waiting for the cool nightfall.

I walk for some time, staring down at the rocks beneath my feet. Suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck, arms and legs stand on end. Even the long hair falling down from my skull seems to rise.

I spin around after stopping dead in my tracks.

"Hello?" I call, my voice quavering.

The leaves suddenly begin to shake with vigor and intensity at the sound of my voice. Icy terror drips down my skin, prickling through my spine.

I turn back around and walk faster, quietly singing a protection spell I learned from Tabitha a long while ago, when I was a little girl. But this song isn't for me.

It's for Faunia.

I go as fast as I can through the forest, rushing toward my house. Relief flows through me at the sight of my cottage, it appears to be salvation. I burst through the doors with gusto, flinging them closed behind me once I am inside.

I close my eyes for a moment, the back of my body propped up against the door's frame. I allow myself to catch my breath, pools of perspiration gather under my armpits and on the surfaces of my palm.

I was right when I sensed the perturbed state of the forest; something was wrong.

I swipe my tongue over my dry lips and swallow loudly. I open my eyes again, running my fingers through my hair. I push myself away from the door, my clammy fingertips moving to rest on my temple. Without taking another moment to consider, I hurry to my herb cabinet, my hand hovering over the different plants until I locate sage and lavender.

I travel hurriedly down to the main room of the house, throwing the herbs into a bowl. I get to work on creating a fire, knocking two flints together over the sage as I chant over them. Sparks fly quickly, and the leaves begin to burn. I can feel my body relaxing, and there is a noticeable shift in the house. Everything around me settles, quieting down. Whatever spirits followed me from the woods have been banished.

I sigh and collapse in my chair, watching the smoke from the herbs rise. The mist dances before my eyes, twisting and moving with lovely abandon. I feel my body sinking further and further into the chair. The weight of my soul grows heavy.

Darkness begins to encase me.

Just as I'm about to descend into slumber, an abrasive bark jolts me awake. I gasp, sitting up straight.

A little creature sits at my feet, a mushroom laying before my toes. She pushes it softly towards me with her nose. I purse my lips, crossing my arms.

"Is this penance?" I ask, stooping down to pick up the gift. "Feeling guilty for abandoning me?"

I stand, going to the kitchen. I hear the patter of Winifred's paws as she follows me.

"Why didn't you want to come? You used to love going to see Tabitha. Now all you want to do is sleep. Sleep and eat. You're not old enough for that sort of behavior."

Winifred makes a soft noise, somewhere between a whine and a growl. I've offended her. I roll my eyes, slipping out a knife to chop up the mushroom.

"Do *not* give me that. I'm worried about you. You've become so lazy," I say. I look at her. "Tomorrow we're going for a long walk." She lets out a huff of breath.

I raise my brow. "Everyone assures me you're a dog, but I still say you're a gremlin."

Winifred wags her tail, amused. I can't help but giggle under my breath.

I throw down a piece of the mushroom onto the floor and Winifred catches it in her mouth; she swallows without chewing. I place a cup of hot water over the fire, plopping the rest of the vegetables into the liquid. I work to season the soup with spices, flowers, and leaves. I add in more vegetables and sustenance from the forest.

I glance out of my window while the stew simmers. Strings with smoothed slices of wood and crystals tied to them hang from the sill, knocking together as the wind twirls them around. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Winifred sit, her head cocked. She feels it too. I kneel down, stroking my hand over her fur.

"I know, Winnie," I whisper. "Something's about to happen."

She looks up at me, her ebony black eyes staring into mine. I place my hands on my thighs, rising to a standing position and returning to my meal.

I stir and mix the soup, taking in a breath. I start to whisper over the mixture. The spell reaches its peak when the water bubbles, I can feel a change when it flows through the liquid. It has been some time since I was an Apprentice, yet I can still recall the basics of spell casting - despite my training having ceased.

My time as an Apprentice feels as though it all took place eons ago. Another lifetime, another existence. It feels as if I've been brewing this concoction everyday for as long as my memory can recall. It is numbingly familiar, and I bristle at the thought. It was not always this way. There was a time when mixing the stew was almost unbearable, knowing who the concoction was for. Now I'm used to it.

Has Faunia been gone so long? So long that making the soup has become a ritual? I clear my throat and finish the chant.

I fetch a small pail from the kitchen, pouring the soup inside and screwing the cap closed.

I do not feel right sitting in this house anymore. The weight of the walls around me is suffocating, the room is tight and closed in.

I'll get to Faunia earlier than usual, but I doubt anyone will mind.

I open the door, looking down at Winifred. "Coming, little gremlin? Or are you going to abandon me for the second time today?"

She huffs, rising to her feet and following me out the door.

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It has been two years since Faunia lived with me in the house, and three since I left the family home. Those early days with her in the cottage were the first and only time I'd understood the meaning of bliss. We had been living together for six months when her headaches started.

The headaches transformed into light fatigue, going to bed earlier and earlier in the day and not waking up until the late afternoon. The weakness followed quickly, and soon after she began walking with a cane, lacking the strength to continue on her own. Her appetite disappeared, and she had never been one to shy away from food before. In a matter of weeks, she wasted away, her once plump body becoming frail and bony. The healers gave her potions, they cast enchantments, they performed rituals, they prayed, but nothing could free her of her affliction. Her hair fell out in clumps. Her dark, silky skin became pale and riddled with sores. Her lungs failed, every breath and word was a struggle. Eventually, she was confined to her bed. I feed her, washed her, prayed and enacted what spells I could.

It was two years ago now, almost two years ago exactly, on my 19th birthday that I went into her room to spoon-feed her breakfast. It was almost two years ago exactly that I found her lying facedown on the floor. One arm was bent back, crooked and pale from lack of blood flow. Her brow twitched, her breathing was short and raspy - that was the only why I knew she was alive. I ran into the village, screaming all the way for someone to help me. My brother Devin had been the one who assisted me in carrying her to the healer's hut. Tabitha said she had weeks left, she all but promised. Weeks turned into months, and months have become almost two years exactly. Still, any day now. They tell me she could go any day.

She hasn't woken up once in almost two years.

"Elain," a voice calls behind me.

I cringe, my hand tightened around the handle of the pail. There's only one person who calls me by my full name. I turn around, taking care not to smile.

"Ceren," I say, greeting her cordially and without emotion.

She jogs towards me. “I didn’t expect to see you out here so early.”

My body tightens as she leans forward, knocking her forehead against mine before I have the chance to respond.

I shrug as I back away. “I didn’t feel like sitting in the house.”

She nods, and I can sense her aura dimming. She’s grown uncomfortable. “Are you going to see her?”

I narrow my eyes, hushed anger bubbling in my stomach. Why couldn’t she say her name? “Faunia. Yes.”

“Ah,” she whispers, glancing down at her feet. “Well, afterward, why don’t you come and take supper with us? We haven’t seen you in such a long time. Roe asks about you constantly, you know. He keeps asking, ‘When’s Auntie Laney coming to visit?’”

My heart softens a little at the thought of their little boy. Guilt pervades my soul. I admit, I haven’t been so eager to see Roe as he has been to see me. These last two years haven’t been the same between us. We used to have such fun. Now, I hardly know how to interact with him. It’s as though we speak two separate languages.

“I - I don’t think so. I’m not feeling well. And the way the forest is acting is...disquieting. I think I’ll just go home after I visit Faunia.”

Ceren’s jade eyes melt in disappointment. “Are you sure? We’d love to have you. Devin has been so worried. He misses you, Elain.”

*I miss him, too. I wouldn't have to miss him if you weren't around.*

“Some other time.” I glance down at Winifred, who has been sniffing at Ceren’s feet since she arrived. “Besides, I’m worried about Winnie.”

The dog glances up, almost seeming to glare at me.

Ceren’s body droops completely. “Alright. Some other time, then.”

She knows that I won’t be coming tomorrow, or the next day, or the next week. I spin on my heels, not putting my forehead to hers to say ‘goodbye’.

I walk away from her without another word, and Winifred follows slowly behind me. I feel Ceren’s sadness radiating like a heat onto my back, but I won’t turn around to look at her. I worry about the things I’ll say if I do.

Winifred and I travel in silence, and the pail full of soup sloshes beside me. I hum to break the silence and watch the trees.

It does not take long until I reach the heart of the village; the uneven cobblestones rub against my bare feet as I enter. A well sits proudly in the middle of the town, while cottages and huts surround the space in a horseshoe. Moss and ivy grow on the sides of huts, and some trees have even twisted about the houses. It’s the forest’s way of telling the citizens that it is God and The Stag who are truly in control and that we are at the mercy of the wildlife. The forest demands our respect. It allows us to survive and live here, it gives us clean water and soil to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Its trees provide protection and serve as guardians.

But we must remember that the forest is what gives us life, and it could take it away if it so desired.

The sky is a pale blue, and a soft breeze whips through the village. This world is a quiet one. People nod as they pass me, fetching water or sewing out in the mild sun. I pass by the hut of the oracles and mediums. Once I was an apprentice there, studying to be a bridge between this world and the invisible one, but I was a silly child then. Though, at the time, I admit I was considered to be quite the talent. There was even talk of my becoming a high priestess, an honor only ever granted to a handful of women. I pause and watch some of the women stand in a circle and pray, singing to God and The Stag. But only for a moment, then I hurry past them.

We care for each other here in the village. There is no hunger or thirst, disease and pain are reduced without cost to the ill. We all know one another, and we all love one another in our own way. Our existences are intertwined, whether or not we wish it or not. It should be a good life, and I used to think it was. I once believed that this place and these people were my paradise. When Faunia and I moved away together, everything was perfect. I was a rising star in my field, the love of my life loved me in return, and life was beyond pretty. By nature, I've never been the most joyous person, but I found peace. I found beauty, I found more than contentment.

There isn't a person in this village who thinks she'll wake up. Not her disinterested family, not the healers. Not Devin or Tabitha. Most people have even stopped saying her name like she's ceased to exist already. She's disappearing. Everyone is letting her go. But I know she isn't slipping away, I won't let her. And she wouldn't leave me. She'd never leave me.

I make my way to the healer's hut, throwing back the curtain and stepping inside. I bow shortly to the sculpture of the Stag's head that is plastered to the wall as I enter, and I am stuck with the mechanical nature of the action. The emptiness. During my life studying to be an oracle, the Stag was my connection to everything. Have I lost that connection? I swallow hard, shaking out my head and moving forward. Just as I know everyone in the village, I am well-acquainted



with the healers here. One of the youngest, a boy in the middle of his apprenticeship at the age of 15, smiles.

“Praise be to God,” he says, greeting me.

I try to smile, the familiar words of the healers ringing in my ears.

I rely halfheartedly, “Praise be to God.”

We place our foreheads together for just a moment.

“Here to see her again, Laney?”

I bite my lip, restraining myself from asking why he can’t say her name. “Yes.”

“Would you like me to escort you?” he asks.

I almost smile at his enthusiasm. His formality will dissipate with time. “No, I know the way. Thank you.”

I go past him and into Faunia’s room. Winifred stays behind, begging to be petted by the boy. When I enter, I see a man and a woman sitting at Faunia’s side. They nod their heads to me.

“Praise be to -”

“Praise be -”

“God.”

“To God.”

I grin, and I find that I’m actually happy to see them. They are two of the best healers in the village.

“I’ve brought her soup,” I say, holding up the pail.

“Ah, Laney, you’re a miracle,” she replies, taking the silver container from my hands.

“Has Tabitha not arrived yet?” I ask.

“No,” he answers. “Not quite yet. Soon, I imagine.”

I grin, stepping closer to them to place my foreheads against both of theirs.

My tone grows somber, as it does every day when I ask, “How is she?” They both look at each other, a grim expression crossing their faces.

My chest tightens. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Laney, she had an...episode last night.”

“What does that mean?”

“A kind of seizure. Her breathing stopped, her spirit was leaving this world. We all saw it beginning to ascend, but Tabitha caught it before it disconnected from her body completely. Just in time.”

I freeze, half-gasping for air. “What?”

Why did Tabitha not tell me just a few hours ago when I saw her?

“Come here, Laney,” he tells me. “Look at her.”

I do, gilding towards them in a trance. My head falls forward, my neck bending strangely as I examine my lover. I hardly even recognize her. Her face and cheeks are more hollowed than before, her legs have metamorphosed into spindly twigs, her stomach has bloated. I remember when her smooth black hair reached her hips, she’s lost every strand of it now. I listen to her wheeze, her body painstakingly forcing breath in and out.

I gasp, throwing my hand over my mouth and stepping away.

“Doe,” a voice whispers at my back.

I spin around, warm tears making my vision hazy.

“Why didn’t you tell me how bad she’d gotten?” I gasp, choking on my words. “How did this happen so quickly?”

Tabitha stands in her traditional garb, decorated with sashes, scarves and a headwrap.

Though suddenly, I find myself struggling to respect her authority as the healer’s leader.

“I was going to tell you tonight,” she says.

She walks forward to place our foreheads together. I step out of the way, avoiding her. She wilts but allows her lips to fall in a firm line and accepts it. The other healers clear their throats and look away. I’m sure they’d like to slap me for my disrespect.

“Help her!”

Tabitha’s eyes harden, but her voice remains soft and gentle as she questions tightly,

“What would you have me do?”

“Something! *Anything!* Help her instead of praying to some damned God who doesn’t care about any of us! Who probably doesn’t even exist.”

“Careful, child,” she says, a hint of rising anger in her firm warning. “Remember who I am, and remember who you speak of.”

I move to stand closer to her, my face inches from hers.

“*You,*” I growl. “You are nothing more than an old fool.”

A palm whips across my face, and a sharp pain cuts against my cheek. I stagger to the side and then collapse onto the ground. My hair falls in a curtain over my face.

The room is consumed with burning silence. I stare down at the dirt floor, my palms flat on the ground. A tear drips off my nose and splashes onto the floor. I begin to shake, red fury in my soul. I turn my head to look at her. Tabitha’s gaze is resolute. I calm my breathing, shakily rising. I straighten my back so I am taller than Tabitha.

“Save her,” I whisper. “You’d better save her.” I run out of the room and outside of the hut.

“Come on, Winifred!” I cry after me.

I hear her follow me, her little paws bounding beside me. I see Devin out of the corner of my eye as I sprint away, balancing two buckets of water between a pole on his shoulders. He stops moving, his sable curls blowing in the breeze. His brown eyes latch onto me as I run pasted him.

“Laney! Laney, what’s wrong?” he shouts at me.

I don’t answer.

I run until my legs are too sore to keep up the pace. I drop down to sit down on the path, drenched in sweat. Winifred is hesitant to come up to sit next to me. I put my hand to the swollen spot on my cheek where Tabitha struck me. It burns, stinging under my own touch.

Faunia is leaving me. She’s dying, really dying.

Perhaps this is the reason for the forest's restlessness. What if Death is coming for her? I breathe harder, my eyes getting misty again. I gather my legs to my chest, resting my forehead on my knees. I sit there until the sun starts to settle down into the horizon.

"Laney! Laney."

I lift my head, looking down at the trail. I watch my brother coming towards me, the pole still balanced on his shoulders. Has he been looking for me all this time? With the water still hanging over him all the time?

He walks quickly, and I can see the strain of the weight from his pails. He sets them both down on the ground, jogging in my direction. I want to resist him. I want to repel him. After he married Ceren, he lost interest in me. He's the one who married her and split apart our family. He never came to visit Faunia or me, he never helped me while she was still awake.

But we used to be close.

I stand up, not going to meet him. I let him come to me instead.

He doesn't say anything at first, grabbing my shoulders. Then he slams his forehead into mine. It hurts when he does it, but my body instantly weakens at this show of affection. I sigh, my eyelids sinking closed as our heads rest press each other. I don't touch him; I don't say a word. After some time, he disconnects his head from mine.

"They told me what happened."

I know my eyes must be red, and I feel instant shame.

"Who told you what?" I ask.

“Tabitha and the healers,” he says, taking a small step back. “They told me about Faunia, they told me what you said and what Tabitha did. What were you thinking, little sister?” When I try to swallow, it feels like a wad of sand in my throat.

“Come and stay at our house tonight. You shouldn’t be alone, not now,” he says.

“I’m not alone. Winnie will be with me.”

He sighs. “You should be with your family.”

My fists tighten. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

His mouth drops open, his eyebrows arching. “What? No, that’s not what I -”

“I’m not a child, Devin.”

“I never said you were,” he mutters defensively. “I’m just worried about you, all alone in that cottage.”

“That’s my home.”

“I know, I know,” he says. He reaches back to tighten the band on his ponytail. He always does that when he’s nervous. “But we’re your family. Roe, me, Ceren.”

“No, you’re not. Faunia is,” I nearly hiss.

Devin’s face goes pale and bleak, and hatred twists around my heart. All I do is hurt people. Even before Faunia fell ill, I still wasn’t easy to be around. I’m moody, and my temper is fiery and unpredictable, but when I was young, I always meant well. I don’t know if I can say that anymore.

Out of impulse, I throw myself against him, my arms tightening around his back. He reacts immediately, embracing me around my upper body. I lean into his chest, letting my eyes shut. Though I don't allow myself to stay in that position for long, and quickly move to back out. He lets his arms fall away from me to rest at his sides.

“Go home, Devin, don't worry about me.” As I turn around to leave, I murmur, “You haven't for a long time, anyway. No need to start now.”

I nearly weep as I continue walking. I don't know why I say things like that.

I reach my house just as the sun goes to sleep in the dusk. I open the door and Winifred gallops inside. I stop to look at the door as I enter. There's a picture of the Stag I painted when I first moved in. It isn't particularly impressive; I don't possess any artistic talent worth noting. I did it for protection, I trusted in God and the Stag to stand guard over my home.

I sigh, entering the house.

How do we know that any of the spells we enact or the enchantments we cast or the charms we use do anything at all?

How do we even know the Stag exists? What if people have just been seeing an ordinary deer all this time?

Winifred huddles on her bed before I can even get her meal for the night. “I'm not hungry either, girl,” I say softly, going to light a candle.

I fix her meal nonetheless, setting the bowl beside her.

I go to my room, laying down on my mattress. I don't strip my clothes or even get under the covers. I just curl up into a ball, and let the darkness take me.

Three days pass. Faunia's condition does not improve while they do. They pour the soup I make her down her throat and pray. There isn't much else to be done, at least that's what they tell me. Tabitha and I avoid each other, stepping around one another's presence.

Faunia worsens every day. Devin and I don't speak.

When I'm not with her, I watch the wind that whips through the trees. The air grows colder. I think back to the stories I grew up with - the ones I worshipped as an Apprentice.

Ancient texts spoke of a massive stag that lives in the forest surrounding the village. The Stag is said to be mammoth in size compared to any other deer. For the last few centuries, seeing the Stag has been said to mean various things. Some think it means a death in the village is imminent, some say that it brings good tidings, but most believe it represents God communicating with us directly.

Sightings of the Stag have decreased over the years. People used to wander into the forest to search for it and never return. My people came to believe that the Stag is a child of the universe, a supernatural entity that cannot die. It is our true connection to God, the cosmos, and the wild world around us.

However, as the years passed, the villagers stopped going into the forest to look for the Stag. The dangers have become too great.

It has been twenty years since the Stag was seen last.

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"I'm leaving."

"What? Where? Where are you going?"



“Into the forest,” I say.

Devin pulls his ponytail over his shoulder, tugging at it. “What does that mean? ‘Into the forest?’”

“It means what it means, brother,” I reply.

I go about the house, placing things into storage and organizing. It’s been forever since I cleaned.

“Well, you’re not going alone,” he tells me.

“It’s not your decision. Besides, you can’t leave Ceren and Roe. Your son needs you and Ceren can’t care for him alone.”

“Laney, please. Listen to me -”

I tune him out, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look like such a child, and I feel like a baby. What right do I have, venturing out into the woods?

I shake off the thought, setting back to continuing my work.

“Why? I don’t understand what reason you have to do this,” Devin says.

I stop again, my hand on a bundle of dried roses. I look at him.

“I’m going to find the Stag, and ask for its help.”

His voice becomes quieter. “The Stag? What help do you mean?”

I’m silent for a moment. “For Faunia. I’m going to find a way to heal her.”

Devin’s eyes scan me, his lips sealing closed. I watch his face sag, a shadow falling over his eyes.

I push some hair back behind my ears, quietly placing the roses in a wicker basket. I don't know what to say next. He knows he can't stop me, he understands that nothing he says can change my mind.

A little part of me wishes he could.

I don't even know what I'm going to do out there. I've never seen the Stag for myself, nobody has in twenty years. So what exactly can I hope to accomplish?

I've also never been into the depths of the forest. I've only been far enough in so that I could still see the village if I turned around. My mother used to tell me always to stay in her line of sight, that the demons of the forest would eat me if I wasn't careful.

She'd have a conniption if she could see me now.

"You understand how dangerous it is, what the risks are, don't you?" Devin nearly whispers, crossing his arms and leaning against the frame of my door.

I know what he means. "Yes. I haven't forgotten Mom and Dad."

"It sounds to me like you have."

I turn rigid. I nearly howl out a rebuff, but then I look at his face. Devin was always so much closer to our parents than I was.

I would throw fits, argue, have tantrums when I didn't get my way. Devin was well-behaved, calm, and easily manageable. They adored him as they were frustrated with me.

When I was eleven and Devin was sixteen, my mother and father went to pick berries and gather flowers. They came across a young buck, with the most terrific antlers. They wanted the antlers for the village, to display and worship.

The hunting of deer is strictly forbidden in our culture, as a sign of respect for The Stag. I don't think my parents wanted the buck dead. Surely they meant to put it to knock it unconscious, then saw the antlers off before it could wake up.

I tell myself a great many things.

After chasing the animal for several miles, my mother snuck up on it, jamming a wooden spike into its chest. It died slowly, and then they defiled it, slicing its antlers away from it. But something found and attacked them. The assailant tore my mother apart, ripped her limbs from her body, and destroyed her face. She was just a shredded mass of meat by the time everyone found her.

My father escaped, having lost a leg to their attackers, and dragged himself back to the village. Devin saw him first, running outside so quickly I remember I thought he was flying. I had stayed in the doorway, too shocked or too cowardly to do anything. My father told my brother what had happened, what they'd done. Devin sobbed and held my father as his life drained away. He died in his arms His last words were, 'you are my pride, my son, my pride and my light.'

I can still hear Devin's scream once he realized he was dead. It was like the screech of a bird while its wings were being severed from its body.

"This isn't going to be like that, Devin," I say. My words are meant to sound comforting, but they come out angry and accusatory.

I watch him as he breathes out shakily, his eyes going red.

"Will you do one thing for me?" he asks. I can hear he's just a few words away from crying.

I stay silent, waiting to hear his request.

“Come have dinner at my house tonight,” he says. “I want Roe to see you one last time. I want him to remember what you looked like.”

I go still, and Devin rushes out of my house before I can see him break.

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Devin and Ceren married he was twenty and she was twenty-one, Roe was born that same year. I was fifteen at the time. Ceren and I were never close, not even when they were courting.

But the prospect of a nephew had excited me.

I doted on Roe as a baby and held him whenever I could. I was the only person who would get him to stop crying. I have a difficult time bonding with most people, but the connection I had with him was natural. He would start to wail whenever I left him alone with them.

“How long will you be gone?” Roe asks me almost immediately after I arrive at my brother’s house for supper, his little voice questioning.

“I don’t know,” I reply, not able to bring myself to look into his eyes. I look down at my bowl, spinning noodles around with my spoon.

Ceren and Devin bring eggs in on a platter, barely cooked and looking as they did when they were first cracked. They set the dishes down in the middle of the table.

My brother has obviously been crying. Ceren’s posture is upright, her face drawn. They both act like they’re attending a funeral.

I shove two eggs onto my noodles, pinching a little pepper between my fingers and sprinkling it in my food. They've made this meal because they know it's my favorite. They've made it as a goodbye.

Roe watches me, not making a move to touch his food.

"Why do you have to leave?"

"I just do," I reply.

I take a long drink of water.

"Can I come with you?" my nephew asks.

A hard knot catches in my throat at that.

"No," I whisper. "You can't." Roe looks to my brother.

"Papa?" he begs, looking for an explanation.

Devin rubs hard at his forehead, shielding his eyes and not answering. His shoulders quiver slightly.

I look down to Roe. His eyes are a light green like Ceren's. Perhaps my brother and his wife are right, maybe this journey will kill me. I might end up like my mother, eaten and ravaged in the woods. Or they may never even find my body. Nobody will know my fate, and I'll be some tragic legend.

My heart quickens. This isn't how I want Roe to remember me.

"Hey," I say, reaching down to tickle his stomach. He leans back from me at first, huffy and confused. "You know why I can't tell you?" He looks up at me, shaking his head.

“It’s because I’m going on a secret mission.”

His eyes widen. “A secret mission?”

“Uh-huh,” I say. It’s all coming back to me, the way I used to play with him like this.

“God is sending me far, far away to do something very important.”

Roe grins, biting his bottom lip. “Come on, just tell me!”

“Nope,” I say coyly. “God made me promise to keep it to myself. Besides, if I tell you, it won’t be a secret anymore.”

He scoots out of his chair, kneeling on the ground.

“I’m going to pray before I eat. Maybe God will tell me about it if I do.” He says, excitement trimmed in his voice.

I smile at him, scooping a spoonful of noodles and an egg into my mouth. He’s got some of my blood running through his veins because of Devin. Even if I do perish in the forest, a part of me might live on in this child.

Maybe that’s a silly thought, but it comforts me somehow.

After a few minutes of the three of us watching Roe mutter to himself quietly, Ceren finally says, “Come on, son. Get up, your food’s getting cold.”

Roe stays down for just a few seconds more, coming back up to the table after a moment. He starts throwing noodles and eggs into his mouth like he hasn’t eaten in weeks.

I grin at Devin and my sister-in-law, expecting them to be smiling at their son’s renewed appetite, but they still look abjectly miserable.

My beaming smirk fades, and I go back to my food.

“Roe, you love Aunt Laney, don’t you?” Devin asks, his voice low and serious.

Roe stops nearly choking down his food to nod and say, “Yes, papa.”

“And you want her to be safe, right?”

“Yes, papa.”

Then my brother looks right at me. “How would you feel if something happened to Aunt Laney?”

“Stop it, Devin,” I gnarl under my breath.

“I - I don’t know,” Roe whispers.

“Would you be sad?” Devin continues.

“Yeah,” Roe says, his voice hushed.

“You would be very sad if Aunt Laney never came back,” Devin says, the harshness in his eyes intensifying.

“Devin,” I warn. “Stop.”

He purses his lips, growing silent. He puts both elbows on the table and lets his head drop into his hands. Ceren places her hand on his back.

I boil from the inside. He doesn’t believe in me at all. He thinks it’s happening all over again, that I’ll be crawling back to the village, leaving a trail of blood behind me. He thinks he’ll be holding me as my spirit passes into the next world.

He thinks I’m just like father and mother.

I finish the last of my meal quickly, rising to my feet.

“I really should be going,” I say.

All three of them look up at me.

“So soon?” Ceren asks.

“I left Winnie at home, she’ll need to be fed. And I should rest, I go the moment the dawn breaks.”

“For your secret mission?” Roe questions.

I smile, tapping his cheek with my forefinger. “Yes, for my secret mission.”

Devin stands. “Before you go, I need to give you something.”

He goes into the back room, coming back out with a purple silk ribbon.

He moves forward, holding out the cloth to me. “Ceren and I were saving this for your birthday, but I think it’ll serve you better now.” I take the ribbon from him. “You can - you can tie your hair back with it. So it won’t get in the way.” My lips part.

“I -” I begin, shaking my head. I don’t know what to say. “Thank you.”

I reach back behind me, binding my hair up on the back of my skull, tying the ribbon in a bow. The heavy weight of my hair lifts.

Ceren purses her lips. “That color is beautiful on you.”

I look down. I’m not sure what else to do, so I say, “Thank you.” again.

After a long moment of standing in silence, I make my way to the door. The three of them hurry after me. I step out into the night, but suddenly feel a force collide with my waist and



hips.

I turn around. Roe has latched himself to me.

“Does God have to take you away?”

My eyes fall shut for just a moment, then I click my tongue and detach his arms from around my stomach.

“God isn’t forcing me to do anything I don’t wish to do. This is my choice,” I say, turning to face him. “Remember this, Roe. Remember what I say; that leaving was *my* choice.

Alright?”

He looks a little dazed, blinking at me, but nods. I lean down and put my forehead against his gently. Then I rise, allowing Ceren to do the same. Then I turn to my brother. He looks at the ribbon in my hair, then leans closer to me, and his skull comes colliding with mine.

“I wish you luck, sister,” he says. “I wish you every luck, truly.” We back away from one another.

“Thank you,” I reply stiffly.

I start to walk away, backing up so I can keep my eyes on them. Finally, I turn around. My legs and body tremble. This may be the last time I see Roe or my brother. My chest has a solid ache as I make my way towards my cottage.

I’ve walked this route hundreds of times. I could find my way here blindfolded. I know the curve of the hills, the deviations in this path, the smell of the flowers.

But what if this is my final trip?

I look around me, not yet accustomed to the way my hair feels tied up.

I remember my days of innocence when I believed we were safe here in the village. when I thought I could be happy here forever. I used to think we were guarded from the demons and malevolent spirits of the forest and the places beyond. I believed completely in the Stag, I had no doubts about the constancy of its protection and I took comfort in my fervent devotion to God. That's why I decided to become an Apprentice to the Oracles. From the time I was fourteen to seventeen my religious faith guided me while I trained under them.

I gave it up when Faunia got sick. I lost something; something that allowed me to work in the world of the unseen, or to even know for certain that it existed in the first place.

I walk until I see the light of the village. They've lit the candles already. I can see the soft light of the flames burning before me.

I hear muffled singing as I enter the horseshoe. I stop walking, looking around me. Even though I can't see it, I know where it comes from - the Oracle's tent. My ears perk up as it surrounds the village, like a glow.

I know that song.

I close my eyes and listen to the serenade in the Ancient Language.

*Oh, honored Mother, God's Gift, and man's Tormentor. Fairy of the forest and Great Stag, we pray to you. Daughter to God, we ask for your protection. We honor you, we celebrate your glory. Deliver our message unto God. We thank you, thank you, we are grateful, for you who have granted us existence.*

I sang that hymn on several occasions during my apprenticeship. The song is a blessing, a chant. It's a prayer. But they must have a reason to sing it now, it isn't just something to be used idly.

Then it hits me.

*I'm* the reason. They must know I'm leaving, perhaps Devin told someone earlier today and it spread, as word often does around here.

My people are saying goodbye to me.

I duck my head, hurrying into the healer's hut.

I hide behind the curtains as healers mull around. Once my path is clear, I scurry through into Faunia's room.

I walk towards her bed, my eyes drifting down to her. She looks worse than yesterday. If I didn't already know it was her, I wouldn't even recognize the being before me.

I kneel beside her bed, putting my hand over the crown of her skull.

"Can you hear me, my love?" I whisper, the tip of my nose against her temple. "Please wait for me. Please hold on until I return. I'm going to save you. I'm going to heal you, so just wait. I'll be back before you even know I've gone, yes? Just stay here and wait for me, I'm going to make you better. I won't stop until I find a way, so don't leave until then." I shut my eyes so tight they hurt.

"I love you."

Then I run out, quickly, before anyone can see me.

\*\*\*

I fasten back my hair, twirling the ribbon into a bow. Winifred watches me dress and prepare to go. I can see her eyes questioning me.

"Don't look at me like that, gremlin," I say, trying not to sound as sentimental as I feel.

“You can’t come with me. Devin will take good care of you, you’ve always liked him.” She whines, scratching at the floor.

“Stop it. I can’t be distracted with worrying about you. Besides, the forest is dangerous. The creatures in there eat gremlins like you for breakfast. They’d mistake you for a rabbit, or maybe just a large rat.”

She huffs, knocking her head against my leg.

“Winnie,” I moan. “Please, stop. You can’t come with me.”

She huffs again, sitting on my bare foot and wagging her tail. Her pleading eyes gaze up at me. I chuckle, shaking my head.

“You’ve gotten to be a bone-headed, stubborn little thing haven’t you?” She licks me, her tiny tongue tickling the top of my foot.

“Alright, alright. Fine. You can come. I was a fool for thinking you’d ever do what I tell you. But don’t blame me if you get eaten,” I say, bending down to scratch her head.

I look out the window. The first hint of light has breached the horizon.

It’s time to go. If I don’t do it now, I doubt I ever will.

I let out a breath of air, taking one last look around the cottage. God only knows if and when I’ll ever see this place again. This place is my home. This was my home with Faunia, and I’m letting it go. I let my hand rest on the frame of the doorway, the wood rough under my fingertips.

Then I go to the door. I fling my head back over my shoulder as I go, and close the entryway behind me. My mediocre painting of the Stag is the last thing I see as I run towards the woods and into the beckoning trees.

\*\*\*

I calm my pace once I am within the woods. It feels like I've broken some sort of barrier. I look up at the interwoven branches of trees above me. They blot out the severe radiating power of the sun, leaving only speckles of light streaming down to the ground. Winifred bounces from rock to rock, sniffing and urinating on a dozen different plants. These are flowers she's never seen, smells she never knew existed. I look around, disorientated by the freshness of my surroundings. The forest is immense, lush bushes and plants sprout all around me. Butterflies flutter in droves, tiny birds not much larger than my thumb feed on the flowers.

I spin in a circle, taking in everything.

This is another world, an entirely different dimension.

I hear a bark and see Winifred running off. I blink a few times, then break out of my trance. I realize that my dog is escaping my line of sight.

"Winnie!" I scream, bolting off after her.

I never knew such a small being could run so fast.

"Winnie! Stop! Come here!" I shout, moss and grass crushing under the pads of my feet.

I go faster, getting closer to the fluffy beast. That is when I see what she's chasing, a little field mouse.

I reach forward, latching onto her body. I pull her up and against my chest in one fluid movement. She squirms in my arms, fighting against my hold.

“Quit, Winnie,” I command.

She doesn’t bother to listen. I look down at the little field mouse, quivering in fear underneath a rock. I smile. “Sorry, little one. I’ve got her, you can go now.”

The mouse peaks its head out before it bolts, running quickly in the other direction. Suddenly, a flash of orange bounds out of the brush, landing on the field mouse.

I gasp, and the animal plucks the mouse from the ground. It holds its tail in between its teeth and tosses it up in the air. The mouse wails, flailing in the air. The orange beast opens its jaws wide. The mouse falls in, and an unheavenly crunch echoes through the air as it clamps its mouth shut. The mouse stops screaming.

I get a good look at the animal and realize that it’s a fox. It’s bigger than any fox I’ve ever seen, with three tails attached to its backside.

The fox swallows, tipping its head back to gulp down the mouse, even the bones. I breathe hard, clutching Winifred to me.

“Ah,” the beast says, its voice low and deep and smooth. “A human. I haven’t seen a child of God in the forest for some time.”

I nod, holding onto a tree for support. “Yes. I - I’m a human.”

“I just said that,” he said, standing up and slinking towards me. “Didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I say breathlessly. “You did.”

The fox tilts his head. He starts to move towards me, prowling around me in a tight circle.

“You seem upset. Distracted. Why is that?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not, I’m fine.”

It’s so obviously a lie. I wonder if he can tell.

“Is that so? Well, I’m not. I’m starving. There’s a pit in my stomach, you see,” he says, his eyes turn to Winifred, a hint of savagery lingering in them. “What is that you carry? It smells divine.”

Panic rushes through my bloodstream. I shield Winifred with my arms.

“She’s not for you,” I say.

“No?” he asks, lurking closer to me. “Who are you to tell me that?” I tilt my head forward, baring my teeth. I try to keep my gaze firm.

“Stay away from my dog.”

“I’ll make you a deal, how does that sound?” he says. “I know you’re looking for something. I can see it in your eyes. Tell me what it is you seek, and I’ll tell you where to find it. Just give me the mutilated wolf in return.”

“No,” I answer, no hesitation in my reply.

“No?” he asks, seeming to be genuinely surprised. “No. Ah, well. You humans can never accept hard truths.” He begins to walk away from me. “The dog will die one day, this way you could have gotten something out of it.”

He saunters off into the depths of the forest. Before he jumps back into the bushes, he looks back at me. He lets out an amused chuckle that continues until he disappears from view.

I sit down on a rock, lying down on the bed of flowers beneath me. Winifred worms away from me, looking where the fox came and went.

I need to be more careful. I need to keep my guard up. This place is as beautiful as it is deadly. If I want both Winifred and myself to make it out of here, I have to be cunning.

The breeze is soft, and Winifred comes to perch next to me. I look over to her, still on my back, and stroke her.

“Don’t be so stupid next time. I may not always be able to save you.” She lays down next to me, placing her head between her paws.

“Listen, I warned you about this before we left.”

I look back at the sunlight from the breaks in the leaves.

We can’t have been out here for more than a couple of hours, yet there’s barely any visible sunlight left. Time passes differently here.

“She protected the wolf runt,” a voice whispers.

I bolt upright, standing.

“I know. What did you think she’d do?”

“I thought she’d give it to the fox.”

“You have little faith in the humans.”

“Why should I have any?”

I look around, my head nearly spinning with the jerkiness of my movements.

“Who’s there?” I ask.

The voices stop. Even the wind seems to stop blowing around me.



“She can hear us. Why?” the same voice continues.

“Our sister must know she’s here.”

Winifred starts barking, yapping at the massive trees.

I look at her, then back at the tree. I walk tentatively to it, laying my hand on the trunk.

My eyes scan the length of the tree, all the way up to its flowering branches.

“She knows,” the voice says.

Tree spirits. It’s the only thing I can imagine. Out of impulse, I rest my forehead against the trunk of the tree.

A gust of air pushes me back from the tree’s trunk. Leaves and branches rip from the tree, and large chunks of bark are torn from the base of the plant.

I shield my face as Winifred continues to bark. Then, just as quickly as the commotion began, it ends. I open my eyes, and look at Winifred first to make sure she’s alright. She is, she even wags her tail. I turn my gaze up, and my body nearly goes slack when I see what sits at the top of the tree. It’s a humanoid being, neither man nor woman, it’s body is made of bent pieces of bark, twigs, and leaves making up its head and neck. It looks regal, beautiful, and balanced on the top of the branches.

My first impulse is to bow, but I resist the urge, not wanting to appear foolish.

“Hello? Dryads?” I ask.

I look around me and see more of them. At least five sit in separate trees. Their appearance varies, though each noble. They drop their heads down shyly. One slides their back into the tree, and the tree seems to consume them.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to offend you.” None of them answer me.

“I’m looking for the ancient Stag. Do you know where I can find it?”

One of the spirits brightens up. “Our sister! You seek Godiva?”

My eyebrows furrow. “Godiva? No, I don’t know who that is. I’m trying to find the Fairy of the forest, the Stag.”

The dryads look at one another, then begin to giggle.

“They are one and the same, silly girl.” The one nearest to me whispers, covering their mouth to stop their giggling laughter.

I’m taken aback. I’ve never heard of this Godiva.

“Well, do you know where I might find the Stag, good spirit?”

One of them, made from a cherry blossom, points to the East, then says, “I think she went that way. She knows you’re here.”

I look in the direction of the dryad’s finger.

I smile, looking at all of them.

“Thank you,” I say, “truly.”

I get down on one knee, my arm resting on my thigh. The light giggles increase, and when I raise my head to look at them again, they’ve gone, melded back into the trees.

I rise, still smiling.

“Come on, Winnie.”

We begin to travel East as the light continues to fade.

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I start to worry when I notice my shadow has almost disappeared. It doesn't get colder though. At home, when dusk would begin to fall, the temperature would collapse. There were some nights we couldn't even go outside.

But something is keeping the forest warm.

I keep my eyes on the ground, looking for plants I recognize. I select toadstools and berries I'm sure won't be poisonous.

I toss some to Winifred and eat the rest myself.

"Well, girl," I sigh. "Maybe we should find somewhere to sleep tonight." I look up at the immensely tall trees. I bet we'd have a better chance at safety up there.

As I'm about to grab Winifred and start to climb, a rustle catches my attention. I stop moving, even quieting my breathing. Winifred senses my worry.

A sleek figure is before me. The darkness of the twilight makes it difficult for me to see, but I have enough light to make out that what I see is a panther. It's as black as the night sky, its jaws could crush my skull if it desired.

I've never seen anything so striking or grand. It's deeply frightening, yet imperial and transcendent.

But it isn't looking at me, it's looking towards the East.

When I see what it's looking at, my heart seems to stop beating in my chest.

I've seen so many drawings, I've heard the tales since I was a baby. I've worshipped statues and sculptures, and I've been told to pray to this being all my life. Yet nothing, nothing

compares to seeing it for myself.

The Stag stands on a hill, on the top of a meadow. It stands three times as tall as me, its antlers are almost as towering. They branch out towards the sky. Its mane is dark, its hide shimmering. It looks out across the forest, its ears twitching.

A tear drips down my cheek.

“It’s real,” I whisper.

A low growl emerges from the panther. I look at the animal, realizing suddenly what it’s hunting. It’s close to the ground, stalking the Stag.

I look back at the deer.

My eyes go wide, and something inside of me turns wild.

“Run!” I scream at the Stag. “Run, now!”

The Stag looks at me, its brown eyes boring into mine. It turns its gaze to the panther, making no move to get away.

“Go! Go! Run, please!” I squawk.

The Stag continues to stare at its predator.

The panther inches closer.

I rush forward, throwing all my weight into tackling the beautiful beast to the ground. We roll together, tumbling down the hill. The panther screams, it’s growl fierce. I don’t break my hold on the panther’s glossy fur.

Its claws thrash, nearly catching on my skin once. I let go of the panther, and we both go flying in separate directions. Before I can even stand up, two huge paws pin my shoulders to the ground.

The panther snarls as it looks down at me, letting its weight crush down on my body. I don't plead or beg, or do anything. I just stare up at it in awe.

Its eyes glow bright with fury at my insolence.

I want to apologize, to let my head rest and allow it to do whatever it likes. But I also want to roar, I want to scratch at it until it's bloody and fears me.

The panther's face starts to settle, and it backs away. Its paws dig into my stomach and my legs, and then it's off my body. I sit up, just barely catching a glimpse of it before it dives out of view.

I scramble to my feet, shaking so badly I can hardly accomplish the task. I look myself over, realizing, to my surprise, that there isn't a scratch on me. Why didn't that creature kill me when it had the chance? I disrespected it, I attacked it, and it would have had every right. Yet, I don't have a single mark.

Why would it spare my life?

I turn around, jogging back up the hill. Winifred stands a few feet away, barking so hard all four paws leave the ground each time she does it.

Despite everything, I manage a kind of grin.

"You were a big help."

She runs up to me, standing on two hind legs and begging. I bend down to pet her until she calms. I look back up, my eyes finding their way to the top of the meadow again. I see the silhouette of the Stag, just a figure, seemingly looking at me.

I stand up straight again, staring at it. It hasn't moved, it hasn't made any effort to escape. I've seen deer before, they're skittish creatures. When they realize they've wandered into the village, they bolt as fast as they can. But not this one.

We look at one another for some time. Suddenly, the Stag begins to move. Slowly, gracefully, and when it goes behind a tree, it disappears completely. I watch as it reappears, coming out from behind another considerably closer tree. It continues this pattern, each time getting nearer and nearer. My heartbeat quickens. Beside me, Winifred retreats backward. She goes behind me and whines softly.

I don't know how to react as it reaches me. Before I have time to consider what to do, it's less than ten feet away.

"Oh, God," I whisper.

It's even more splendid close-up. I can see each strand of fur as the wind blows through them, its proud chest and snout extended and protruding.

I look around me, then back up at the Stag.

I don't know what else to do, so I drop to the ground, sitting on the backs on my heels with my hands in my lap and my head bent in reverence. My bound hair flings in front of me.

I can't look at the Stag, but I hear it taking steps towards me. I continue staring at the ground until two hooves appear before my eyes. I glance upwards.

The Stag's head is coming forward. All that once, its head comes to connect with mine. I gasp, feeling its soft fur against my skin. It leans into me, forcing me upward. I put one leg out in front of me, then the other, and manage to rise to my feet.

Once I'm on my up, something happens.

A small yet blasting gust of wind circles around the Stag. I try to back away, but our foreheads are connected. I look into the Stag's eyes, watching them as they change. Its fur sinks away, smooth skin taking its place. I finally manage to stumble back, taking in this sight. It's a woman. Her hair flows down in a satiny mass. It's longer than she is, gleaming like pure sunshine and starlight. It floats around her as if she's underwater, weightless. It moves as she moves.

She doesn't have legs, her body hovers above the ground. Her frame is made up of a long robe, comprised of ever-blossoming flowers, moss, and grass. Whenever she moves, a small garden appears below her. She is the most unearthly, ethereal being I've ever seen. But there is something about her, despite her beauty, something disturbing that I can't quite put my finger on.

She looks at me for a moment, a pleasant yet sinister smile spreading lightly across her face.

I break the silence. "Are you the Great Stag, your grace?" She hums.

"I am what I am, and I am you," she says, her echoing voice low.

I take a small step away.

“Wh - what? But -” I stammer.

“The people once called me Godiva,” she says, sliding to my right. “But they have forgotten my name, they have forgotten me.”

I shake my head vigorously. “No! No, your grace. No one has forgotten you.” “Ah, but you have,” she says. “I am the Spirit of God’s Greatest and Foulest creation, Humanity, and you have forgotten me.” She laughs, the eerily sound rebounding through the trees. “Are you afraid of me, sister?”

I scan her eyes, taking a moment.

I close my mouth, nodding. “Yes.”

“Good,” she replies. “You should be.” I

don’t answer, swallowing hard.

“That panther wouldn’t have killed me,” she says.

I furrow my brow. “What?”

“The panther you defiled. It cannot kill me, no matter how it tries. It couldn’t hurt you, either.”

I blink. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any dishonor.”

“No,” Godiva continues. “You did not know. You believed you had risked your life. You risked your life for me.”

I look down, ashamed at my stupidity.



“I cannot recall the last time one of the people put my existence before their own.” I try to say something, but no sound emerges from my lips.

Suddenly, she rockets upwards. A dazzling blue rose sprouts from where she was, the blossom the size of my head. I walk up to it, caressing the delicate petals softly.

I’ve never seen a blue rose. It’s not a natural flower. I look up, watching her fly above me. She’s so beautiful.

She’s just over the tops of the trees when she calls down to me, “I felt your presence when you entered the forest. What do you call yourself?”

“Elain, your grace. Those close to me know me as Laney.”

“Laney,” she says. She soars down to me. “What is it you seek?” My heart palpates. This may be my only chance.

“I come to ask for your help. My lover is extremely ill.” My throat catches, but I force myself to keep going. “If she does not receive assistance soon, she will perish.” I pause, attempting to gather myself. “Please, your grace, I need something to heal her.”

Godiva’s face falls. “Oh, sister,” she says.

I can feel myself drain. Her tone is dismal at best.

“There is nothing I can do,” she continues. “I have not the power over Life and Death.” I nod slowly, biting at my bottom lip.

In an instant, she’s down closer to me, her forehead almost against mine.

“But there may be something else I can do,” she says. “What would you do to save her?”

Water fills my eyes.

“I would go to the end of the world.”

She grins. “Wonderful.”

She holds up her hand, her palm flat and her fingers extended.

“Put your hand to mine.” I

do, hesitant.

Her flesh feels like silk. Something courses through me when we touch. It’s like gentle lightening, a jittering that runs throughout my veins.

She laces our fingers together. “*I hereby forge the connection between us.*”

There is a flash of light, so blinding I cry out. I duck, throwing my hands out in front of me. My palm feels as though it is incinerating.

I scream, grabbing the base of my wrist.

I try to open my eyes, turning my back away from the light. I look at my hand. There is a burning image of a blue rose seared into my flesh. It smolders as I examine it.

I turn around, and the light begins to fade.

A woman stands before me. It’s still Godiva, but somehow she seems more tethered to my reality than before. Her hair, long and thick, drags along the ground now. There is a crown of snapdragons, lilies, and roses across the top of her head. She steps towards me. As she does, plants bloom from the ground.

“What did you do?” I gasp.

She smiles, holding up her hand. The same image of the blue rose is tattooed onto her.

I shake my head, baffled. “What did you do, your grace?”

She laughs, “Stop calling me that.”

I open my mouth, nearly saying something, but decide against it, sealing my jaw again.

“I have bound myself to you,” she says, excitement etched on her face. “I am mortal.”

I feel panic flood within my system, my eyes widening. “What? Your gra -” I stop myself. “Godiva, what have you done?”

“I am going to help you, we’re going to find a cure for your love.”

I blink a few times. My breath heaves hard in my chest. She doesn’t wait for an answer. She twirls around in a circle, looking up to the sky. Then she looks down at her bare feet and legs, grinning. She looks like an excited child.

How can this be happening?

I wobble a little. A feeling of faintness makes me ill.

She puts her hand on a tree, it grows, and its branches expand. The leaves on the tree grow in seconds. Her eyes close, as she falls to the ground. She giggles to herself, her arms and legs spreading across the grass.

Winifred trots over to Godiva slowly. I reach out to her, but she ignores me. Godiva turns to her side, beckoning my dog to her. Winifred sits next to the woman. She seems nervous, yet still drawn to her.

Godiva pets her back, a look of bliss on her face.

I don’t know what to do, so I sit down and watch her.

The light starts to fade away completely. Godiva sits up, her eyes facing the sky. As the sun dies, darkness descends on us. It’s so black I feel I’ve gone blind. I twist my head but can see nothing.

A few seconds pass, and everything around us begins to glow. The mushrooms are flushed with a green tint, the flowers are blue and pink, and the grass yellow. I look down, pressing my hand into the ground. I lift it, and there is a bright afterimage from my handprint embedded in the moss.

Godiva smiles at me, her face lit up from the radiating plants.

I crawl over to her, still too hazy to stand. She leans on her hand and arm.

I look into her eyes, so fiercely blue, and shake my head.

“I don’t understand,” I admit.

“What?” she asks.

My heart beats fast. “Why are you doing this for me?”

Her hair falls over her shoulder. Her dress is sprawled out on the ground, and she cocks her head.

“I don’t know.” \*\*\*

I stare up at the sky, the stars shimmering in the deep blue. Winifred is snoring at my feet. Godiva sleeps beside me, her closed eyes facing me.

I wish I could tell Faunia this is happening. She’d weep if she knew the Stag gave up it’s own immortality for her. I smile, tears building in my eyes. We’re truly going to heal her. She’s going to live.

For the first time in a long while, I feel the urge of hope.

Streaks of water drizzle down my temples. I rub them away, sniffing. The forest glows, Godiva rests next to me, and the stars shine above. I don’t know how I’ll relax myself enough to sleep.

“Faunia,” I whisper. “Wait for me. I’ll be back.”

I turn on my side, so I’m facing Godiva. Our noses are almost touching.

I close my eyes, an unshakable grin on my face.

\*\*\*

“Laney.”

I jolt up, squinting against the sun. Godiva sits upright, staring at me.

“Yes?” I ask sleepily.

“There’s a burning sensation in my stomach,” Godiva says, her face contorted and her arm over her torso.

I blink, sighing. I scrub my hand over my face.

“That’s hunger. You’ve never been hungry?”

She tilts her head back slightly, looking offended.

“I’ve never been mortal, Elain. You can’t possibly expect me to understand all of your frailties at once.”

I go cold, embarrassment prickling at the back of my throat.

“I’m sorry, of course. I’ll go get us some food.”

Godiva nods, pinched-lipped. A smug expression crosses her face.

“Good.”

I swallow, looking down, then to Godiva. She reaches down, placing her hand on the trunk of the tree. A branch sprouts out, allowing me to drop down easily to the ground. I tuck Winifred under my arm. Once I’m at the bottom, I let my dog wander around on the grass. She

urinates quickly, running around the tree we just slept in.

I pluck some edible flowers, along with the ripest, juiciest berries I can locate. I glance back up to the tree, where Godiva watches me. I give Winifred her share first.

“Come on,” I call up at her. “These are good.”

She groans under her breath. Then she makes more branches grow, walking down them like stairs.

“I don’t care for this feeling. I’d like it to stop.” A small tinge of irritation grasps a hold of me. “Then eat. The hunger will go away.”

She walks towards me. Her eyes are locked on the food in my palms. She reaches out her hand. I give her half. I place my first berry in between my teeth, biting down as the juice fills my mouth. I chew it slowly, savoring it.

Godiva looks down at her share. She throws all the flowers and berries into her mouth at once. I stare at her, ceasing my chewing for a moment.

Her cheeks are puffed out like a chipmunk. Her eyes light up.

“Good!” she says, her mouth stuffed.

I cock my eyebrow. “That was all of it, Godiva. You were supposed to eat it slowly, to savor it.”

She readjusts her crown of flowers. “Get me more.”

I open my mouth. “Huh?”

“Get me more, the burn in my stomach is still there.”

“There isn’t anymore in this area,” I say. “We’ll have to walk to find some.”

She frowns. “Give me yours then.”

My heart sinks. “What? But -”

She cups her hands out towards me.

I narrow my eyes, my jaw nearly clicking to the side. I can feel a boiling in my chest and torso. I begin to say something, then look at her face.

She’s pleading, and I can see the selfishness of a young child in her face. She doesn’t understand.

I sigh slowly, twisting my lip and dropping my food into her hands. She gobbles it up faster than before. I clear my throat.

“Was it good?” She shrugs.

“Yes. It’ll do for now.”

I sigh. Winifred sniffs at Godiva’s ankles.

“So, tell me,” I say. “What do you have in mind?” She cocks her head.

“What?”

“To heal my lover, Faunia,” I reply.

She chuckles.

“Oh, I don’t know. Truth be told, I don’t have one.” I go stiff.

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”

“I haven’t any plan.”

I start to breathe heavily, shaking.

“Godiva,” I nearly cry.

Her smile fades as she realizes she’s upset me.

“There are other spirits besides me in this forest. They may have a way to heal her,” she says.

“What spirits?”

She gestured up. “The Spirit of Truth. The Spirits of Judgement and Justice. My siblings, the dryads. Even the Spirits of Life and Death.”

I let my shoulders go slack. “The Spirits of Life and Death?” “The children of my mother, of *your* mother,” she tells me.

“The children? The children of God?” I ask.

She nods.

“Indeed,” she says.

I cross my arms. “Alright. Where do we find them?”

Godiva chuckles again. “You cannot seek them. You can only find them when you aren’t searching.”

She trails off.

I bite at my lips. “The Spirit of Judgement?”



She coils up, a physical shiver coursing through her body.

“He’s dangerous. Not many mortals have survived a meeting with him. I have spent millennia warning your kind. They never believe me.” I look away. Fear makes my heart pump fast.

“But there isn’t even a way to find them.” Godiva rolls her eyes.

“I *just* told you. We cannot *try* to locate them. In a way, they must come to us. We will not be able to find them if we try.”

I turn away from her, looking out into the forest. My head is beginning to ache.

“My God,” I whisper to myself.

Two strong hands grasp my shoulders. It very nearly hurts. Godiva comes up behind me, her mouth to my ear. I can see a hint of the curve from her smile.

“Don’t fret so. We will find what we need to find.”

I turn to the side so I can see her. Her hold may be crushing, but there’s something comforting about it.

A small grin crosses my face. “Do truly think so?”

“Yes.”

She lets me go. I feel a stinging in my shoulder. I look to the source of pain. I gasp, seeing a tiny sprouting plant with one leaf bursting from the skin.

I try to brush it away, but my swipe does nothing. After another couple of moments, the plant turns brown and dies. The withering stew blows away after a small gust of wind rushes over me.

Godiva is already walking away, and Winifred follows at her heels.

She turns around, throwing her arm out to me. "Come on."

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We walk in silence. I sulk, as I tend to do, and Godiva sings softly to herself. I watch her as she twirls around, plants beneath her feet growing with every step she takes.

Everything she sees excites her. She's a spirit of this forest, she must have seen every inch of these woods for millennia. Why does she act as if she's never been here before?

"Godiva," I say. She turns to look at me. "You say you've never been a mortal. What - what is this like for you?" I ask.

She stopped walking, allowing me to catch up and walk by her side.

Her bright eyes dart around. She moves closer to me, so close I can feel the warmth of her skin against mine.

"I was born many hundreds of years ago. As I grew in the forest, mankind evolved. At first, those in the village and I lived in harmony. They treated me as their equal, as I am." Her face sinks, and she looks away. "But the villagers grew afraid of the dangers in these woods, they grew fearful of death. They stopped coming to visit me in the forest. I became a legend. People prayed to me and painted me as God. I became a deity. Eventually, no man or woman ventured to look for me. I forgot what human emotion felt like. The only thing I remembered

was loneliness. I did what I could to remember the good and forget the bad, but everything I tried failed,” she says.

Water fills her eyes. She gets even nearer, hunkering down. Her arm presses into mine. My mouth cracks open, and my soul swells. I gingerly reach out, putting my arm around her shoulders.

She stands up straighter, the flowers in her hair blossoming wider. She looks at me and smiles, tears falling down her cheeks. Her eyes sparkle.

Suddenly I feel a fierce surge of protectiveness for her. I nearly chuckle at that. She hardly needs my guardianship. Yet, she seems so changed from the formidable, breathtaking spirit I came across yesterday.

Winifred circles around my feet, looking up at the both of us. I let my arm drop away from Godiva, a cold chill nipping at my skin once we’re disconnected. I almost say something to her, but don’t know what that would be.

Everything feels surreal. Part of me can only imagine that this is all a dream. Even touching her feels unnatural. It’s as if she may just dissipate into the air, like a puff of smoke.

Winifred scampers ahead of both of us and Godiva breaks away from me to chase after her. A large grin comes over her face as she does. They run together, Godiva just barely behind my dog. I sigh, snorting a single laugh through my nose. I start to grin while watching them.

“She’s bewitching, is she not?”

I jump, gasping, and look to my side. The three-tailed fox trots next to me. I never heard him coming.

I look to Winifred, at least a dozen feet ahead of me.

The fox laughs. "I'm not going to eat it, child."

I swallow, turning defensive. "Why are you here?"

His head snaps sharply towards me. "This is my home. *You* are the stranger here, not I." I purse my lips, tilting my chin up.

"I beg your pardon," I reply, my teeth clenched.

"You don't care for me, do you?" he says.

I don't look back at him.

"No, I suppose not," I say, regretting the words the minute they leave my mouth.

He clicks his tongue, his ears pricking upwards.

"Insolent girl," she says coolly. "You have no respect."

I feel myself beginning to shake. The longer I speak to him, it more it begins to feel like a snake is slithering down my throat. I want to gag it up, to spit it out and clear my belly and my system of this evil.

"I apologize again," I say.

He ignores me. "Do you wonder why she became a mortal for you? She is like an ancient tree, her roots run deeply all through this forest. She was untouchable. Why should she give up such freedom?"

I lick my lips, which are suddenly dry and cracked.

"I don't know," I admit.

The fox is silent for a moment.

Then he says, “She unnerved you, didn’t she? When you first met her.”

I don’t answer.

“She frightens me, too,” he continues. “She holds no dominion over Life and Death, yet she frightens me. Why do you think that is?”

I look down at him and come to a halt.

He stops too, his tails swiping about in unison.

“Who are you?” I whisper.

“Laney! What are you doing back there?” Godiva calls.

I glance away from the fox, where Godiva watches me with Winifred in her arms.

There’s a quiet rustle, and I see the orange fox jump back into the brush from the corner of my eye.

Godiva didn’t see him, I can tell by the naively innocent look on her face.

“What are you doing?” she asks again.

I look back at her.

“Nothing, Godiva.” After I say it, my tongue burns in my mouth. I can feel the ache of the lie.

She cocks her head. Then she smiles, shrugging.

“Hurry then! I don’t care for walking so slowly.” I start to jog, sighing.

Why didn't I tell her about the fox? He knew her. Perhaps she knows him, knows who he is and what he wants.

Perhaps he poses no threat at all. He lives in this forest, not me. I'm the intruder. What right do I have to question his motives after all?

Yet, something makes me deeply uncomfortable and nervous when it comes to the fox. So why didn't I say anything to Godiva? It's not like me. I duck my head, watching my feet as they crush into the grass. Shame and guilt flush through me.

I walk closer to Godiva, watching the plants that blossom with her footsteps. As I watch her, I begin to notice that she always looks up at the sky, gazing at the treetops. What is she looking at? What is she looking for? Perhaps she's just entranced by the clouds, the sunshine. Maybe she's feeling the light on her skin for the first time. I wonder what that's like for her. What would it be like for me? I might be too old, too jaded to feel the sun like she does. I almost extend my arms out to touch her but decide against it. All at once, she stumbles over her long hair. I reach to catch her, but she doesn't fall. It doesn't take her long to regain her balance, moving her arms to steady herself. She looks at me in bewilderment.

"What happened?" she asks, dazed.

I have to stop myself from laughing. I look down at the thick mane of hair running along the ground.

"It's your hair. It's too long."

She sucks in her lips, reaching down to gather up the hair. She holds it in a bundle, looking upset.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek to stop the smile that threatens to spread across my

face.

“Do you want to keep going?” She nods,  
walking forward.

We continue down our path for some time. I keep my eye on her as she struggles to carry the hair. After only a couple of minutes, she stops completely, throwing her head back and groaning loudly. She flips her eyes to the side to look at me.

“Can you just cut it off?”

I cross my arms, folding my feet at the ankles.

“Cut it off? Are you sure?” I ask.

She nods, glaring at me like I’m a fool.

“Yes! It’s obnoxious and I don’t need it. What good does it do?”

I look down, bending to the ground. I sift through the soil, rubbing my hand around until I locate a sharp, thin rock.

I rise to my feet again, showing her the stone.

“Turn around, I’ll just slice it.”

Godiva spins backward, letting her hair drop to the ground. I take a fistful of it, putting the rock to it.

I try to chop it, but the blade does nothing. The hair is incredibly robust, unyielding as I attempt to cut. She looks back at me over her shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“It’s too strong, it won’t cut,” I reply, frustrated.

She tears the bundle away from me, her brow furrowed.

I look around us. Where are we even walking to? We’re looking for some spirits we can’t find by searching.

“Sit down,” I say, sighing. “I’ll pin it up for you.” She grins, plopping down without another word.

I sit behind her, crossing my legs. I look at the flower crown, slowly reaching out. I grasp ahold of it, pulling it from the top of her head. It disconnects without protest.

I look it at, twisting the headdress around in my hand.

“Do you want this?” I ask her.

She shakes her head.

I glance back at it, my eyes going wide as the flowers crumble and die. I drop it, and Winifred goes to sniff at the deceased blossoms.

I swallow, shaking my head and concentrating on her hair again. A half-smile crosses my face as my memory flashes back to another time.

“I used to be good with hair,” I tell her, combing my fingers through hers.

“Really?” she asks.

“Uh-huh,” I say. “But Faunia, she never had any talent with it. She would try to tie it up and it would be falling out by the end of the day. Half of it would be in front of her face, the other half in a knot at the top of her head,” I laugh. “She’d always get so irritated.”



A sharp pang of longing hits me, and the grin evaporates from my face. My throat goes dry. I continue to finger-brush Godiva's hair.

"What's she like?" she asks.

I feel a groove form on my lips.

"Who?" I ask for clarity.

She chuckles, her shoulders trembling as she does.

"Faunia, obviously. You haven't told me about her yet."

I stop separating her hair, blinking a few times. My fingertips go cold and stiff.

"No. I suppose I haven't." She turns around.

"Well, tell me then. I'm bored." I shake my head vigorously.

"No, no, I'm sorry," I say, too quickly.

"What? Why?" she whines.

I do what I can to swallow, it feels like a wad of sand.

"It's just...it's difficult for me."

She leans back, falling against my front. Her head rests of my collarbone, and she looks up at me.

"Please? For me? I'm your friend, aren't I?"

I sigh, pushing her away to continue my work with her hair.

"Fine."

She sits up straight again.

“Faunia became ill two years ago. Before that, she worked to keep the water drinkable. She would check the river sometimes to make sure it was clean, and that there hadn’t been a block.” I start to braid the top part of her hair, where the flower crown once was. “That’s it.”

Godiva groans. “She sounds boring.” Anger torrents through me.

“She is *not* boring,” I say, my voice loud and sharp. “She isn’t. She’s a genius, and everyone loves her. If you could have known her - before. She’s the most beautiful woman in the village, far more beautiful than me. She was passionate and independent, and she was kind. She wasn’t dull, Godiva. You don’t know her, so don’t speak as if you do.”

I drop her hair, standing up and stomping away. My head burns.

“Laney! Wait!”

I walk hard on grass, my fists balled up tightly.

“Laney! What’s wrong with you?” Godiva calls.

I turn around, my hair flipping back behind me.

“Just leave me alone. Do what you like, but let me be for a while.” I can hear her footsteps stop as I continue.

“Why?” she asks.

I don’t answer, ducking behind a tree. I slam my back against the trunk, sliding down until I’m sitting.

This is pointless, this adventure we're on. We're searching for spirits that clearly don't wish to be found, or at least make it too difficult for any human to do so.

Godiva knows as little about this as I do. She's not a spirit anymore. She's a woman, she's mortal. She's blood and bone.

If I left her alone, she'd either starve to death or eat poisonous berries by mistake. She can't help me. She doesn't even understand why we're out here. She's enamored by the idea of mortality, yet she has no clue what that means. She's a child. And besides what, what do I really know about her? She may be a snake in this garden, waiting to inject me with her venom.

Faunia worsens every day, and we're just going to wander around in this forest. I bury my head in my hands, lacing my hands over my head.

I pull the ribbon out of my hair, shaking out my creased curls. I hold the fabric in my hand, my thumb tracing over it.

What if she's dead already? What if she leaves because she thinks I'm not coming back for her? God, I wish there was some way I could talk to her. I'd give everything I have, or ever will have, for her to awaken, even if it's just for five minutes.

If only she knew where I am, what I'm trying to do.

But that's impossible.

I fold my legs together, wishing I could crawl somewhere warm and dark. This forest is so immense. I want to curl up in a cave, I don't want this streaming light and this temperate wind. I don't deserve it.

Faunia should be the one out here, not me. She'd understand how to deal with Godiva, she'd know what to do. I don't.

I set the ribbon down on the ground.

So, what can I do? I can return to the village and watch Faunia perish, I could face my fate without her, knowing I failed. Or I can accept what Godiva has done for me.

Godiva, whatever her motives may have been, seemingly gave up everything for me and for Faunia.

And here I am, like always, pouting.

Perhaps she is a snake, perhaps she's just a naive girl. I don't know if a spirit in this forest has the power to heal Faunia, and I never will if I go home now.

I close my eyes, rubbing my fingers over my them and groaning.

I have to be patient with Godiva. I have to believe her intentions are good. If I can't do that, neither of us stand a chance. Faunia doesn't either.

I hear a little yap beside me. I look down, and Winifred sits directly in front of me. She puts one paw on the top of my foot. I smile, cocking my head.

"Hey, gremlin."

I rub her ears, scratching under her chin.

"I'm stupid aren't I?"

She huffs, sneezing on my toes. I laugh out loud, cringing at the same time.

"You nasty beast."

I sigh and stand up. I brush off my pants and hold the ribbon out in front of me. I pull it around the base of my skull, gathering it up behind me. I tie it in a bow, then look around from the tree.

“Godiva?” I call.

I walk back towards where I left her, and Winifred follows close behind me.

“Godiva? Let’s keep going!” I yell.

I don’t see her. I don’t see a hint of her blonde hair or her white dress. I spin around, looking in a circle.

I swallow, biting down on my lip.

“Godiva!” I call again, louder this time. I cup my hands around my lips and repeat it.

I begin to feel panic. My heart beats so hard it hurts.

“Godiva!” I scream.

I run, going in no particular direction. All the trees look identical. It doesn’t take long for me to become disorientated and lost.

“Godiva! Where are you?”

Winifred barks every few seconds.

I keep sprinting through the dense woods for what feels like a century. The soft chirping of birds and my heavy panting are the only sounds around me. I keep going until I hear the soft creaking of leaves and branches.

I turn, and see Godiva’s back. She’s watching something I can’t see.

I breathe out, putting my hand to my chest.

“You scared me to death,” I say, breathlessly. “What are you looking at?”

She spins around, putting her finger to her lips. I furrow my brow, tiptoeing close to her. I move to put my hand on her shoulder, staring at the back of her head. The braid I started is loose and tangled now.

“Godiva, are you alright?”

She nods but doesn't face me. I look forward, trying to see whatever it is she sees.

My body goes stock still as my eyes find their way to what she's looking at. Two massive creatures stand before us. They both stand half as tall as the trees. One, a grey stallion with a black mane and muscular figure, and the other a grand brown bear with a stocky body.

Godiva smiles.

She whispers to me, “The Spirit of Justice.” she gestures to the bear. “And the Spirit of Judgement.” she points to the stallion.

Suddenly I recognize them. Dinah, the bear, and Zedekiah, the horse. We were told that these two were the aides to God, and to Life and Death. I'd all but forgotten about them until now. During my apprenticeship, we used them as tools to understand Life and Death. Until now, I assumed they were myths for our benefit.

I grip Godiva tighter, whispering in her ear, “Come on, we need to go.” Her face crinkles, and she shakes me off of her.

“Why? I've known them all my life,” she asks.

I raise my eyebrow.

“You *know* them?” I ask.

She looks up in exasperation.

“Well, of course, I’ve never actually met them, but I’ve seen them around the forest for centuries. Though we’ve never interacted face-to-face. It always felt forbidden somehow. But things have changed. I want to talk to them.” My eyes widen.

“No! Don’t be silly. They’re dangerous.”

She faces me. Her expression is closed off and distant.

“What do you know?”

“I learned about them back in the village,” I say, desperate to make her understand. “If you seek them out, you must accept the consequences.” She snorts, rolling her eyes. “You’re being foolish. What consequences?”

“It depends. For some, just looking at them drives them mad. Other times they send for Death, and Death sweeps them away before they even understand what’s going to happen. Few who meet Dinah and Zedekiah come back sane or alive.”

Her shoulders relax, and she stares at me with deep-rooted annoyance.

“Dinah and Zedekiah? I’ve never heard such names. Those are mere legends, lies. I’m going to speak with them. You can stay behind and be a coward if you wish.”

She looks away, and bursts through the trees and towards the spirits in a single bound. I gasp, throwing my hand over my mouth.

Dinah is the first one to notice her. She is startled when she sees Godiva, straightening her strong legs and baring her teeth. Upon hearing Dinah's snarling, Zedekiah turns. His mighty body nearly makes the ground shake when his hooves stomp the ground.

Godiva laughs, "Don't be afraid, my friends. I am Godiva, the Fairy of the forest. The Great Stag."

Dinah's lips curl over her teeth, and her eyes lose some of their ferocity. She looks to Zedekiah, then back at Godiva.

I nearly shiver. The bear is smiling.

"Prove it," a glossy, feminine voice says.

I narrow my eyes. Was that Dinah? Her jaw didn't move, but I'm almost sure it was her. Godiva's smile fades as she looks at the bear.

"I - I'm mortal now. I cannot transform."

"Prove yourself. Prove yourself, or I will kill you," I hear Dinah's voice repeat.

Godiva scans her, then looks to Zedekiah for guidance. He does nothing, so she closes her eyes, focused. The forest quiets and no birds dare make a sound. I feel the copper taste of blood in my mouth and realize I've been biting on my cheek.

Godiva begins to shake, almost seizing, as if something is possessing her. Then she screams, as though her body is on fire.

The familiar gust of wind rushes around her, and she morphs into the Stag. The deer wobbles at first, as if unfamiliar with the sensation of using its legs.



“Mmm,” Dinah hums. She looks again at Zedekiah. “It is truly the Fairy.”

A deep, polished male voice, which must be Zedekiah, answers, “Indeed.”

The stallion paws at the earth, shaking out his mane and stepping close to the Stag. I’m struck by how much smaller the Stag has become. It used to be nearly as large in height as Dinah and Zedekiah, but now it’s at least two heads shorter than they are.

“What have you done to yourself?” Zedekiah asks.

The Stag grunts and clicks, moving its head about.

“I see,” Dinah says, seeming to understand the sounds.

The bear and stallion glance at one another. Dinah gets closer to Zedekiah.

“And what will happen if you expire while in this state, Fairy? Will you cease to be, cease to altogether exist, in the forest?” she asks.

The Stag does not move at first. Then, it softly grunts through its nose. I tilt my head, furrowing my brow.

I wish I knew what it was saying.

The bear and the stallion both stand in silence for a few moments. But the Stag does nothing else. I keep still, waiting to hear them speak.

Zedekiah’s hooves tap at the ground again. Dinah growls softly under her breath. Whatever was just communicated upset them. I stiffen, bringing my arm up to my face. I clamp my teeth around my wrist to keep from screaming because of the tension.

“And who are you looking for? The Spirit of Truth?” Dinah asks.

The Stag chirps more.

“Not easy to find, you know. Even if you do manage to seek out what you mean to find, Death may find you first.” Zedekiah says, his tone almost fatherly.

The Stag does not do anything for a while. Then, it looks back to where it knows I’m still watching. Another gust of wind comes over the Stag. It brays loudly. Within seconds, Godiva reappears. She looks around, clearly dazed. She even trembles, her eyes glassy and confused.

Her eyelids flutter, and I can see she’s about to hit the ground. I run forward, my feet’s instincts carrying me instead of my mind. I bend down, sliding closer to her. I reach out and she collapses into my arms. She is completely dead weight, her body lax. She curls into me, and I gather her until her head is against my shoulder. Then I look up, and see Dinah and Zedekiah looking down at me.

I swallow and something that sounds like a bleat comes out of my mouth. I look at Winifred, who sits beside me and wags her tail, she does not seem fazed at all. I nod to the two beautiful creatures.

“Hello, great spirits,” I say, my voice shakes more than I would have liked it to.

They don’t answer, they simply continue to glare. Perhaps I can’t understand them any longer. I look down at Godiva and reach out to slap her face gently.

“Godiva?” I whisper. “Godiva, please wake up.”

Her eyelids pulsate, and she blinks a few times. Then she looks at me with those bright eyes and frowns. She still seems disorientated.

“Go,” she says in a hushed voice.

I try to move my head closer to better hear her.

“What?”

Her feeble fingers latch onto the collar of my shirt. Her eyes go wild.

“Go. Run.”

A ghostly laugh rings above me. It’s Dinah.

“Don’t run just yet, child. We will catch you, you know that.”

I look up, my mouth agape. I watch these two spirits as they both peer down at me. And somehow, afraid as I am, I feel a sense of serenity.

I know there is nothing I can do. I can’t lie to them, so I sit back on my heels and nod.

“I won’t run.”

Zedekiah neighs, then says, “Good.”

My eyes flick back and forth between them. “What are you going to do to me?”

Dinah tilts her head, saying, “You have found us. Few mortals can say that. Many spend lifetimes looking for us and never discover any trace. You should consider yourself blessed.”

Godiva tries to move away from me and stand, but she is too weak.

“So we shall look into your soul and decide your fate,” Zedekiah says.

I take a slow, deep breath in, trying to prepare myself.

“I understand.”

Godiva may not have the power of Life and Death, these two don’t either, but they have strong connections. If Dinah calls upon Life and God and finds me unworthy, then Zedekiah will hail Death to come for me, and God will approve. My presence in this world will end.

I don't know what they'll do to Godiva or Winifred. Perhaps they'll allow both of them to go free, though I doubt it. Dinah and Zedekiah are frozen, they are statues. I'm not sure what I expected, but their complete lack of movement is unsettling. My throat feels like it's closing. Godiva's eyes are open now, and she watches the two spirits blankly. What happened to her? What did they do?

I can feel the stilted breath coming in and out of my chest. I sense every beat of my heart. Everything around me moves at a slow, lagging pace. There's a tickling in my stomach. I wish they'd make their decision, one way or the other.

Just as I'm about to jump up and run away screaming at the top of my lungs, Dinah says, "I have made my choice. Are you prepared?" I grit my teeth together.

"Yes, I'm ready," I reply.

Dinah steps in front of me, and Zedekiah stands to the side. I watch her mountainous body as she moves. She's proud, and such a sight to behold.

"I have seen into your heart and soul, child. You have a strong spirit, but it is easily lost and often confused. It is confused now. This mission, it is damned and misguided. I believe your motives are of good intent, but there is a demon growing in you. This is a demon of your own creation. As you have forged it, you must destroy it. At this moment, you live in embers. Soon, the embers will spark and burn. They will become flames that will consume you. In time, you will be nothing more than a husk of soot and ash."

I don't make any move to reply at first. All I can do is stay there in a firm trance. My lips part again, and I sit there staring at her. I even feel a hint of drool at the corner of my mouth, it breaks me from the enchantment.

"I...I don't understand," I whisper finally.

Dinah looks to Zedekiah, and he takes a few steps forward. Dinah walks back. Zedekiah takes her place.

"Your judgment is not to understand, child, as you do not wish to understand. Your soul is boiling from the inside out. If you were told the true nature of Faunia's fate, you would not accept it. Despite your bravery and your passion, you are stubborn and unthinking. When you are ready to hear what I have to say, I will come to you again. Until that day arrives, I drive you away from both of us."

I shake my head. "Drive me away?"

"Pick up the Fairy, and your little wolf," he says.

I look down to Godiva. I don't make any effort to oppose his orders. I rise up, throwing her across my shoulder. Then I step forward and hastily scoop up Winifred and slip her into my belt, where she rests comfortably.

"Now you must run," Dinah says.

My brow becomes stiff and hardened.

"What?"

"Run," they both say, synchronized.

I start to back away, slowly at first. Dinah and Zedekiah's bright eyes turn barbaric and yellowed. The stallion stomps his front legs hard on the grass. He lets out a loud scream and it echoes across the forest. Dinah let out a deep-throated bellow, opening her monstrous jaws and roaring. They both begin to charge, speeding towards me. A short shriek escapes me, and I turn around. I start to sprint, holding on tight to Godiva by her hips. Winifred bounces in my belt. I don't look behind me, but I can feel the dread of my pursuers as they follow me. Godiva is lightweight, but it's still another human body. I begin to slow, and then feel hot air on my ankles. I turn, and see Dinah's snout and teeth are nearly to my calves. I turn back and run faster. My heart feels as though it's about to explode in my ribcage, but I need to keep going. I close my eyes and run blindly.

"Go away! Just go away! I don't want you, leave me!" I scream behind me.

Then I feel something catch on my big toe, and I go stumbling forward. I turn to the side, so Winifred and Godiva won't feel the impact. I collapse, hitting the ground hard as my hip collides with a smooth rock. When I look back, Dinah and Zedekiah have both disappeared.

I take a moment, staring down the path where they were just running towards me. Then I remember Godiva and Winifred. I turn, and see Godiva lying on her side. Her eyes are closed. Winifred stands by her side and whines, pawing at her hair gently. I scramble over and flip her onto her back. My breath rattles as I shake her shoulders.

"Godiva?" I ask, putting my hand on her head.

She's changed somehow. Her hair, it's shorter than it was. It's just slightly longer than mine and no longer trails along the ground. Her skin is different too, it doesn't glow anymore.

The vines that grew along her arms and shoulders have all gone, even the flowers in her dress have died. For the first time, she looks truly human. I shake her again.

“Godiva? Can you hear me?”

She groans. It’s low, but I can still hear it.

“What happened to, ‘your grace?’” she asks, her voice raw and cracked.

I close my eyes, breathlessly laughing in relief. I can almost feel tears form in my eyelids.

I look back at her again, trembling as I bend over her.

“I believe you told me not to call you that.”

She chuckles, but it sounds more like a moan than anything else.

“Can I take it back?”

I grin, shaking my head and saying, “Of course not.”

Lucidity comes back to her eyes. She scans me, breathing out through her nose. My smile fades.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?” I ask.

She swallows, reaching up to grip my forearm.

“No, I’m alright. And you? How are you?”

I look myself over. I have a few scrapes from where I fell, and my hip aches. Other than that I’m fine.

“I’ll live. Don’t worry about me,” I say.

Godiva pushes herself up off the ground so she's sitting up. She looks so tired, her eyes have shadowed over. She looks down at the ground below us.

"I'm sorry, Laney."

I close my mouth, my shoulders clenching up.

"For what?"

"For talking to them, to the spirits. It was foolish to think I was still one of them. I put you in danger," she tells me.

Her eyes well up, and her bottom lip quivers. I'm struck by her earnestness.

"It's alright, Godiva."

"But it isn't," her voice breaks. "We should have just left, like you said."

Her shoulders start to shake lightly, and I can feel myself start to choke on my own breath. Hot water forms in my eyes, and I let my face wilt. The things Dinah and Zedekiah said to me, what if they're true? They said my mission was damned, they said I could not comprehend the truth.

Tears roll down my cheeks. I let them.

They said my soul was going to waste. They said I would have nobody to blame but myself when my spirit was set ablaze. I let myself absorb everything they said. How can I ignore the words of spirits, deities? I duck my face down, though Godiva sees my upset. She reaches out to me, her palm open and her fingers extended. I stare at it.

I go to grasp it, folding my knuckles around hers. She doesn't say anything to comfort me, she doesn't apologize or attempt to make excuses, she just sits there with me and holds my



hands.

I don't say a word, either. I can't even look at her. Shame and humiliation make me keep my head bent. And there we stay, unmoving and unspeaking as the sun falls away. Darkness takes over, and the forest glows.

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Godiva and I sit at the base of a tree, leaning against the trunk. I sink my teeth into a berry the size of my skull and then pass it to Godiva. She takes a bite of the fruit and swallows, making a loud gulping sound as she does. Neither of us speaks. I'm not sure if we're too exhausted or if we simply don't wish to. Winifred sleeps at our feet.

Godiva fiddles with her hair, twirling a strand around her fingers, I chuckle.

"Your hair still bothering you? I never did get to finish braiding it." She shrugs, not amused. I don't even see a hint of a grin.

"It's fine. It's not as long now."

"But it's still heavy. Would you like me to just braid it? It would be out of your eyes."

She looks at me, looking me over. Her gaze is more aware now than it was before, more awake.

"Alright. I suppose."

She turns around so her back is to me.

I set my berry down, combing my fingers through her hair. Somehow this is comforting, brushing out the small knots and tangles puts my mind at ease. Suddenly, I feel a stinging on my palm, I cringe, looking to the source of the pain.

It's the rose tattoo. A real, blue petal peels off the skin and falls to the ground. It leaves the outline of the fallen petal as it drops down.

"How did you know?" Godiva asks me suddenly. "How did you know about the Spirits of Judgement and Justice?"

I look at the back of her head, trying to ignore what just happened with my tattoo.

"I learned about them when I was an apprentice,"

"What for?" she asks.

"I was training to be an Oracle." I say, and then laugh. "I wanted to be a High Priestess, foolishly, I suppose. There have only been three in the past fifty years." She turns her head to look at me.

"You wanted to be a priestess?" I shake my head, smiling.

"Silly, I know," I say.

"That isn't what I meant. Why did you stop?" she asks softly.

I breathe out, braiding the hair around the top of her head and around the back of her skull on both sides.

"Faunia got sick. While she was still living at home, I spent all my time taking care of her."

"But she doesn't still live at home, right?" she asks.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“So why didn’t you start working again?”

I stop braiding, flicking my eyes away from her.

“I just didn’t.”

“Hmm,” she hums to herself.

We stop talking for a moment. She doesn’t push me to say anything else.

I separate some hair, spinning it around in the middle of the back of her head. It creates a shape similar to a rose. I keep braiding it down, combining three separate braids into a larger one.

“What’s your family like?” she asks me.

“I have a brother and a nephew, and a sister-in-law.”

“No parents?”

I suck in air tightly through my nose.

“No. No parents. They passed about ten years ago.” She sits up straighter.

“A decade ago? And how did they die?”

“They died in this forest,” I say, then I clear my throat. “They assaulted a young buck. Something attacked and killed them for it.”

“What did? What killed them?” her voice becomes rigid and intrigued.

I finish the braid, it falls over her shoulder in a long rope. I secure the end so it doesn’t

fall apart.

“I don’t know, nobody knows. My father died in my brother’s arms, but he didn’t have time to say what they were killed by.”

“Huh,” she says quietly. “Strange. What did their bodies look like?”

I grimace. “It was gruesome. They were torn to shreds.”

She runs her hand over her hair, spinning back around. “That sounds unnatural. Vile. I’ve seen as much death in my time as life. I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“They killed a deer, it was violent and bloody. Most people in the village thought it was what they deserved.”

Godiva’s eyes sink.

“So, you’re an orphan?”

I nod. The word doesn’t shock me as it did when I was still a child. I’m used to it now.

“Yes.”

“You must miss them desperately,” she says.

I part my mouth, nearly agreeing with her. She cocks her head, looking at me. I drop my hands to my knees, rubbing them hard on my pants. My eyebrows furrow.

“We weren’t close.”

“What? Why not?”

I lean back against the tree, resting the side of my head on the bark.

“I was...difficult,” I say. “My brother, Devin, was always easy to manage. I was loud and wild. They often became angry with me.”

She blinks and stays quiet, listening to me. I bite my lip.

“They used to go outside and pull a branch from the nearest tree. The worse my crime, the larger the twig. They would bend me over and hit me over the back until I apologized.” She swallows, still silent.

“I learned to sleep on my stomach because the welts hurt so much,” I continue. “They never hit Devin,” my voice is quiet by the end of my little speech.

Godiva crosses her legs, feeling her hair again.

“I see,” she whispers.

“It wasn’t their fault. I was too rambunctious.” I try to smile, but I can feel it coming off as a sneer. “I suppose it toughened me up.”

Godiva shakes her head, bending her lip in a curve.

“Did it?”

I let the offbeat smirk dim and vanish.

I shrug and say, “I don’t know.”

Godiva watches me. The crickets chirp and the wind whistles through the trees.

“Sometimes I don’t know if I miss them,” I finally say. “But I know I should, or at least I feel like I should. Maybe because people tell me I ought to.”

Something eases off my chest. There's a pressing measure of guilt, but those are words I haven't said to anyone. I can't remember even saying them to Faunia. Although the townspeople condemned my parents' actions and believed their deaths to be justified, it still left my brother and me orphaned. My people took great pity on us, coddled us, nursed us.

Yet I never felt the misery and sorrow that Devin did. Mostly, I felt confusion and remorse.

Godiva looks away, closing her eyes as the air caresses her face. Tiny pink, blue, and yellow flowers bloom in her hair. My eyes fall back from her.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter, and I shouldn't speak ill of the dead."

"No," Godiva says, so quiet it's nearly a whisper. "It's alright." I look at her again.

The eye contact we make penetrates my soul. Everything in the world dies down, the wind stops dancing, the crickets quiet. In such a short time, she's grown so much older. In years, we're still the same age. But her eyes have changed, perhaps evolved. I'm not sure if this evolution is a blessing or a curse.

And something between us is different, too.

The air that lingers between us has become glittered with light, sparking fragments only we can see. She sighs and smiles, and her eyes softening.

"I like my hair," she says gently.

I nod, almost chuckling, and reply, "I told you. I used to be good." We sit in silence for a couple more seconds.

Finally, Godiva says, “Perhaps we should end this.”

I freeze, my brow furrowing. “What?”

Godiva shakes her head, and is quiet for a moment.

“This road you wish to take...it all ends the same way. You humans never learn.”

“You’re human, too,” I snap back, a little embarrassed at the childish tenor of my voice.

“Not like that. Not in the way you mean.”

My mouth is slack as I stare at her for a moment, trying to process what she’s telling me.

“So, what, then?” I ask. “I just give up?”

“Giving up is not defeat.”

“It is for me. If I go back now, I lose everything.” Godiva

looks at me, sadly. Her pity enrages me.

“Perhaps...perhaps you’ve already lost, my dove.”

My mind repels her words as though they are venom. I stand sharply, all but seeing red behind my eyes. I need to get away from her before I crumble.

“Come on, Winifred,” I say, snapping my fingers so she’ll follow.

We walk off towards the East, my back to Godiva.

“Laney! Where are you going?” A voice shouts behind me.

“I’m leaving, per your wish,” I say.

She cocks her head, moving swiftly towards me.

“What are you talking about?”

I blink, holding out my hands.

“You told me you wanted us to go our separate ways,” I say stoically.

Her face suddenly falls.

“What? No - but -” she says.

“If you want to stop this, then our path together ends here,” I say, more brutally than I would have liked.

Her face falls, and her chest aches.

“Oh...” she mutters softly.

I clear my throat. My eyes flicker away from hers, unable to meet her gaze.

“I won’t trouble you anymore, I promise,” I tell her, my voice betraying me and quivering.

She doesn’t answer for a moment, though I know she’s staring.

“Where will you go?”

I shrug, rubbing over my arms.

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly.

She looks down, pushing some hair behind her ear.

“Perhaps you should go find the Spirit of Truth, just as you wanted to before.”

I finally meet her eyes, scanning them. What is she thinking? What does she think of me?

I wish I could tell, but her gaze is closed to me.

“You warned me against it,” I say.

She smiles, chuckling ruefully with one eyebrow cocked.



“Well, you’ve made it clear you don’t care to listen to my advice.” I feel the sting of the comment instantly.

“Do you have any idea where I would find it? The Spirit of Truth?”

“You must go to the end of the world,” she says. “And you must jump over the side. If he accepts you, you will be safe from harm. Then, and only then, you can enter his cave.”

“His cave?” I ask.

Her face becomes grim, her expression gloomy.

“Yes. His cave is where he sees all mortals who come to visit him. Only a handful have survived his truth, the path you seek is a perilous one,” she says, then she takes a moment. “I wish you luck.”

I give her a tight grin.

“Thank you. What about you, where will you go?” She looks tense, moving her head off to the side. “I’m not sure, really. I’ll have to ride out this spell, I can’t break the bonds of my humanity until the petals fall from the rose. The dryads will care for me until it’s time.”

I nod. “Alright then,” I say, unsure what else to tell her.

She nods as well, her posture that of discomfort.

“I suppose that’s all then,” she says.

“Yes, it is,” I reply, keeping my voice steady.

She stares at me, her eyes boring the depths of my soul. She looks right through me as if I don't exist any longer.

“Goodbye, Laney, I truly hope you find what it is you're looking for,” she says.

I blink to rid my eyes of the misty water trapped inside.

“Goodbye, Godiva.”

I spin around as fast as I can, my hair whipping around as I do. I pace off into the depths of the woods. I don't look back, I won't allow myself to turn around.

If I do, I fear I will shatter completely.

Winifred pitters at my feet, her nose low to the ground. She's ashamed of me, I can feel it. I can feel it just as I can feel Godiva's shame. And God's. I can feel God's shame searing into me like the piercing heat of the sun. I walk firmly toward the East. I have no real direction, no destination. How does one even begin to look for the ends of the earth? I don't know how to get back to the village, I don't know how to find the Spirit of Truth. I don't know how to do anything. My knees and legs feel weak, I want to sit down, I want to curl up and sleep for decades, but something forces me to continue.

“What happened to you, girl? You didn't look like this when you entered the forest,” a smooth, deep voice says beside me.

I gasp, coming to a stark halt. I look to my right. The three-tailed fox sits at my side, staring at me.

“What do you want?” I snap, aggressively.

I bend down to scoop Winifred off the ground.

He chuckles. “Still protective of the mutant, are you?”

“Don’t test me,” I gnarl, “I’m in no mood for your tricks, whoever and whatever you are.”

He cocks his head. “So feisty. I didn’t realize I’d done anything to -”

“Hush!” I shout, “Say another word and I may very well break your neck.” His ears perk up in surprise.

“Would you now? My, my.”

“Tell me who are you and what you want with me. Are you some sort of spirit?” I ask, though it comes off more as a demand.

This time he gives me a full and hearty laugh.

“A spirit? No. I am not.”

I look him up and down.

“Then what are you?”

He sighs with great exaggeration and gusto.

“I can scarcely believe you have not heard of me. Your village is such a religious one, I did think they would have mentioned me at least once.”

I narrow my eyes, lunging towards him sharply. He jumps back. His ears pin to the back of his head, his legs stiffen, and his eyes widen.

“Enough! Tell me who you are, quickly!”

He stands still for a moment before shaking himself out.

“I am no spirit,” he says. “I am a demon of unnatural creation, of *your* creation.” I furrow my brow, shaking my head.

“A demon? How is your existence any fault of mine? You and I both know I did no such thing, I’ve never seen you before I entered this forest.”

“Not you specifically, stupid child. I am a creation of your people, of the humans. In fact, I am a creation of Godiva herself.”

My shoulders sag and my body becomes limp.

“Godiva?” I ask, my voice softer. “Liar. Why would she create a demon?” He lounges on the grass, grooming himself.

“She had all these nasty, nasty feelings inside of her. She hated the loneliness, the isolation she felt when she was still a spirit. She became angry and resentful of the villagers, she blamed them. Her hatred was killing her, gnawing away at her very being. She didn’t want it, so she forged me. She forced me upon the world to wreak havoc. The magic she used was dark, but she used it nonetheless. And the pain she felt was compiled into something. Can you guess what?”

I swallow, my throat constricting.

“You?” I squeak.

He nods slowly.

“Yes. Me. I am a part of Godiva as she is a part of me. I have no name, I am no spirit.

And you, you are a sister to me as I am a brother to you,” he says.

I back away from him, my head spinning.

“No, no.”

“Yes, it’s the truth,” his tone perks up. “Speaking of truth, is he not the spirit you seek out now?”

I flick my head to the side, my ponytail and ribbon falling over my shoulder.

“Of course not.”

He rises to his feet.

“Don’t lie to me now,” he says. “What can I do to you?” My mouth parts in an amused grin.

“What can you do?” I ask sarcastically. “Are you not a demon? There are a million ways you could end me right at this very moment.”

“I can help you.”

My lips purse again, my eyes narrowing.

“You can’t truly expect me to believe that.”

“What else do you think you can do?” he questions. “Can you find your way home? Do you know how to navigate this forest?”

I shrug, attempting to feign confidence.

“Well enough.”

“Liar. I am a child of lies, I know when one is being told.” I blink, looking down. Air escapes through my nose.

“Yes, alright.”

He slinks up to my heels. The closer he gets, the more I come to realize how large he is.

He's more akin to a wolf than a fox.

"You need my help. You will die in this forest without it," he whispers.

I continue to move back until I slam into a large oak behind me.

"I don't need you, I don't need anyone."

"I know where the Spirit of Truth is. I've led many of your kind to his cavern, though I've seen much fewer emerge."

"You must think me very foolish," I say, walking in the opposite direction of the animal.

"Hardly," he replies, following close behind. "I would only think you foolish if you decide to ignore my offer."

I close my eyes, not stopping. I hate myself for even considering it, but what else can I do? The truth, unchangeable as it may be, is that I don't know my way around this place.

I'll perish before I'll be able to find anything to save Faunia.

"Ahh, you see my point now, yes?"

"Hush, I'm thinking."

He chuckles. "Thinking. It never leads anywhere good."

I begin to slow my pace, my hand coming up to scrub my chin. I turn to look him in the eyes.

"How do I know I can trust you?" I ask.

He cocks his head.

“You can’t, of course. You’re a clever woman, you know better than to ask silly things like that - silly things that mean nothing.”

My fingers roll up to form a fist as I glance away from him.

“Would you rather I lied? Would you rather I tell you I’ll be your closest companion and we’ll be connected the rest of our days?” he asks.

I huff, my shoulders tightening.

“No, I wouldn’t.”

He hums deeply under his breath, slinking forward. His tails curl around my legs. I cringe, sidestepping away.

“Keep your distance, vermin,” I snap.

“Vermin? Oh, come now” he says coyly, “What disrespect is this? Do I not deserve better, as your escort?”

I sneer, scoffing.

“My escort? Hardly. You’ll keep away from me if you know what’s good for you.” He shakes himself out, sighing.

“Humans. All alike, the lot of you,” he says. He keeps his tone and voice level, unchanging and nonchalant. He begins to walk forward. I can hardly bring myself to follow.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

He flicks his head behind his shoulder.

“I’m taking you to the Spirit of Truth. Is that not what you want?” I furrow my brow, looking around.

“It’ll be dark soon. I need to make camp, not wander around.” He turns back around, sauntering into the depths of the forest again.

“You have me to protect you now,” he says.

I cross my arms, refusing to budge.

“I hardly need protecting, and certainly not from you.” He grows further away, his voice distant.

“Of course, of course. Come now, before something larger than myself comes along and decides you look edible.”

I bite my upper lip, a deep pull in my chest. There’s a whining at my feet. I glance down to see Winifred sitting at my feet, her paw covering my largest toe. I stare at her, bending down to ruffle her hair. Then I turn my head to the sky again, watching the fading light dissipate into the deep horizon.

“Come along, it won’t do to leave you behind,” the fox calls out.

Before I can even shout back any sort of rebuttal, the sun fades away. For a few moments, the darkness consumes and devours me. It doesn’t take long, however, for the forest to begin to glow. The illumination isn’t nearly as bright as it was when I first came to these woods.

I know it’s Godiva, I can feel it. It’s her weakened state that has affected the radiance.

“Come on, Winnie,” I say, forcing my feet to move forward and follow behind the fox.



He doesn't look back at me, but I know he must hear my footsteps.

"Decided to join me, have you?"

I don't reply, watching his feet move swiftly across the grassy floor.

"This is going to be a long journey if you refuse to speak," he says.

"I'm not refusing to speak. I just have nothing to say to you."

He giggles menacingly. "Ah, I see."

I scan the length of his long torso, keeping space between him and Winifred. We walk in silence, the star twinkling above us.

"Why didn't you change when she did?" I finally ask.

"You'll have to elaborate," he replies.

"When Godiva became human," I say. "Why didn't you become human too?"

"It doesn't work that way, our connection is not so strong. She's done whatever she can to drive me away, even destroy me, but she never could. She's never been strong enough. I'm a stagnant part of her, a lingering presence that she let loose upon the world."

He laughs heartily then, though whatever joke he just made has escaped me.

"Why wouldn't she tell me about you? It doesn't make sense," I say quietly, more to myself than to him.

"Oh, she's quite ashamed of her little creation. I'm always with her even if she doesn't care to admit it. She thinks if she pretends I don't exist, then I won't."

I rub my arms up and down, looking out into the black distance.

“So, you just wonder about this forest? You stalk her, follow her, torment her, is that your purpose?”

He slows down so he can walk next to me.

“Why are you still so protective of her? Did she not abandon you here?”

I purse my lips, looking away from him suddenly. “She did so with good reason.”

“Still, an action like that is unforgivable, is it not?”

I shake my head. “You know nothing about it,” I say sharply.

“No?”

“No.”

“Then tell me.”

“I think not.”

His ears perk up. “Dear me, have I angered you?”

“Of course not,” I say through clenched teeth.

“I have,” says.

He looks at me hard, but I keep my gaze fixed ahead of me.

“Stop it,” I say.

“Stop what?”

“Stop looking at me,” I nearly shout.

“Why? Does it bother you?”

I come to a hard halt, fury flowing through the river of my veins like poison. He twists around me, his body rubbing up against my legs. I kick him off quickly.

“What’s the matter with you?” I bellow. “Did I not tell you to stay away? I swear, get closer to me again and I’ll crack your spine!”

My mind spins with red anger, sweat spreading across my forehead. Everything in me feels hot, seething. I feel ill.

What’s happening to me?

The demon doesn’t back away.

“I have a hunger, girl. Remember? I told you the moment you entered this place.”

“Your hunger is no fault of mine.”

“My hunger was created by you,” he says. “It’s a void in my stomach, a pit within my soul. I was born with it. It is what I have in place of a soul. If that is not your fault, then whose fault is it?”

I refuse to back away, standing my ground. I force myself to not feel or acknowledge the terror that permeates me.

“I don’t know, but it isn’t mine.” He stalks towards me.

“Then it’s Godiva’s. And Godiva is you. You are Godiva. You see?”

I bend out, reaching out blindly. I grope about until my hand lands on a hefty stick that lies on the ground. I grasp it firmly.

“I don’t know anything about your hunger or how to solve it. Your own. Would you rather Godiva not have made you at all?”

He growls. “Yes. I suppose so. But she has, and now I am forced to exist in this hideous state, always starving, never satisfied.”

I aim my stick in his direction, planting my feet firmly in the dirt.

“Stay back now, be smart. I’m - I’m stronger than you, I could kill you and you know it,” I say warningly.

“Then why haven’t you?” he hisses, his stance predatory.

I pause for a moment, swallowing a lodged lump of saliva.

“Because I’m relying on you to show me the way out of here.”

“And what’ll you do once I’ve done that? Is that twig of yours to be the end of me?”

I grit my teeth, swinging the staff towards his sizeable jaw. He ducks, dodging my intended blow easily. I gasp under my breath.

“My, my,” he says. “What a stupid thing to do.”

He bares his teeth, his yellow eyes brimming over with wild malice. My heart pounds violently as I watch him, wide-eyed.

As he’s about to lunge forward, a blinding white light shines through the density of the trees. It comes in a wave, furiously bright in the stark darkness.

I back away, the fox’s ears pinning flat against his head. I can almost hear him crying softly. Winifred lays down at my feet, calm in the midst of such a bizarre phenomenon.

The light doesn't frighten me like it perhaps should. It calms me, it soothes something deep within my spirit. My knees buckle, and I find myself lulled to the ground. I drop down until my palms are flat on the grass. My body is at rest and at ease, and I don't fight the urge to fall asleep.

The fox stays on his feet, shaking and whimpering. My eyelids are deadweight as they drift closed, all the pain I've ever felt has seeped out of my body. The light has absorbed it. I've never known a peace like this. The light is a lullaby I haven't been able to understand until this moment. My body does not exist, it floats away into the oblivious.

In the midst of the darkness and the light, I fade away.

I dissipate and evaporate until I am nothing.

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I can feel every beat of my heart, every breath is a gust of wind. I have no desire to make any part of my body move and I doubt I could if I tried. There are no trees, no plants or flowers. I look around me, yet the fox is nowhere in sight. Winifred is gone as well. The light continues to shine, unwavering and powerful like a star. I blink, and the light begins to die. It peters out. In its place, I see the outline of a stag. Its antlers tower, its strong legs and its firm body stand unmoving in front of my fallen body. I feel some sense of coherence return to me.

"Godiva?" I whisper, my voice crackling.

The stag flicks its head towards me, moving forward. Its steps are slow and graceful. I don't feel threatened or afraid. Something about it makes any fear I might have had fall away from my mind.

"Godiva? Is that you? Why don't you answer me?"

Even though it's me speaking, my voice sounds so distant and misplaced.

"I'm sorry for what I did, Godiva," I continue. "I was afraid. I *am* afraid. I didn't want to hurt anybody, but I always do. I always hurt people, even if I try not to."

The stag doesn't answer me. It isn't until the stag stands close to me that I realize the color of its fur. It's white, snow white.

This isn't Godiva.

The white stag bows its head down to me, its snout nuzzles down into my neck. I can feel the tiny hairs on its nose tickling me. My eyes roll back into my head, whatever control I had over myself is gone as my body goes entirely limp again. I can feel something lift away from my physical being, something intangible. I become one with the invisible air surrounding us. Suddenly, a sharp pang of icy pain rushes through me. Guilt, anger, disappointment, a sense of waste, hate, everything swirls around me in a murky pool. Then, as quickly as the feelings came, a golden fountain of euphoria rushes against it. Love, joy, contentment. I see myself as a child. I see a smile, Devin's smile. I haven't seen his face and expression so gentle or innocent since we were both young. I am flushed with aching nostalgia.

"Devin?" I whimper, reaching out to nothing.

Devin disappears and Faunia materializes in his place, lively and breathtaking. I see us when our love was still new and blossoming. I see the unsure hesitation in her eyes that mixes with ecstatic curiosity and excitement. I watch as we both grow up, the childlike confusion melting away into something deeper and stronger. It fills both of us.

I watch as she falls ill.

I watch from a distance as the village grows, rusts, erodes, and then repeats the process. I watch as the sun and moon spiral around each other throughout the days of my life. I turn my head to look into the eyes of the white stag. They're black and contrast against the light hue of its fur. The stag blinks, bringing its forehead down to rest against mine. The white light returns with a vengeance. I awaken suddenly, bolting upright. My body trembles and I gasp, sucking in air like I haven't taken a breath in years. I feel as though I'm close to becoming ill.

"Good lord, I thought you'd never wake up," a deep voice says.

I turn my head shakily to the right. The fox lays on the grass, his paws crossed. He licks and grooms himself absentmindedly. The sun is high in the sky.

"What - what happened to me?" I stammer. "What did you do?"

"Me? I did nothing. How could I?" he asks, chuckling.

I grasp ahold of the nearest tree branch, forcing myself to stand upright. My legs are weak, but I won't allow myself to fall back down to the ground. Something feels vile in my stomach, a yellow pain in my belly.

I lean forward, spewing up bile and vomit violently.

"Oh, how unfortunate," the fox says. "But I suppose one must purge to cleanse oneself, yes?"

The spasms in the torso cease, and I lean back against the tree's trunk.

"What was that, if not you?" I ask.

He pushes his paw back through his ear.

"It was deliverance. Don't you know?" he tells me, snarky.

I breathe out, spitting the remnants of vile from my mouth.

“It felt like death.”

He hums quietly, rising.

“Well, you’re more perceptive than you seem. Come on now, let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time here.”

I shake my head. “No, I can’t move. I - I can barely use my legs.”

“Don’t be a child about it, now,” he says.

I narrow my eyes, digging my hands into the hair on my scalp.

“You attacked me, didn’t you? You attacked me right before I saw the white light.”

“Ah, who can remember the past? History is a strange thing. Happy times are always recalled far more pleasantly than how they truly occurred, and bad spells are glossed over with ashen thorns. They’re too painful to touch and look truly nasty from a distance. You can’t get close to them, you can’t observe them. It’s all quite a shame.” I shake my head, looking at him from the side.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying that we must go now unless you want the entire day to be wasted.”

“No! I can’t go anywhere with you. I don’t trust you.”

“Trust isn’t the grounds our relationship is based upon, child. Trust is like sand, it slips and slides. It would be a stupid thing to lay a foundation upon.”



I grimace. I can feel my legs growing stronger with every moment that passes. The strength returns to my mind as well.

“I don’t need you,” I tell him. “I want you to stay away from me.”

I stomp off, Winifred at my heels. The fox laughs at my back as I fade away.

“You can’t find your way through this forest without me.”

“I can and I will,” I call back.

“Ah, but we’ve only barely begun. It’s a long journey to the cave of the Spirit of Truth.

You don’t know the way.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking, agreeing to be escorted by you,” I say sharply.

“You were thinking clearly, for once.”

I purse my lips, catching the response in my mouth and keeping my words locked firmly within my jaw.

“You can’t just run off. Don’t think I’ll give up on you so easily.”

I close my eyes, sighing loudly. Winifred and I walk aimlessly as the fox travels behind us. I hear his footsteps crunching the grass.

“Where are you headed to? The village?”

I groan. “Not.”

“Naturally. You wouldn’t know how to get there anyway.”

I feel the moss on my bare feet, the flowers that I crush as I walk. They keep me stable, I need it.

“I can find it on my own. Now leave me be.”

“Ah, of course,” he breathes. “You will be wandering around this place for years. Years and years. You can live off the berries, I’m sure. But that can’t last forever. One day these trees will all begin to look alike. You’ll go insane. Your mind will wither like a dying flower. You’ll die in one way or another and I’ll be there to devour your corpse.”

I stiffen at his words, but I don’t turn around to face him.

“And I suppose that’ll finally kill your hunger, will it?”

“No. Nothing can kill my hunger, but it’ll satisfy it for a while.”

I look up. The wooly branches block out most of the blue from the afternoon sky. I furrow my brow, and suddenly I feel claustrophobic. The loose fabric of my clothes even feels tight against me.

My heart turns icy, a chill spreading throughout my body.

“It feels as though it’s been a thousand years, doesn’t it?” he asks.

“What does?”

“Since you’ve last seen your family. Your people, your home.”

I very nearly falter in my movement, but I won’t let him see it.

“Don’t speak to me about that. Don’t speak to me at all.”

“Your little nephew must be missing you desperately.”

That makes my feet skid out from under me. I see Roe, clearly, in my mind. It burns. It seems as if it's been a lifetime since I saw him. He may very well have forgotten me by now.

"I'll be back soon," I say, more to myself than to the fox.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I will."

"That's not much of an answer."

"It's as much of an answer as you're going to get from me."

"Hmm."

He grows quiet then, and his silence is welcome. A few leaves flutter down from the trees and scatter down onto the ground. I watch them fall, I focus on the way they hit the grass. My stomach begins to settle, and the strained pain in my back eases up.

"You like the leaves, don't you?" he asks.

"Yes. I do. What does it matter to you?" I reply tightly.

"Why do you like the leaves?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know anything?"

I chuckle ruefully, shaking my head and holding up my palms flat to the sky.

"No, I suppose not. I wish I knew how to get rid of you, but I don't."

"You don't wish that. You'd be all alone out here, and I know you wouldn't want that."

I can hear his pace quickening behind me. “I’m finding my way on my way on my own, without any help from you, aren’t I?” I ask confidently.

“Really?” he sniggers. “And just where do you think you’re going? Do you have any idea? Is walking blindly East your idea of knowing where you’re going?”

I feel a cold shiver run through me and down my spine. I know he’s right. I feel my feet slow themselves. The fox catches up to me, his orange fur burning against my eyes.

“You can’t do much, can you?” I swallow,  
my brow furrowed.

“What? Of course, I can. I’ve survived life in this place so far, haven’t I?”

“In this place?”

“In the woods,” I say.

He laughs loudly. “You truly think that? Do you think you’ve done well? Then you are more a fool than I thought. Godiva is the only reason you’re still breathing. Without her, you would have been dead quite a long time ago.” My throat goes dry. I can almost feel it crack.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I whisper.

“You’re a bully and a useless one,” he says. “Godiva’s only crime against you was love. When she gave you that love, you slapped it from her hands.”

My shoulder stiffens. The pounding of my heart against my chest is loud and painful.

“She wanted me to stop. I can’t stop. Faunia is too important.” He flicks his head up at me.

“More important than everyone?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. “She is.”

“Huh. So, what kind of person does that make you?”

My feet feel cold, my palms grow sweaty. I rub them hard against my pants.

“It doesn’t matter. Faunia...she’s the one who matters out of the two of us. I’m nothing,”

I tell him, my voice trailing away. “I am no one.”

“And Faunia?” he asks. “Has she become some angel since she grew ill?” I stop in my tracks, growing still and firm. I turn to him.

“What? What did you say?”

The fox stops walking as well.

“Come now. She has never been so virtuous as she is now, sleeping away her existence.”

Rage floods me.

“How dare you?” I cry. “Faunia’s soul is vibrant and radiant, she is beautiful and without flaw.”

He snickers, folding his paws over themselves.

“That’s a funny thing to say. Not a single flaw? Not even her temper? Legend says it was just as wild and ferocious as yours, if not more so.”

I look down at my feet, nibbling at the inside of my cheek. I attempt to keep myself restrained, but the calm is very loosely bound.

“She was never violent.”

“No,” he says. “Only in her words. She could be hateful, couldn’t she?” I shake my head.

“Never,” I say frantically. “That’s a lie.”

“But you had fights, you had some very bad fights,” he says. “Have all those memories flown from your mind?”

I feel my bottom lip beginning to quiver.

“None of those things matter now, do they? Sickness erases that.”

“Sickness doesn’t change the past.”

“Faunia and I only fought when things were my fault. The blame was never on her,” I say, stumbling around the words.

“That isn’t how you felt at the time.”

“Stop it.”

“Faunia is not untouchable.”

“Faunia was -” I stop myself, catching my breath. “Faunia *is* smart, and kind, and strong and gentle and -”

“And hot-headed, and irritable, and -” I throw my hands over my ears.

“Stop it! Stop it, now! I don’t want to hear this!”

“You have heard it though, haven’t you? Deep inside your own mind? I only exist because of you, I cannot make things up or invent. All I say is what you have thought already.”

I narrow my eyes, scanning the fox over. It seems that he’s grown suddenly taller, his shoulders spiked upwards. His legs have extended out in a stringy way. I lower my hands down slowly.

“What’s happening to you?”

“What’s happening to *you*?” he counters.

I back away, scooping Winifred off the ground.

“No, something’s wrong with you,” I gasp. “Keep back.”

He continues to rise up, his orange hide losing its vibrant tint and changing into that of a greyish brown. He is no longer a fox, but a wolf. A hound. A beast.

“What does that mean?” he asks.

I begin to pant. Panic sets in. I take to my feet, speeding away. I run down against the grass and into the thick trees.

“Come back! Come back! You can’t escape me, you know you can’t!” the wolf screams.

I close my eyes against the stinging wind. I face forward, winding through the depths of the woods. I go as hard as I can, my heart pounding unevenly like fireworks in my chest. I hear the wolf behind me, its breath is hot against my heels.

“Stay away, wretched thing,” I cry, cradling Winifred hard in my arms.

“I’m starving! I’m starving and nobody cares. Help me, please!” he screams.

I look back at him and realize quickly that the move was a mistake. His mouth is foaming, his eyes wild and rabid. The froth about this jaw and the yellowing of his eyes make my stomach churn. This beast is so much different from the meddlesome fox I'd meet.

I breathe out quietly, turning back around. I make myself run faster, even as my legs threaten to collapse.

“Your hunger isn't my concern! I cannot take it away!”

“No,” he says. “But you can quiet it for a moment.” I shake my head.

“I can't solve anything for you! I can't help you!” Behind me, a choked wail erupts from the wolf.

“I beg you! Help me! I'm alone, you're the only one who can save me.”

Something tugs in me, a string that pulls me back towards him. It takes a considerable amount of strength not to turn back.

“And how am I meant to save you?” I call back. “Do you plan on eating me? Is that your solution?”

He growls low and under his breath.

“What does it matter to you? Your Faunia will be dead soon, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Why not give me your life? What use is it to you? Who would care if you never returned to the village? Your brother? Oh, he'd mourn for a while, but he'd forget you sooner than you'd like to think. Your nephew doesn't need you, and you never treated Ceren well. By



the end, you even drove away Tabitha. She was the last friend you had. You're useless, worthless, you don't mean anything to anybody."

"That's - that's not true," I respond, my voice breaking.

"It is, and you know it is," he says.

I can feel myself beginning to fall back. My pace slows.

"Yes," I whisper.

He breathes heavily.

"Nobody gives a damn about you. And why should they? What reason have you given them?" he asks. "You're bitter. You're resentful, and you take it out on others. Even before Faunia fell ill, you never let people see you. And you become angry when they try."

My feet come to a grinding halt. Winifred squirms in my arms as I become concrete.

"But," I stammer, "Devin doesn't want me dead. The village does want me dead."

"Some wouldn't mind it. What do you add? You make people miserable. You make your world a darker, greyer place."

My heart slows, and my eyes blur over with tears.

"Roe loves me. He has fond memories."

The wolf nods, pacing over to my side. He twists himself until he's in front of me, circling me slowly.

"He's one of the few."

I look down, breath leaking out of my chest.

“Faunia is depending on me. She’s more important than I am, she’s more important than everyone in that village.”

“Someone else will save her.”

“No...impossible...”

“Take pity on your people and let them go. They’re already so much happier now that you’re gone.”

I look all about me, bewildered and confused. Nothing makes sense. My head is too muddled.

“But, Faunia -”

“Shh, shh,” he shushes me. “Let her go. Let it all go. Give everyone peace. Give yourself peace.”

Suddenly my mind begins to clear. I nod slowly.

“Yes. Yes.”

It all makes sense. My body calms, and I ease. The wolf lets out a guttural growl, erupting from deep within his diaphragm. It penetrates through me.

“Just stand there, you don’t have to move. You don’t have to do anything. I swear, I’ll get it done and over with fast. It won’t even hurt too much.”

The wolf bares his teeth, his white fangs sparkling in the light.

“Faunia will always remember me well,” I whisper.

He slinks towards me.

“Of course. Of course she will,” he hisses.

A sudden beating against the grass pounds in my ears. It catches the attention of the wolf immediately. He throws his head to the right, fury smoldering in his eyes. I look too, but before I can catch even a glimpse, I’m knocked to the ground. I grunt, throwing my hands over my face as I fall.

A brown flash rushes passed. Its breathing is heavy and hard. I look up, unshielding my eyes. Four strong legs and a long body. It positions itself squarely in the dirt, its stance firm like a mountain. I look up at it in shock as I lie flat on my back.

“Godiva?” I gasp.

The Stag turns to me, snorting out a wheezing huff through its snout. The wolf whimpers.

“Godiva? No, no it can’t be,” he says.

The Stag rears its head up, shaking out its antlers. Then it makes a loud grunt, charging. In an instant, the wolf transforms. Its slick, light fur changes back into orange. It shrinks dramatically in size, devolving back into a fox.

The Stag rams the fox hard in the chest, jamming its antlers into its body. The fox wails in pain, screeching as though its heart has been torn from its chest. The Stag lifts him from the ground. Blood erupts from the fox’s stomach, spewing out and blanketing the Stag in a red cloak. The Stag runs hard, slamming the fox against a tree. It screams again, those the yelling dies away, and quickly after he begins to laugh ominously.

“My, my, Godiva,” he says. His voice is a wet whisper, only just audible.

The Stag snorts softly in response.

“I must admit,” he says. “I didn’t think you’d have it in you.”

The Stag shoves the fox harder into the tree. I can hear its bone crack against the pressure. The fox groans.

“Just do it. Get it over with, coward.”

I begin to pant, the panic of what has just happened sinking in.

“Godiva?” I gasp.

The Stag flicks its feral eyes towards me, not turning its head fully. It backs away slightly, running the fox into the trunk of the massive oak one last time. With that, and with one final breath, the burning light in the fox’s eyes flickers away. The forest is silent, still. The only sound is the blood dripping from the Stag’s hide. The fox becomes the dark color of dust. I watch as its fur crumbles and turns to ash, a pile of ash falling onto the grass. The blood, once crimson and staining, transforms into nothing more than black soot.

I put my hand on the trunk of a large tree behind me. I try to rise, but my legs wobble underneath me. The Stag breathes heavily, spinning around to face me. I can feel my body weakening, I’m on the verge of collapse. The Stag rushes towards me, tucking its head and neck around me. I grasp onto it, latching against its body. I place my hand against the deer’s fur, clutching it. My eyes are wild and widened, my whole body quivering. It takes me a moment to understand what’s happening.

“Godiva,” I say.

I can feel tears rising in my eyes. The Stag warms suddenly, its skin hot against mine. Air rushes around me, swirling around both of us in a loose tornado. I can feel the soft hide under my fingers turn into skin. A flash of hair whips across my line of vision.

Her arms come around me, looping my waist.

“You’re alright, everything is going to be fine,” Godiva whispers.

Winifred yaps at my feet, pawing at Godiva’s leg.

“You - I - I don’t understand,” I say shakily.

She shakes her head against mine. Her gown sways softly in the wind as she puts her palm on the back of my head.

“Calm. Be calm, sweet one,” she tells me.

My full weight bends against hers. My legs do not hold out for long, they bend under the stress invading my body. I collapse to the ground. Godiva helps to lower me down, keeping one arm secured around me until I’m onto the grass. She pulls back away from me, looking hard at my face.

“Are you hurt? What did he do to you?” she asks.

I blink, frozen. “What?”

She strokes up and down my arms, scanning me.

“Did he hurt you? I don’t see any blood.” I

shake my head, swallowing hard.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Relief flushes over her face. She breathes out slowly.

“Good, that’s good.”

I narrow my eyes, my mouth agape. Her blue eyes sparkle gently in the summer light.

Why is she here?

“What are you doing?” I ask.

She cocks her head. “What do you mean?”

“What are you doing here? Why did you come back? You said -” She holds up her hand, ceasing my speech.

“I know what I said,” she tells me. “I know what I said, and I know why I said it. Now come, stand up. You need to work out your legs, or you’ll have a much harder time later.”

“A much harder time doing what?”

She smiles, cupping my face. “Walking. Now get up, don’t be silly about it.”

I look down. Godiva grasps my hand and pulls me up hard. My legs wobble and tremble, my feet are numb against the ground. I feel like a damned fool. I shake my head.

“I can’t. If you just could let me rest for a little while, if I can sleep. I’m so tired. I want to sleep.”

Godiva chuckles, placing her other hand on my back.

“If you sleep, you’ll die. You need to stay awake, just for a little while.” She turns her head to the right, glancing at a berry bush.

“You need to eat something,” she says.

She walks over to the bush, and I lean against the tree trunk. She plucks a branch off the plant. Ripe and plump round balls dangle from it. She paces back towards me.

“Here,” she says.

I reach out, pulling off some of the fruit. I push them around in my palm.

Godiva nods. “Yes, eat it.”

I look up at her, some sense of coherency returning to me.

“What about Winifred?” I ask, looking down at my dog.

Godiva smiles, rolling her eyes. “Fine, fine. Just eat that, okay? I’ll go look for something for Winnie.”

I glance back down at the berries. With one go, I toss them all in my mouth. The juice bursts free in my mouth, flavorful and juicy.

“Now, swallow,” she commands.

I do. The moment they hit my stomach, they threatened to come right back up again. I bend over, bile lurching in my throat.

“No, no,” she says. “Keep it down. Force yourself to.”

My lips twist into a grimace. I groan, pushing my tongue into the back of my throat.

“I can’t, I’m going to vomit.”

Godiva comes to slap her hand over my mouth.

“Keep it down, keep it down,” she says, her teeth clenched.

I squeal, tearing at her hand. I try to fight against her, I dig my fingers into her palm, doing what I can to pry her off of me. Yet it does nothing.

“Don’t! Stop it.” I gasp, my words muffled under her grip.

I breathe heavily, and my stomach begins to spasm.

“Laney, look at me,” she says. “You can’t throw up. You can’t sleep. For once, just do as I say. Alright?”

I scan her, her blue eyes frozen and hard. I sigh, my breath warm against her hand. Finally, I close my eyes. I make the berries stay in my belly, my rapid breathing calms itself.

“Yeah, there we go,” Godiva says soothingly. “You’re alright.”

She removes her hand from my mouth, allowing it to drop onto my shoulder. I part my lips, opening my eyes again. I blink a few times.

“How do you feel now? Any better?” she asks.

I nod slowly, putting my hand against my sternum.

“I’m fine.”

She looks down at my legs. “And how does it feel to stand?”

I shrug. I don’t want to admit how sore I am. “Fine, I’m fine.” She looks back up at me, a light smirk across her face.

“Liar,” she says.

I chuckle softly, massaging my forehead.

“I missed you,” I say.

She glances up at me, and we lock eyes. The moment we do, my grin fades and dies away. Tears blossom, and my bottom lip starts to quiver.

“I missed you,” I repeat.

Godiva tilts her head gently, her shoulder slouching.

“Laney,” she says, her voice cracking.

“I’m so sorry for what I did. You were just trying to protect me and I betrayed you,” I say, my voice breaking. On impulse, I drop down to one knee. “Forgive me, Great Stag.”



“Laney -” she replies gently.

“I have offended you. I have disrespected you. I have wronged you, your grace.”

She sighs loudly, bending down and grabbing my arm. She pulls me up hard, looking me in the eyes.

“I haven’t been the Great Stag since I met you,” she says. “There’s no need to bow down to me now.”

I shake my head, my ponytail swaying as I do.

“You are, and I have abused you. I was taught to worship you, to pray to you as we prayed to God.”

Her face turns steely.

“I do not wish to be worshiped. I’ve told you this.”

“But -”

“I’m Godiva,” she says. “To you, I’m Godiva. I always will be. Let me have that.”

My face grows hot, tears spill over from my eyes and down my cheeks. I bend my neck, tilting my head down in shame. Godiva reaches out, putting her arms around my torso, bringing me to her. I bury my head in her hair, pushing my body to hers.

Her hair is so much thinner than it used to be. The golden light that once shone from it has disappeared. Her skin has paled as well. There is no radiant glow. No flowers blossom from her gown or the crown of her forehead.

I’ve changed her. This world I’ve dragged her into has changed her. I look down and

open my palm. Three more petals fall away from the blue rose. I shut my eyes hard.

“Hmm,” Godiva hums. “My time is close to ending.”

Suddenly my heart pounds hard in my chest. I pull back, holding her shoulders so I can look her square in the eye.

“What?”

“My time here, as a mortal, with you. It’s coming to an end.”

“No,” I whisper pathetically. “No yet, not now.”

She grins, putting her hand up to the side of my face.

“Not now, but very soon.”

I scan her. Something in me is cracking, crumbling. The stone fortress I’ve built so meticulously around myself is falling away. I feel raw as if I’d been cut open.

“Will you remember me? At all?” I ask.

She cocks her head.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what will happen.”

I breathe out slowly, reaching behind me to pull the purple ribbon from my hair, it falls against my shoulders once I do. I collapse down onto the grass, my legs giving out. Winifred whimpers and crawls into my lap. Godiva bends down slowly, sitting next to me.

“I shouldn’t have left the village,” I say slowly.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t save her,” I whisper. “And all I’ve done is make things worse.”

She scoots closer to me, her hand reaching around to the back of my neck. She puts her forehead against mine gently.

“Nothing happens if it wasn’t supposed to. We all do what we do for a reason, God ensures it.”

I scoff. “How can you say that? How can you still think God gives a damn about any of us? Have you ever even met them?” She breaks our connection.

“No. I shouldn’t have to.” I  
look down at my lap.

“If you’re right, and everything that happens is somehow preordained, then it was God who made Faunia ill.”

Godiva narrows her eyes, her lips pursed. “I’m not sure you should think of it like that.” I  
look up at her from under my hair.

“If what you say is true, then they are no God of mine.” She closes  
her mouth, her eyes wide.

“Laney -” she begins.

Before she can finish, I grow faint and fall against the ground. Godiva plucks me up softly, laying my head in her lap.

“You’re exhausted. You need to eat, and rest. You’ve made it passed the worst of it.”

I try to keep my eyes open but to no avail. They flutter shut, and my entire body relaxes.

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“Devin? Devin?”

“No, Laney.”

“Devin?”

“Laney, wake up.”

“Devin?”

“Laney, open your eyes.”

“Devin!”

“Laney, calm down!”

“Devin, Devin, Devin!”

“Laney!”

I’m shaken, hard. I jolt upright, gasping. Godiva’s eyes bore into mine.

“Stop screaming, these woods are a quiet place. Something out there will hear you, and I can’t protect you. I’m not strong enough now.”

I blink, my chest heaving. I’m sopping wet with cold sweat.

“I - I’m sorry,” I gasp softly.

She tilts her head at me, silent for a moment. Then she holds out a handful of berries and other edible plants.

“Eat. There’s a little stream down the side of the hill. I’ll get you some water. Stay here,” she tells me, handing all the food to me.

I put my free palm flat on the ground, scooting up into a cross-legged sitting position. Godiva rises, jogging down into the horizon. I look to the right and see Winifred wagging her tail slowly. I grin in a half-smirk kind of way. I put my hand on her back, ruffling her fur.

“Hey, baby,” I say.

She whines softly, nuzzling up against my side. She perches near me. I lean my head against the trunk of the tree.

“Ahh, Winnie,” I muse quietly. “I’m sorry I dragged you away from the village at all.”

She lays her little head down on my thigh. I dip my hand down, letting her nibble on the food Godiva brought me.

“You need to eat, too,” Godiva calls, coming back up the hill.

“I know.”

She raises one eyebrow, carrying a leaf between her hands. I see the water sloshing inside the leaf.

“You’ve gotten too thin,” she says.

Winifred finishes, and I pop what’s left in my mouth. The taste is bitter and strong. It lingers on my tongue. I cringe, and Godiva snorts through her nose.

“I know. That’s all I could find that wasn’t rotten.” I crinkle my eyebrows.

“Rotten? What do you mean?”

Her smile fades away, she kneels beside me.

“Something is changing in the forest,” she says, pressing the water and make-shift cup up to my lips. “I can feel it. The balance between Life and Death is not balanced, it’s no longer even.”

The water is chilling against the back of my throat as I swallow. I should be thirsty, but I’m not. The liquid does nothing to satisfy me.

“Shifting? Why?” I ask.

She looks down, setting the empty leaf down.

“I think it’s because of me,” she says. “I can feel it, Death. I can feel it creeping up my neck, through my spine. It’s cold and hot at the same time, but every second I can feel it getting nearer. It’s trying to find me, and I know it’s getting closer.” I blink, my lips parting.

“What? How is that possible? You can’t die, not really.”

She pushes her hair back behind her ears, giving me a sarcastic grin.

“Of course I can. One day, in eons or perhaps mere days, this forest will die. It will wilt away and break apart, evaporating and becoming one with everything again, and that will be fatal to me. Though, ever since I gave up my status as a spirit for you, I’ve been able to die.”

I pull my knees up to my chest, queasy.

“Godiva,” I whisper.

“Hmm?”

“When I was with the fox, I saw something. Maybe it was just a vision, but I thought…”

I trail off, all at once embarrassed.

She ducks her head to catch my eye.

“What, Laney?” she asks gently. “What did you see?”

“At first, I thought it was you. It looked like a stag, but it was white, pure white. It was brighter than the sun. And when I saw it, something happened to me. I don’t know what, but I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Godiva’s face flushes, then it drains of color. She smiles and hums softly to herself for a moment.

“What? Do you know what I saw?” She nods.

“Yes,” she tells me.

I pause, waiting for her to continue. She doesn’t. I scoff quietly under my breath.

“Well?” I prompt her.

She shakes her head, sighing deeply.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

She rises, brushing herself off. Her arm extends as she offers her hand to me.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I’m not sure.”

I purse my lips, reaching out to grasp her palm with mine. She pulls me up.

“I don’t know either,” I say once I’m on my feet. “So where does that leave us?”

She chuckles, shrugging slightly. “I could take you back to the village if that’s what you want.”

I feel a weight wedge within me. My palms begin to sweat, and my heart rate quickens.

“No!” I blurt. “I can’t go back.”

She shifts her weight back on one foot, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Are you saying you’ll never return?”

I dig my hand into my hair, turning away from her.

“I don’t know. Maybe not. I could learn the ways of this forest, the real ways. I’ve survived so far. There’s food, I have Winifred, and if I stayed, I’d never have to leave you. You could change back into your natural state and I could live here with you forever.” Godiva rubs her arms up and down. Her brow furrows.

“You wouldn’t last here without me in my mortal form to assist you,” she says, but I can hear the skepticism in her voice. She’s questioning herself, and I take advantage of that.

“That’s not true, you could teach me before you turn back. We still have time.” She nibbles on her bottom lip.

“There’s no guarantee I would even remember you or anything about what we’ve done when I become a spirit again,” she says. “I may forget you completely.” A chill course through my back, but I ignore it.

“I won’t let you. Anyway, let’s say you do. All I would have to do is tell you about what happened, and what we did. I’d keep telling you until you believe me.”



She looks me over, brings her hand up to massage the back of her neck.

“I don’t know, Laney, it doesn’t seem right.”

“What does that matter?” I ask sharply. “Who cares? When I first met you, you told me how lonely you were. I bet if I’d made this offer back then you would have accepted it without question.”

She scratches her chin, glancing all around the forest. I watch her eyes as she considers my offer. Trees bend against the sunlight, sparking and shadowing over.

“I’m not going to choose for you,” she tells me after some time.

Relief washes over me, and the weight of indecision lifts away from my shoulders. I nod and breathe out slowly. I’ve allowed myself to freeze, to become a being of static. I barely exist anymore.

“You don’t have much time before you turn back,” I say. “Is there anything you’d like to do? Before you change?”

My voice sounds odd. Somehow it doesn’t belong to me any longer. I’m too exhausted to care or to try to understand if I ought to care at all. Godiva runs her fingers through her hair. I can see them catch on some knots as she detangles.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “Everything feels so strange.”

I nod. “Yes. I know it does.” I

look back up to her again.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks me.

I nod, my arms limp at my side. “Sure. Might as well, I suppose.”

We look at each other for a moment. After a few seconds, I beckon Winifred to follow me. Then I begin to walk, though it feels more like floating. I can hardly feel my feet against the ground.

“Wait, Laney,” Godiva calls.

I turn around. “What?” I ask, sounding as if I’ve been drugged.

“Why now?”

“What?”

She steps up closer to me.

“Why are you doing this now? What’s the reason for it?”

I let a breath leak out slowly. I look down at the ground, then back at her.

“I don’t have one, a reason,” I say. “I don’t think there’s a reason for much of anything. I don’t think there’s a reason for the decisions of your God, I don’t think there’s a reason Faunia got sick, I don’t think there’s a reason for any of us being alive in the first place. I don’t think anything is connected or conjoined. Everything is loose and separated, barely woven together.

We’re all just floating out in space, and with no purpose at all. So why do I need a reason?

Nothing else does.”

Godiva doesn’t respond. She just stares at me, her eyes growing cold and brimming with judgment. She was hoping I’d say something else. She wanted me to be more than whatever it is I am now. Her chest heaves breath in and out. I turn around, walking forward again. She doesn’t follow me right away. Instead, she stays behind, and I feel her eyes burning against my back as I go.

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*“Father! Father! Papa!”*

*It was Devin’s screams that woke me up. I scrambled out of bed, my feet slammed down onto the dirt floor. I was still in my nightgown. I ran into the main room of the house. Devin’s hair was tied back, he was already dressed for the day, fixing breakfast for us. I watched his back as he screamed. He was silhouetted against the sun. It almost made him look angelic. He ran outside faster than I’d ever seen him move.*

*“Papa! Papa! God, please, God, no!”*

*I didn’t cry, I didn’t know what to do. I just stood there, I let him disappear as he sprinted away. His howling grew distant. I stepped up to the open doorway. Red overwhelmed my vision. Blood, blood, gushing blood. It painted the grass crimson. My father - he didn’t look like my father anymore. He was missing a leg, there was a gaping hole where the limb used to be. He was crawling along the ground, dragging himself towards my brother. One eye was gone, the other twitched rapidly. His flesh was torn apart.*

*My brother had begun to sob. And I stood in the doorway and watched.*

*Devin scooped my father up in his arms. His head was in his lap. My father’s blood soaked into Devin’s shirt. I watched the blood flower onto the fabric.*

*Devin looked up at me.*

*“Get help!” he screamed at me.*

*I didn’t move.*

*“Laney! Get help! For God’s sake, get the healers! He’s dying!”*

*I didn't move.*

*Devin gave up on me. He looked back down at my father. He put his forehead to his, stroking his hand over his hair. Devin's weeping was louder than my father's voice.*

*Finally, my father said, "you are my pride, my son, my pride and my light."*

*His voice carried to my place in the doorway before silence overtook it. I watched my father's breath flutter in his chest one last time before drifting away.*

*Then Devin screamed. He screeched. He wailed. His voice echoed through the village. His shrieking pierced something deep within me.*

*I didn't move.*

*Devin wrapped our father's body around his. His screaming turned to low weeping, and then moaning. He held my father until the sun went down.*

*I didn't move.*

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Godiva and I walk through the woods. The forest feels heavy as I go. The ground almost seems to sway beneath my feet.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

Godiva shakes her head.

"What about you?" she questions in turn.

"No, I'm fine."

Both of us feel bizarre and discordant. I know it.

"Tell me if you get tired, we can stop to rest," she says.

I look up at the trees, the thick branches blocking out the sun..

“Laney?”

“What?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I suppose.”

“Why do you never talk about your brother?”

I crinkle my brow. “What?”

“Well, it’s just - you never speak of him. Why?”

I blink, pursing my lips. I hadn’t realized I was doing so in the first place.

“I don’t know. I suppose I just, don’t care to. Now that I won’t see him again...”

Suddenly, a flash of memory floods all through my brain. I think of Devin in our old house. I think of my nephew growing older. I even think of Ceren. They’ll spend the rest of their lives wondering what happened to me. Yesterday, the thought of that might have destroyed me, now it only makes me feel numb. Perhaps I’ll pass into some sort of legend. I wonder what they’ll say happened to me. I wonder if they’ll mourn.

*Stop it. Shut up. It doesn’t matter now.*

My thoughts twirl around each other, burning into ash within my mind.

“My brother married his wife, Ceren, a few years back,” I blurt, surprised by the comment.

I look at Godiva and can see her surprise as well.

“And you got along with her? Your family was close?” I

swallow, my throat suddenly dry.

“No. We didn’t.”

Godiva is silent for a moment beside me. Then she breathes out slowly.

“Why? Was she cruel to you?”

“Yes,” I answer, too quickly.

“What did she do?”

My heart quickens, and fury warms my ears. My stomach aches as if it might burst.

“She did what she could to turn my brother against me. Her son liked me more than he did her, and she hated me for that. She’ll be happy when I don’t return,” I say.

It wasn’t until I stopped speaking that I realized how loud my voice had risen.

“Truly?” she asks.

I nod, somehow aware that I am trying to convince myself more than Godiva.

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

I cross my arms over my chest, looking down at the grass.

I’ve hated Ceren for as long as I can recall. There were days when my hostility and loathing for her would make me ill. But she stole my brother away from me and did what she could to get me out of the house. She always tried to sabotage me.

Didn’t she?

I look up at the sky, my heart pounding.

I enjoyed hurting her. I wanted to let her know how much I hated her. But where does my venomous resentment come from? I'd never truly considered it. At the end of everything, I can't remember why I despised her. Perhaps she did nothing. Perhaps I was the cruel one.

I shake my head, running my fingers through my hair. It doesn't matter now. I can't think about it. My mind is already too muddled and clouded. I know that if I dwell on this for long, I'll travel down a path I won't know how to come back from.

"Laney?" Godiva asks quietly.

I snap out of the trance I didn't realize I was in.

"What?"

She points her fingers towards the sky. "Look up."

I do, ripping my eyes away from her. I see a mountain, poised ominously before me. The snow that had once covered the tip drips down onto the grass in a frothy pile. This mountain has become a brown, twisted hill.

I look back to Godiva. She chews on her bottom lip, her brows furrowed.

"It looks wrong, doesn't it?" She asks.

I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. I walk over to the mountain, putting my hand against its brown, ashy side. When I do, a large chunk crumbles away from it.

"That's hardly a good sign," she says.

"Why is it like this?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

“I don’t know. But I do know that it’s a passage to their dimension, their world.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” I ask.

Godiva does not reply.

I dig my nails into the mountain, pieces turning to dust as I slide my fingers into it.

I close my eyes.

“Grab on to me,” I say, before I realize I am saying it. “Now.”

She does, her arm going around my waist. I grab a fistful of her dress and clutch her close. Our foreheads nearly touch, and we both grab the top curve of the mountain. The slushy ice chills my hand. The mountain begins to straighten itself and both Godiva and I are pulled upwards. We dangle in the air. My arm aches, but I pretend I can’t feel it. Godiva suppresses a scream beside me, her hair flapping wildly in the wind.

“Hold on, don’t let go!” I yell to her.

I can almost see her nodding, but the wind cuts against my eyes. It won’t allow me to look at her. Once the mountain has become upright again, it rockets up into the sky. We shoot upwards at a devastating speed. The pace makes my face burn.

“Laney!” Godiva screams.

I keep ahold of her gown.

What was my life before all this started? I can hardly even remember what my house looked like - our house. Our cottage, cut away from the rest of the village just like I wanted. Faunia had no desire to live so far away from everyone else, but I insisted.

I always insisted on everything.

I used to make her soup, I remember that. Every day I would make her soup and carry it



into the healer's hut. They would pour it down her throat and I would watch. Then I would go back home. I would fetch water, I would sit in my house and stew. I'd mix herbs and spices.

Winifred kept me company and I never went to visit my brother.

So much waste. My time, my life. All such waste.

I want Faunia to be the way she was again. I want my existence to be how it was before. I want to go back, but there is no going back now. I can't return to the village, a failure, and watch her slip away from me forever. If I stay here, in the forest with Godiva, she'll never die. For me, she'll always be right here in the village, waiting for me to come for her.

And I never will.

I'll become an old woman in these woods. I won't become an Oracle like I wanted, I certainly won't become a High Priestess. What a stupid child I've been. The forest killed my parents, somehow. It'll kill me too. That may be a blessing, and I've just been too blind to see it. I picture myself, dragging my body, nearly a corpse, back to the village. Maybe Roe will be older by then, he'll be the age Devin was when we watched my father die. Roe might just be the one to hold me as I perish. He'll sob and watch me as I fade into oblivion. His Aunt Laney, my brother's sister, Faunia's lover, Ceren's bane.

I'm nothing. I'll never become something.

The mountain stops moving. It comes to a shuddering halt. Godiva and I bounce up, forced through the abruptness of it. Once we land back on solid ground, Godiva blinks, groaning quietly. I put my hand to my head. Light and darkness swirl around us in violent flashes. I look up, putting one hand on Winifred and the other on Godiva's shoulder. The sun and moon set and rise in an unnaturally fast cycle. Every few moments, one settles down underneath the horizon

and the other comes into the sky. The ocean churns below us, curling up in massive waves. They fall back down against the water's surface with a thunderous crash. The clouds hover around us, a deep and ominous silver. Godiva squints, struggling to stand.

“What happened?”

I shake my head. “I don't know.”

I rise to stand beside her, keeping a hand on her shoulder.

“Look at that storm,” I say. “It looks angry, doesn't it? Like a snake that's about to strike.”

Godiva eyes me and nods subtly.

“What do you reckon we do now?”

I let a puff of breath slide out through my mouth.

“We would slide down the mountain, go into the sea.” I offer.

“We'd be destroyed by those waves,” she replies quickly.

“Not if we're quick.”

*Was this quest for Faunia love? Was my decision to let her die without me love?*

“We don't have a choice. We have to get off this mountain somehow.”

Godiva purses her lips for a moment and then nods. I take her hand, and before we can think more about it, we hurl ourselves down from the mountain's slope. Godiva's hand slips from mine as we careen toward the water below. I try to keep my eyes on her, but in a flash, I plunge into the ocean below. For a few wretched moments, the water submerges and threatens to drown me. I breach the surface just as my lungs begin to burn, looking around wildly for Godiva.

As I am about to call out to her, a hand on my shoulder makes me whip around. Godiva swims in the clear water directly in front of me. Her hair is fanned out behind her, floating on the ocean's surface. I lunge forward, securing my arms around her middle. She does the same to me.

"I thought -" I begin.

"So did I," she says against my ear.

I pull away from her.

"Are you alright?"

She smiles in a half-cocked way.

"I'm fine. I am the Great Stag, am I not?" she says, in a playful manner.

I don't take the bait and keep my face firm. "You're a mortal now, Godiva. Remember?"

She looks at me, raising one eyebrow as her sheepish smile returns.

"Yes. I suppose I am."

I crack a grin despite myself, shifting in the water.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

She shakes her head slowly.

"I don't know. But we have to get out of this water first."

I nod, gesturing to the forest landmass a short swim away. We both tread water, moving toward the woods again, collapsing back on the sand and catching our breath as we lay back on the sand. We do not speak for a long while, watching the sky as the sun disappears and the moon takes its place. We were plucked from the forest's arms only to be placed right back within them. I find a chuckle emerging from my mouth.

“What?” Godiva asks.

“Nothing. Come on, we should be getting back to the forest. We can’t just stay sitting here forever.”

I purse my lips, watching the water twist and curl, watching the clouds swirl above us.

“I need to find the Spirit of Truth,” I say.

Godiva’s eyes find their way to mine. She puts her palms flat on the ground and sits up straight, but doesn’t appear overly surprised - which surprises me.

“Really? Are you sure? It’s a dangerous path to travel down.”

“If there’s a way I can save Faunia, the Spirit will know. I need to end this, one way or another,” I tell her.

She falls silent for a moment, then sighs and pushes some hair back behind her ear. As she does, some of her locks break away and fall into the water. We both look down at the floating strands in shock, and I feel a pinch as two more petals fall from the tattoo on my palm. I notice then that Godiva’s skin has turned unnaturally pale and she’s grown thinner. I put my hand on her forehead, which shines with a sheen of sweat. My heartbeat quickens.

“You’ve a fever.”

All at once, I’m afraid. With all the communion, I didn’t realize how sickly-looking she’s become.

Her eyes dart around.

“What?”

“How do you feel? Do you feel alright?”

She puts her hand over her shrunken stomach.

“I don’t know. I’m tired more than anything.”

“But, you’re well at least?”

She cocks her head and my heart plummets.

“No,” she says slowly. “I wouldn’t say that.”

I remove my hand from her head, rubbing my arms up and down.

“You’ll feel better once we’re back in the woods. Are you ready?”

She purses her lips and smiles, securing her hand on the side of the mountain.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right.”

I need to be right. She can’t become ill. I know nothing of healing and medicine. God, what if she dies because of me? I know I won’t come back from that. There will be no healing no recovery. It’ll be the end of her and the end of me in one swoop.

“Just...hang on. You’ll be back in your forest soon,” I say.

We walk through the woods, the sun breaking through the horizon as the dawn awakens. It creates a sky filled with purple and pink. After the mountain folded back down into the ground, we’ve been wandering around the forest, seemingly aimlessly.

“Hmm,” Godiva says. “Beautiful.”

Her voice is weak and low. She moves in more of a shuffle than a walk, her feet dragging. Large bags hang on the underside of her weary eyes.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“No. I’m alright.”

That fills me with more dread. Faunia lost her appetite right before she fell into her slumber.

“Are you sure? Maybe you’d like to rest.” She sniggers, throwing her head back.

“Why would I need to rest?” I look down to the ground. “I don’t know. I just want you to be alright.” Godiva’s smile fades as she looks over to me.

“You’re worried,” she says in realization.

“What?” I ask, my voice too high-pitched to be believable. “Of course not. Why would I be worried?”

Godiva stops moving, grabbing my forearm.

“Do you...do you truly believe there is cause for concern?”

“No, no, don’t fret.”

Her eyes and face fill with alarm.

“Are you lying to me?”

I lock eyes with her firmly. I need to keep my composure. “Godiva, please don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

She narrows her eyes at me, clearly attempting to read my face. After a few seconds, she appears satisfied and nods slowly.

“Alright.”

I smile, locking arms with her. My warm flesh presses up against her cold, clammy skin as we begin walking again.

“Tell me if you want to sit down,” I say. “Rest whenever you like.”

We don’t talk for some time. After a little while, I finally break the silence.

“What’s it like, the Spirit of Truth?” She frowns deeply.

“He’s a nasty piece of work, I’ll tell you that.”

“Have you ever met him?” She shakes her head.

“No, not directly. But I’ve heard stories, ugly ones.”

“But you know where to find him?” I ask.

She looks down at the grass, kicking some of it under her heel.

“Naturally. Even in this state, I can feel him, I’m pulled to him constantly. Just as that demon I created, the fox, was drawn to him. Yet the fox could not seek him out, I can.”

“Why is that?” I ask.

“The Spirit of Truth chooses who can see him. He discards those he does not want.” That makes me hesitate in my pace slightly.

“Discard?”

“In these past centuries, not many have entered his cave, even fewer have emerged.” I turn my head to her, my brow concentrated.

“What does he do? Surely he doesn’t kill. He’s a great spirit of - ”

“Don’t be a fool, Laney. You aren’t a fool,” she says, most snapping at me. “Did you think he invites them to stay for dinner and bed them down for the night?”

I twist my head, glancing sharply to the side. My heart pounds and my chest begins to ache with fear. Godiva shifts away from me slightly, lowering her arm away from mine. Winifred walks along beside me, and I smile at her funny walk and silly, squished-in snout. This quest hasn’t diminished her spirit in the slightest.

What has it done to mine?

“Godiva,” I say quietly.

“Hmm?”

“If something were to happen to me, would you do me a favor?”

“What is that?”

“Would you look after Winnie?” Her jaw twitches.

“I will do my best, yes,” she says, then she takes a moment. “You could change your mind, you know. You needn’t go through with this if you don’t want to.” I shake my head.

“No. This is something I must do, for myself as much as for Faunia.”



Godiva keeps her eyes on me for a few seconds, then flashes them away from me.

“I understand.”

I know she doesn't, but I appreciate her trying.

We head West, through forests, trees, and brush that all look the same. Godiva, however, appears to know where she is headed. I look down at my hand. Only two petals remain joined to the tattoo on my palm. Her time as a mortal is coming to an end. What will happen once the blue of the rose is gone? She pretends to know, but I can't truly imagine she does. Perhaps she truly is dying. That would explain the way she looks, the paleness and fragility. The thought makes me sick to my stomach, I can feel the pain in the marrow of my bones. By trying to save Faunia from death I may lead another straight into its arms. I look at her again. With every step she takes, she becomes weaker. She needs to rest, why won't she let herself?

“Godiva -” I begin, hoping to make a plea to her to sit down for a while.

Before I can say anything, she holds up her hand.

“Shh, be silent,” she whispers.

I do as she asks, stopping my feet in their movement. I don't say something and watch her face as she looks about her. Then she nods slowly.

“We're here, or we shall be very soon,” she says.

I step closer to her.

“What? How can you tell?”

A shiver runs through her body.

“It doesn't matter, I just can.”

I brace myself, stiffening my body and hardening my expression.

“Let’s go, then.”

I begin to walk forward, but Godiva grabs my wrist.

“Wait, please,” she says feebly.

My gaze goes to her immediately.

“What’s wrong? Are you ill?”

She squeezes her eyes shut, nodding.

“A little. But the fact of the matter is that you may die very soon,” she says, her voice cracking. “I’d like to stall you for a moment, if I’m able.”

My stomach sinks. I won’t deny that I find it a little upsetting to hear her speak so bluntly. I sigh deeply through my nose.

“Alright. I suppose we can rest here until morning.”

I’m surprised at how nonchalant I sound. My life might end tomorrow. *My life might end tomorrow.* What have I done with it? Is God, if God even exists, pleased with what I’ve done? Was there even a plan to begin with? What’ll happen to me if I do die? Will it just be black nothingness, an abyss? The only thing I am certain of is that there will be no paradise for me. If God does exist, they will have given up on me long ago. I lay down, my back against the grass. I look at the black sky as the stars shimmer. Godiva doesn’t say anything. We lay together in the quiet of the night, the moon shining down on our faces.

Godiva takes a shuddery breath inward. She shifts her body towards mine, laying her head down on my shoulder. She looks so small, bundled up in a knotted ball like she is. My heart cracks in my ribcage.

“I’m sorry about all this, you know,” I say. “What I’ve put you through.’

“Ah,” she replies. “Hush.”

I don’t try to apologize again. I allow my body to relax. I smell the scent of cold sweat on Godiva’s skin and allow myself to sink into the oblivion of sleep.

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“Laney?” Godiva asks, quietly shaking me.

I blink, opening my eyes against the blinding sunshine.

“Hmm?”

“It’s morning,” she says. “It’s time.” Flutters erupt from within my stomach.

“What?” I ask, my voice weak and cracking.

“The Spirit of Truth awaits you,” she whispers.

I sit straight up, my eyes widening.

“How do you know?”

She tries to smile.

“Because I do.’

I look at her hard in the face, examining her for a moment.

She's grown so much worse in the matter of one night. A great deal of her hair has fallen from her head, and the rest has turned snow white, the same color as her skin. Her dress sags against her. Bones protrude from her body, jabbing out from all angles. My stomach lurches.

"Oh, God, Godiva," I say.

She laughs, the sound scratching and course.

"I know, I know. But you can't worry about that at the moment. Your mind must be clear when you go to visit him."

I continue to stare at her until eventually, I force myself to turn away.

"No, I don't think I can. I can't leave you out here by yourself." She reaches out to grasp my elbow.

"Don't be silly. You can't make such a decision based solely on me."

"But, you -"

"I'll be alright, just go, before he shuts you out and you miss your chance." I sigh, running my hands through my hair.

"Fine, I'll be as fast as I can. How do I get there?"

I rise to stand, but she doesn't. She may be too weak.

"Just walk, go to the edge of the world, that's where you'll find him." My lips contort.

"What?" I ask.

"You need to let go," she says. "I promise, once you do, he'll be waiting for you."

Alright?”

I shake my head, holding up my hands.

“Well, no. That doesn’t make the least bit of sense.”

She clears her throat, choking on some phlegm as she does.

“Everything must make sense to you, eh?”

She leans up against the tree, lowering her eyelids in apparent exhaustion. I loosen the strain in my forehead and face.

“No, I wouldn’t say that,” I mutter.

She rolls her eyes.

“Of course you wouldn’t, but it’s true. It’s difficult for you to be honest with yourself, I know. But buck up. Allow yourself to let go, or else you’ll never find him.”

Her eyes shut completely then, and she curls into a tight wad against the tree trunk.

Winifred whines, moving to lay her hand on her lap.

“Godiva?” I ask, bending down so my hands rest on my knees. “Godiva?”

She didn’t answer, she had fallen fast asleep.

I sigh, glancing up at the sky. I lay one hand against my hip and put the other on my forehead. What do I do now? Just, walk aimlessly until something comes to me? I groan.

“Damn it, Godiva,” I hiss under my breath.

I begin to go forward, pressing one foot in front of the other. I look back over my shoulder and watch Godiva fade into the distance the further I go. I glance around me, nervousness making me break out in sweat.

I'd never been alone in the forest like this before, not totally alone like this. I was with Winifred at the very least. Even when I was with the fox, at least I had some sort of companion. Suddenly, a hideous thought slams into my chest. What if I can't find my way back to Godiva? What if she dies out here, alone in the forest? I close my eyes, shaking myself out.

"Oh, stop, stop, stop it," I command myself. "Keep yourself together. You'll be of no use to her otherwise."

Every tree I pass looks the same, all tall and thick with heavy leaves that all but blot out the sun. I turn my attention up to the sky. I purse my lips, mashing my teeth together. I clench my teeth, throwing my head back in frustration.

"I need to concentrate, yes? Or, should I do the opposite? Maybe I should not think at all, let my mind wander, that kind of thing?" I say, talking more to the forest than myself.

I look back down, giving my eyes a break from the burning sunlight.

"Let my mind wander..." I whisper.

I close my eyes. The grass and moss press under the beds of my feet as I feel all around me. I try to think of nothing, but nothing never comes. So I think of Faunia's eyes instead. They were rich and bright. She always looked like she was hiding something, as though she was in on a joke nobody else understood. When we would fight, those bright eyes would be set aflame. Fire, smoldering fire. It was terrifying. Still, I adored her eyes. For the last two years, they've been vacant. It was one of the worst things about her falling into slumber, watching the light drip slowly out of her eyes.

"Is this right?" I ask nobody. "Am I doing this right?"

After I walk for a while longer, I groan and fling my eyelids open. I stop moving and spin in a tight circle. I feel agitated and anxious as I pick at the skin around my thumb.

“Am I doing any of this right?”

I lower my eyes to the ground, trudging along again. The expanse of the forest seems to continue endlessly.

“You know,” I say, somewhat ruefully. “I was young when my mother and father died, I didn’t really understand what it meant to be dead. Somehow I kept thinking they’d, I don’t know, come back somehow. One day I’d wake up and there they’d be, waiting at the door. It doesn’t make sense. I saw their bodies, they were torn apart. Ripped to shreds. You’d think seeing that would have been more than enough for me.”

I chuckle, shaking my head and keeping my eyes down.

“Stupid child. Stupid thing,” my voice grows softer. “I wish I was stupid like that again. I wish I could think like I used to. I wish I had faith like I did before. When I was young I believed so fervently, I believed with everything thing I had. But something’s happened to me. Maybe I’ve simply grown up, and that’s all there is to it. Maybe the older you get, the less you believe that there’s something better than this, that there’s a purpose. Is that wisdom? What does it say that I don’t even know what ‘wisdom’ means? Perhaps I’m still just a stupid child, and I’ve only grown stupider.”

Suddenly there’s a pull in my middle, akin to a tickling. My head goes fuzzy and I become fraught with dizziness. I put my hand to my hair, looking up. Everything looks the same as before, the trees still stand, the grass is still lush. Yet, something has changed. I can see a

curve in the Earth now, the distance before me doesn't seem so great. I cock my head, I turning my head back to the sun.

"I'm going crazy, aren't I?"

I narrow my eyes, walking forward. As I go, I quickly realize that I'm not hallucinating. I'm heading toward the sky, not deeper into the forest. I continue towards it, fixing my gaze on what appears to be a mirage squarely before me. I keep expecting it to go away, but it never does. After walking for some time, the trees come to an end. I look out at the sky, my eyes fall below. It's as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. My throat closes, and my breath comes in and out of my chest in large huffs.

"Oh, God...What is this?"

I'm standing on the curve of the Earth. My whole body shakes violently, nearly out of control.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," I say, clutching my chest.

The world simply ends here, I could jump off and fall over the side. I imagine I'd just keep falling forever.

*"Planning on standing there until you die of old age?"* a voice asks calmly in my head.

I gasp, jumping backward.

"What was that?" I shout. "Who was that?"

*"You know who it was,"* the voice says.



My lips part as I scrub my hands over my face. My eyes sting, darting around the forest as I search desperately for the owner of the voice. Finally, I face back towards the sky, furrowing my brow.

“Are you the Spirit of Truth?” The voice laughs.

“*Yes, I suppose I am, if that’s what you’d like to call me.*” I swallow, attempting to compose myself.

“I’d like to see you, where are you?”

“*Why, I’m right in front of you.*”

I look around, ducking and twisting in search of this being. I see nothing.

“Where? I can’t find you.”

“*Walk forward, then you shall.*”

I crinkle my brow, looking back down at the abyss before me.

“Surely you’re joking. I’ll fall.”

“*Hmm, but perhaps you won’t. Believe in the truth that you won’t.*”

My stomach drops. I realize what is being asked of me. He wants to see what I’ll do. My life is a game to play, to toy with.

“This is a test.”

“Yes,” he says.

I nod, biting my lower lip.

“What must I do?”

“*You must believe that you will not fall, you must believe that is the truth and make it so.*”

I step up, putting one foot over the edge. As I do, crumbles of dirt break off and tumble down. I cringe.

“But, if natural law says that I will fall, then I will. No amount of belief will change that.”

“*Your world is made up of laws and realities that only exist because it has been decided they exist by those in power.*”

“Those in power? You mean, leaders, things like that?” I ask, stalling.

“*Higher.*”

“Higher? God?”

“*Ahh, yes. Now we’re onto something interesting. You like to imagine that God has created everything you see before you.*”

“Is that not the truth?”

“*It is the truth to you, so why would it not be? Therefore, God has created the rules that keep your feet on the ground and dictate if you will fall. Take those rules away, and you’ve got another truth altogether, yes?*”

I begin to feel a sense of tranquility. Some of the apprehension has fled from me.

“Yes, I suppose.”

“*Then walk over the cliff, and come to me.*”

I turn my head forward, putting one foot fully out. Then I move the other. I tiptoe out, barely balancing. My chest clenches and my left arm aches.

“Be calm, be calm, just do it,” I say to myself.

I grit my teeth and rush over the side. I gasp inward, yelping more than screaming. I am walking on the curve of the Earth. I look down and see the blue of the sky below me. My hair lies on my back, and I flail my arms wildly. They can't be happening. I close my eyes, panting. I need to keep going. I try to walk forward again, but the movement feels strange and awkward.

“*You're getting closer,*” he says, his voice taunting.

I walk until I'm upside down completely. Each step is agony as I feel the terror of what would happen if I was disconnected from this cliff. I reach the underside of the Earth, but all the grass and trees are gone. I enter into what looks to be a cave, and all at once I'm surrounded by darkness and long stalagmites. I try and force my breathing to remain steady.

“Hello? Are you here?”

“Yes,” he says, though I still can't see him. “You did well. I'm surprised.”

Suddenly, my control over gravity ceases. I fall onto the cave's floor and land hard on my shoulder. I cry out in pain, whimpering softly. I put my hands on the ground, pushing myself up.

“Are you alright?” he asks, his voice echoing off the walls.

I look up, trying to seek him out in the darkness, though I have no luck.

“Yes, of course.”

I stand up, the pain from the side I landed on shooting through me.

“Good, good. It'd be a shame if you died before I got a chance to kill you. It's been such a long time for me.”

My eyes widen, I put my back to the wall and clench my fists.

“You’re planning on killing me?”

“Perhaps.”

“Why?”

“Is that a question you want to ask?”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, you’re confused, are you?” he asks. “Allow me to explain.”

That’s when he appears from the shadow. I feel my heart has stopped, but I know it hasn’t because I’m still breathing. Drool pools in my mouth, my palm sweaty profusely. I’ve never seen anything so disgusting.

The Spirit of Truth is a massive being, double my length, with eight spindly legs like that of a spider. But its body is infinitely longer than many such arachnids I’ve ever seen. Its face is similar to that of a rodent, like a rat. My stomach burns hot.

“Yes, I wish you would,” I say.

He scurries up close to me, sniffing me up and down. His wet snout presses up against my middle. I grunt, shoving him away on an impulse.

“Stop it, what are you doing?”

He laughs heartily, though there is an air of cruelty to it.

“Why are you here?” he asks.

I lift one eyebrow. “Why?”

He nods. "Yes."

I hold my shoulders out in a firm line. This is my chance.

"My lover, Faunia. She's very ill. I want to know the truth of it, I want to know what to do. How to save her."

"Is that all?"

My brow furrows.

"Is that all? That should be more than enough. I've traveled a long way and have found nothing."

"You're lying to me," he says. "That can't be all you want to know. I am not judging you, little beast. Just be honest. Truth is all I want from you. This is your opportunity, don't you understand?"

My body sags, and all at once selfishness pierces through me. The fact is, I do want to know more. I have questions, questions I'm afraid of, questions that have nothing to do with Faunia. I hate myself, but I'm not strong enough to resist. I step away from him, walking slowly about the cave.

"I can ask you anything?"

"Yes."

I turn around to face him.

"Alright. What happened to my parents?"

"Your father murdered your mother."

I gasp sharply against my will, the words piercing me like a knife.

“What?” I breathe.

He skitters around the cave, crawling up to the ceiling and looking down at me.

“Yes, indeed. With his dying words, your father lied to you. It was true, they went into the forest to pick berries. But the air in those woods does strange things to the human mind. An argument ensued. Your father attacked your mother, she fought back. Your father ended her life.”

My lips vibrate, and the tips of my fingers and toes go numb.

“That can’t possibly be. My father...he was missing a leg when he came back to the village. How could my mother have possibly done that?”

“She did not have to. After he’d done the deed, he met two other spirits. Friends of yours, I believe. I know them by different names, but your people call them Dinah and Zedekiah.” My jaw goes slack. I sink to the ground with my back against the wall.

“What?” I ask again, not knowing what else to say.

“Dinah was the one who ripped off his leg, took it in her jaw, and tore it asunder. Zedekiah beat him with those massive hooves of his. They allowed him to crawl back to the village in that state. As for your mother, well, she was scavenged by one you call simply ‘the fox’. He ate bits and pieces of her flesh until some of your villagers came and found her body.” I look at him for a moment, then feel a burning hatred fill up my gullet.

“Bastard,” I hiss.

He chuckles.

‘Who?’

“My father,” I say between gritted teeth.

“Yes, well, I suppose you can discuss that with yourself at a later date. Don’t you have any other questions for me?”

I close my eyes, running my fingers through my hair. I rise up, my legs shaking and quivering. I can hardly keep my balance as I go to the mouth of the cave. I keep one arm propped up against the cave wall, looking out at the sky, watching blue extend out forever.

“I can’t think,” I say to the spirit behind me.

He sighs in boredom.

“I do not possess the patience for this. Come up with something or leave. If you don’t, I think I must kill you.”

I grimace, water prickling in my eyes.

“I’m going to vomit.”

“I wish you wouldn’t. I don’t care for that kind of thing. You’re beginning to tire me out, little beast. If you don’t have another question, then I’ll -”

“No, wait,” I say. “I have another.”

I turn back around, looking him in the eyes. There wasn’t any point in getting myself killed now. I’ve come all this way, I suppose it would be foolish to throw away my chance. I try to set the truth of my parents aside.

“Faunia - is there any way to make her better?” I ask, my voice tired and bleak.

He scans me with his hard, black pupils.

“You know the answer to that already, don’t you?”

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, letting loose a strangled sob.

“No, I don’t.”

“Next question.”

“Tell me the truth, what’s going to happen to her?”

“That is not for me to say.”

I make a whiny puffing pant, like a child would.

“What nonsense,” I spit. “You claim to be a Spirit of Truth, yet there is a truth you cannot tell me?”

“It’s a truth I *will not* tell you. There is a difference. Next question.”

“No! I -”

“Next question,” he says harshly, a murderous intensity suddenly present in his tone.

I gulp loudly, accepting his words with great reluctance.

“Fine, I’ll ask something else.”

He moves back down to the ground, his eight legs scampering.

“Do it quickly.”

I bring my fist up to my lips, pressing it there.

“I want to know about...” I begin, trailing off.



What do I want to know about? What now could I ask? My head is clouded, my chest hurts. What questions were there? I feel my feet going towards him. I force myself to look at him, in all this hideousness.

“Why don’t you finish your sentence?” “Because

I don’t know how to finish it.”

“Hmm, interesting,” he says, circling me.

I feel something against my legs, it makes a strange squelching sound. I look down and see a white thread he has spun around my feet. Suddenly, I’m lifted upward. I hang from the roof of the cave upside down, suspended by his web. I want to scream, but it all happens too quickly.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve grown bored of you,” he says evenly. “So, I’m going to eat you.”

“No,” I say. “Please, wait, let me think of something.”

“You still have time. I’m not finished spinning my web yet.”

My mind races. The silken string grows all around my body, encasing me.

“What is -”

“‘What is?’ What is what?”

I squirm, shimmying in my confinement. My desperation to escape is fruitless.

“What is...what is the point of all of this?”

He stops spinning for a moment, twisting around to look at me.

“Come again?”

I stop panting so heavily and quit wriggling in my cocoon. My pulse slows as well. All at once, I'm calm.

“What’s the point of Life and Death? Does it matter at all?”

He sighs, putting one leg up to stroke my cheek. He stays silent for a moment.

“There is none,” he says. “This is my truth, this is the one I grant you. In all this endless cycle of Life and Death and all the rest, there has never been and there never shall be any point to it all. Birth is followed quickly by decay. God looks down at what has been created and feels nothing but disappointment and regret. Your people were the great experiment, and the experiment has failed. You are greedy, selfish, foolish. You follow in the ways of shadow rather than light. Your father, what he did, it was a representation of your filthy race. You are nothing, Life and Death are nothing. You are all rotting sacks of meat and bone. That’s all, there will never be anything more.”

My mouth opens, slacked. Drool seeps out the corners and drops out onto the dust ground. I become paralyzed with horror, it oozes through me like ice.

“No, that can’t be right,” I say, more as a question than a statement.

“It is my truth,” he tells me.

The spirit continues to spin its web, holding me tighter and tighter under it compresses my chest. I can scarcely breathe.

“Liar,” I whisper.

He stops moving altogether, his mouth directly in my ear.

“What did you say?”

What did I say? It slipped out before I had a chance to consider it. Yet, I feel the word bubbling up in my chest again, it crawls its way up my throat and lays on my tongue, finally bursting through my lips.

“Liar,” I say again, more meekly than I would have liked.

He spins me around, his ebony eyes suddenly a vibrant red.

“How *dare* you use that word in front of me? I told you my truth, nothing more and nothing less.”

Suddenly it hits me, it slams into my chest and I begin to laugh. He eyes me strangely.

“What’s so very funny?”

“I understand, of course I do,” I say, my voice frantic and high-pitched. “You tried to trick me.”

He cocks his head in a strange way, like a bird.

“What is it you claim to understand?” he asks.

“The truth you told me, it is your truth. It isn’t mine. You don’t understand the point of any of this, you simply pretend to. You have decided what you believe, and you claim it is truth because it is true to you.”

A puff of wind escapes his mouth. For a moment, he simply stares at me. His eyes have gone empty, blank, and loose. My hysterical smile drifts away as I watch him. He chuckles again, glancing up at me.

“Oh, aren’t you a funny little thing? I daresay there’s something I’d like to show you,” he

says.

All at once, the web encasing me falls away from me. It becomes a watery substance, creating a kind of goop on the ground. I land on it, collapsing onto the grimy floor. The spirit nods towards the exit of the cave.

“Look there, what do you see?”

I narrow my eyes, shaking my head.

“Nothing. I see nothing.”

The spirit crawls over me, each leg against my back creating a tingle across my skin.

“Keep your eyes fixed on the sky.”

I try to relax my body and muscles, breathing out slowly. I force my mind itself to become lax. Suddenly, there’s a bright light that comes flying toward me. I bend my head back.

“What is that?”

“Whatever you need it to be,” he says.

Exhaustion falls over me, and I collapse onto the floor.

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When I open my eyes, I am lying flat on my back. The cave is gone, and the forest is gone. Everything is gone. I’m in a room made up of nothing but white. Made of nothing except nothing. I sit up, gasping, and feel the air around me. Yet, there doesn’t seem to be a ‘ground,’ there isn’t a ‘ceiling’ either. There is no one. I blink, rubbing a hand over my face.

“Hello? Is there anybody here?”

There's a rustling sound behind me, and I turn around to see who the perpetrator is. The first being I see is a black panther, the same panther that I attempted to save Godiva from when I first entered the forest. It looks at me with soft eyes, its body is relaxed and at ease. Next to it stands the white stag that I saw during my incident with the fox. They stare at me, doing nothing. I should be afraid, it only makes sense that I should want to run away as fast as I can. Though, somehow, I only wish to continue staring at him.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" A voice says behind me.

I gasp, the voice creating an unfamiliar and very strange combination of euphoria and despair within me. I turn around and see who the voice belongs to. Although, deep inside I already know.

"I stopped believing in you," I say.

"Yes. I know."

Before me stands a young woman, but it is not Godiva. Her beauty is unmatched and unparalleled. A halo of light surrounds her. The stag and the panther move towards her, each on her opposite side. She puts a hand on each.

Why aren't I panicking?

"Who are they?" I ask, gesturing to the two animals.

She smiles, and tears prickle at the back of my eyes. She turns her head to the black panther.

"This is Life," she says. Then she looks at the white stag. "And Death. Do you understand?"

My eyebrows raise, and I begin nodding slowly.

“I - I understand.”

She cocks her head, looking at me.

“Do you, child? I think you’re lying.”

I scan her, taking in every piece of her magnificence. I feel so comforted. I feel as though I am home, that I am safe, for the first time in my life.

“No, you’re right. I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of what’s happened. I don’t understand why you let me go through all this. Why have you allowed me to come this far?

Was there ever any hope for Faunia at all?” Her grin fades.

“No. There was not. She was going to die no matter what.” I purse my lips, fury entered my body.

“Why? She’s so young. She’ll never be able to do all the wonderful things she deserves to do. She’ll never get grey hair, she’ll never laugh again, she’ll never see the first snow in winter. She’ll never grow old. How is any of this fair? I don’t understand. Help me understand.”

“You don’t understand,” she says. “And you hate me for it.” I can feel water trickle down my cheeks.

“I used to love you. I prayed to you constantly, tried to live by every ideal they told me you wanted. You and the Stag were my everything, I was ready to devote my life to you.” “And now?” she asks, keeping one palm on Life and the other on Death.

I take a moment before answering.

“I don’t know anymore. Before, I felt you. I felt you in the very crevices of my soul.

Now, you’re just gone.”

She nods. “Because you don’t want your love to die?” I

begin to breathe heavily, panting.

“Because you’re letting her die!” I cry. “She doesn’t have to! That’s your choice, that’s up to you. You could stop it if you wanted to.”

“I could.”

That’s when I lunge at her, getting directly in her face.

“Then why don’t you?” I shriek, my palms hovering over her face but unable to make contact.

She sighs, lifting her hands off the stag and panther to place them on my shoulders.

“Because her time is over.”

“But why does she have to be sick at all?”

“Sickness is not -”

“*You* are the one to create these bodies, to give us life. You are the one who takes it away” I snap. “Why did you make us all so weak? Why make us so frail? Any little thing can go wrong and then our existence is over.”

“Would you rather not exist at all?” she asks, her tone sharper than before.

I blink, taking one step back.

“Well, no, but I -”

“Your bodies function as they do because, yes, they are destined for Death. What do you believe gives Life meaning?”

I shrink into myself, ducking my head.

“Thanks not true. If there was no death, there would be no fear. We would finally live.”

She takes a step towards me, her arms set firmly at her sides.

“So would you have me create your bodies in the image of perfect health, beauty everlasting? And then what? More births and an overpopulation? Or, would you rather all new Life end completely?”

“It isn’t that simple,” I say meekly.

“No, it isn’t. Can you not see that?”

I shiver and cross my arms over my chest.

“I just -” I begin, taking a large breath inward. “I want her to live. I want her to live so badly.”

She looks at me, her lips closing. Her eyes soften.

“All want their loved ones to live forever. You’re not alone.” She grins, and I see dimples at the corners of her mouth.

“So, what does any of this matter?” I ask. “Maybe I’m stupid, maybe I should understand by now but I don’t. Do you even have an answer?”

She takes a long, striking step towards me. She reaches out and takes my hands in hers.



“You are creatures of stardust,” she says. “I created you out of the very atoms of the universe. You were born of Earth, and one day all must return to it. For a brief moment, you exist on this planet. You may do what you will with this existence. I am so often blamed for every and all ills that befall you, but most evils are not of my doing. I give you freedom of the soul, but that freedom cannot be unlimited. If it were up to you, you would all be immortal and no one would experience what I had planned for you to experience. Death is the great love of Life, it is what drives you. Without it, nothing would be appreciated. Nothing would be earned. Death is a part of you, it is constantly stalking you and eating away at your bodies. I don’t pretend to understand what that must be like. I never will. But it’s a part of you, and it shall always be. It is how I created you. I knew what I was doing.” I blink, looking away from her.

“I...I...”

She moves to put her palm on my right temple, then rests her forehead against mine.

“I am always with you. Moonlight and sunshine that move through your soul. Experience the life I created for you and let go. Faunia will never be gone. She will be in the darkness of the sky, the wind through the trees. She will be within the fabric of your being. You release her from her decaying body only.”

I shake my head slightly.

“No. It’s so much more than that and you know it.”

She smiles with the corners of her mouth and nods.

“I know. One day, when you begin the same journey Faunia is about to undertake, you will come to understand.”

I look down, staring at my feet. They look so filthy and grimy compared to hers.

“Can you take me now?” She raises her brow.

“What?”

“Could you take me now?” I repeat. “Could I die, right now? I know you have the power to make it happen.”

I gesture to the white stag, who eyes me strangely. She considers it, and makes a humming sound.

“No. It is not your time. It is Faunia’s, but it is not yours.” I close my eyes, and tears leak through my eyelids.

“Why?”

She backs away from me, taking my head fully in both of her hands.

“Because it is. Everyone must die, some as infants after only a moment of life, others when they’re old and have seen too much of it. Faunia’s death will not only mean decay and ruin. There is still life to be had. You will see it for yourself one day.”

She leans forward and plants a kiss on my forehead. Breath is expelled from my body. I reach to secure my arms around her back.

“I don’t know what to do,” I whisper.

She presses her mouth to my ear.

“You will find a way, my love. We will all find peace.”

I close my eyes, and the white light from the room fades into darkness.

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My head is pressed into the grass when I wake again, I can feel it rustle beneath my skin. The wind kisses my cheeks, the light dances under my closed eyelids. I move my neck, smelling the sweet Earth below. Bird chips softly and the air smells clean. My eyelids flutter open.

“Back, I see.”

It’s Godiva’s voice. I blink, pushing myself up off the ground with my palm. As I go, another rose petal falls off my hand. I stare at it for a moment, then look to Godiva. My spirit sinks.

“Oh, Godiva,” I breathe.

I hardly recognize her now. She’s shrunken dramatically in height and weight. What’s left of her hair falls from her head and lies in stringy, white strands against her back. Her eyes are sunken into the deep hollows of her face. She stands pigeon-toed and hugs herself, looking as though she’s about to be blown away by the wind. She shivers and offers me a pitiful grin.

“Oh, my friend,” I whisper, standing. “What have I done to you?” Her bony shoulders move forward in shame.

“I’m repulsive, aren’t I?”

I purse my lips, shaking my head.

“No. Never.”

Her teeth chatter against each other. I gingerly move to put my hand against her arm.

“You’re freezing.”

She breathes in short, wheezing huffs.

“What about you?” she asks weakly. “What happened?”

Something catches in my chest, and I have to blink away tears to clear my vision. I bite my lower lip.

“Nothing.”

She furrows her brow.

“You look...different. What’s wrong?”

I look down, grinning. There’s a knot in my stomach, I can feel it. A pain has deep-rooted and settled. It has become a part of me. It may loosen, but somehow I know it will never disappear. Somehow I also know that it isn’t meant to disappear. I glance back up at her.

“Don’t worry, my friend. All will be well,” I say gently.

She coughs, hacking up some grey liquid as it dribbles onto the ground. Her legs go out from under her and she collapses. I reach forward, catching her and cradling her head in my lap.

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” I say, stroking her hair.

My heart pounds and my face becomes flushed. I know what I need to do. I lift my palm up to my face, looking at the final feather.

“Laney,” she says scratchily. “I’m dying.” I close my eyes, sniffing.

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid,” she shutters.

I shake my head and move to stroke my palm over her skull again.

“Shh, shh. Don’t be. Everything will be beautiful. Don’t be scared. Just, look up at the sky.” I watch as her clouded eyes turn themselves upward, gazing at the treetops.

“Is it not beautiful?” I ask her, my voice cracking.

She blinks, her brow raising and a slight smile pulling at the corner of her lips.

“Beautiful,” she whispers.

I smile, tears dripping off my nose and onto her forehead.

“Beautiful.”

If I could, I would give my soul to turn her back the way she was when we first met. I wish I could take her back to the village, I wish I could introduce her to Devin, Roe and Ceren. I wish Faunia could have met her. I wish we would take walks every afternoon and tell stories even after the sun falls. I wish we would grow old together. I wish I could keep her here with me. I wish for a great many things.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Godiva says.

I sigh, running my hand through her hair.

“I wish you didn’t have to. But don’t worry about that now, just relax. Relax.”

There won’t be a day that goes by that I won’t miss her. There won’t be a day that goes by I don’t miss Faunia. But this isn’t fair to her. I have to let go.

“The sky is becoming black, can you see that?” she asks.

I look up. It's still a clear blue, it shines through the trees.

"Do you think I'm going somewhere wonderful?" she asks.

I sigh, reaching my fingers up to peel the final petal off my hand. It stings as I do.

"Everywhere is wonderful," I tell her. "Just try to be quiet. It's alright."

The petal hangs off the edge of my hand, almost ready to fall. My lips twist and my heart beats so hard it aches.

"I'm going to miss you," she says. "I love you." I kiss her gently on her hairline.

"I love you too, my friend. You'll always be with me. I'll always be with you. If you ever need me, just look here," I say shakily, putting my palm on the middle of her stomach. "That's always where Faunia thought the soul was. So look there, and you'll find me. Do you understand?"

She doesn't answer me, and that's when I see her fading. The light in her eyes drifts, she's slipping. I need to be fast. I swallow, whimper, and pull the final part of the petal away from my palm.

Once I do, Godiva gasps and sucks in a mountain of air. Her eyes fly open. Something pulls her upward until she's standing firmly erect. I blink, moving away as I watch her arms extend out to her sides. The trees begin to rustle, birds chatter and the air whips up around us.

"Godiva?" I ask.

She doesn't respond or even seem to hear what I'm saying. She is lifted until she stands on the tips of her toes, her arms dropping to hang limply. Suddenly, something seems to pulse

through her. It looks as if she's been struck by a bolt of lightning. Flowers are pulled from the grass and circle around her, drawn to her body. Her position shifts, and she hovers straight. All at once, she begins to spin. Her arms cross over her chest. I watch as her thin, dirty white hair grows back in with bursts of golden light. Her white dress is replaced with a long robe of flowers and covers her down to her legs, which seem to be nonexistent now. Her skin returns to its glowing state, and a small garden of green sprouts from underneath her. I scan her, chuckling in splendor as I bury my fingers in my hair.

“Godiva,” I whisper.

She stops spinning, her hair flows from behind her and drifts out. She closes her bright eyes for a moment, then they flash open again. She stays risen above the ground, her palms out flat and open. She stares at me, her eyes cold and dignified as the day I first met her. My smile fades, and I take a long step back.

“Godiva?” I ask. “Do you know me?”

Her lips remain in a firm line, her expression tense and unyielding. I swallow, blinking, and brace myself to run.

“Godiva? Please, it's me. It's Laney.”

She doesn't move or change position. I can't tell what she's thinking, or what she's planning to do. Do I try and escape? Is she angry with me? Does she resent me for making her go through all this? I furrow my brow, moving backward faster. Winifred wags her tail at my feet. “My friend?” I ask.

When she doesn't respond again, I turn around so I can sprint properly. But my feet catch on some moss, and I go down hard on the grass. I flop around on my back, laying my palms flat and staring up at her. I freeze. From down below, she looks even more powerful and ominous.

“Godiva.”

She narrows her eyes at me, swooping down to my level. Her weightless hair flies with her in a long sheet. She comes to an abrupt stop before me, her glowing mane hair surrounding me as she continues to stare. My brow furrows as I gaze at her.

“Have you forgotten me already?”

Her eyes focus in on me, hard. My bottom lip quivers as she lifts her hand and places it on my head. She smiles.

“No, silly girl,” she says, her silken voice falling soft as fresh snow over my ears.

I grin, the motion too wide to look natural as a guttural snicker erupts. She brings herself close to me, leaning her forehead against mine. We both close our eyes for a few seconds.

“Thank you,” she says.

I open my eyes, the light from her skin glowing. She floats away, rising back into the sky. When she looks down at me, her eyes sparkle in the sunlight. I stand up, biting back misty tears. Godiva dips her chin down to me, then flies up and bursts through the branches. She rushes along the tree line. Then she ducks back down to me, running her fingertips across my cheeks one last time. She glides backward, her arms out towards me, and surges up towards the clouds.

“Goodbye, my friend.”

And then she's gone. \*\*\*



I sit under a large oak tree, the branches shielding me from the sun. Winifred rests against my lap, deep asleep. I stare at a small butterfly who hasn't seemed to notice I'm here. It sucks the nectar out of a pink flower, its tiny wings flapping every few seconds. I keep one hand against

Winifred's head, holding myself still.

I can't recall a time that I was this tired. Every muscle in my body is lifeless and lax as I nibble on my lip absentmindedly. What do I do now? What is my next step? Even though the question appears difficult, there truly is only one path available to me. There isn't really any choice at all. I need to go home. I must face what has thus far been unbearable to me. God, I hope she isn't already dead. I sigh, scrubbing one hand over my face. I rest my chin on my fist and tear my eyes away from the insect. I can't seem to make myself move. I'm not completely sure I'll find a way to move again.

A sound catches my attention, it sounds like hoof beats. The strength of the noise startles the butterfly. It fluttered away from the pink blossom and into the sky. I look over my shoulder and see Zedekiah looming before me. I grin.

"Hello."

He nickers, shaking out his mane. I glance beyond him and see Dinah lumbering slowly towards us. I nod, offering this as my greeting to her.

"Have you come to kill me?" I ask.

Neither of them makes any sound that could be interpreted as communication.

"I know what you did to my father," I say. "I think I forgive you. And I understand, or,

I'll come to understand. If you allow me to live, that is."

Dinah cocks her head, huffing. I look down, standing up.

"I'm not afraid. Truly I'm not. If it is to be, then it shall happen. Yes?" Nothing.

I chuckle wearily.

"If you're going to do it, I ask that you do it quickly. I'd prefer to die without pain."

Zedekiah and Dinah exchange glances, and then Dinah breathes out hard through her nose. Zedekiah trots towards me. I don't back away or make any move to escape. I'm through with all that. The painful knot in my chest is still there, present and relentless, yet I feel more at peace than I've ever felt before. Zedekiah, however, does not appear aggressive. Neither does Dinah. Instead, the stallion bends down, seemingly offering himself to me. I lift my hands in confusion, shaking my head.

"I don't understand."

Zedekiah sighs, sniffing. I look to Dinah for instruction.

"Surely...surely I can't be allowed to mount you," I whisper.

He doesn't change position, however, and Dinah simply looks at me. I glance back down to the horse's strong back.

"No, this..."

I breathe out, gingerly placing my hands on his neck. Dinah bends down and grasps Winifred by the scruff of her neck.

"I've never even ridden a horse before. I don't know what I'm doing."

He glances up at me, his eyes boring into mine. Why doesn't he speak? Perhaps he can't any longer, at least not to me. Or maybe I simply don't know how to understand him now. But I don't have the time or energy to oppose him, so I gasp a fistful of his mane with one hand and oddly swing my leg over his back. I pull myself up, mounting him. Once I'm secure, he rises and hoofs the ground. We begin to move then, his pace little more than a walk at first. I look down at the grass. It's grown lusher and greener since Godiva changed back. The flowers bloom to fullness, and the wind dances through the trees. Zedekiah slowly begins to trot, then canter. I discover that I am not a naturally good rider, I slip and slide and bounce instead of moving with him. I wrap both arms around his neck and press myself to him to keep from falling off.

I scan my eyes across the forest, the tallness of the oaks and the blotted-out blue of the sky. Part of me will miss this place. I'll miss the smell, the feeling of moss beneath of feet. The way the forest glowed at night. Zedekiah picks up his feet and moves at a firm gallop. My eyes water against the force of the wind, and I keep my head down. I feel something begin to slip in my hair, I reach back, but by the time I do, it's too late. I turn to look beyond my shoulder just in time to see my purple ribbon go flying from its place securing my ponytail. It swirls in the air for a moment, flying up and then back down through the wind. Finally, it flutters to the forest floor. I keep my sight fixed upon it until it's no longer visible to me. My hair feels odd being loose and free again. I can feel its weight against my back as the stallion continues to run. I close my eyes and breathe out, savoring these last few moments in the woods before I lean into Zedekiah fully. Within what feels like seconds the stallion slows down and stops. He nickers.

I open my eyes, sitting back up.

"Are we here?" I ask, rather stupidly.

He doesn't make a sound, I reckon he's well aware I already know the answer. I slide down off his back, my legs shaking slightly from the journey, however short it felt. Dinah drops Winifred, and she comes up to heel at my feet. I look up again at the two spirits. I smile and bow my head slightly.

"Thank you."

They keep their eyes on me for a moment, then turn around and retreat back into the depths of the forest. I take a large breath inward. I can see they've left me at an opening which leads to the edge of the village. I hold my hands out, pushing aside brush that bares me from entering. I take a long, striding step. And with that single movement, I'm out of the forest. I look back once more as the greenery folds back together and creates a barrier between myself as the woods. I stumble out onto the same brown, dirt path I've traveled through hundreds of times. The sun hits me hard, burning my skin. The air is warm and sticky. My lips part as I begin wandering down the road. It feels as if I've been gone for decades. Yet, the rocks and stones feel familiar. I know this place. I'm back, bizarre as that may be. There is a great emptiness, I don't see anyone or hear any commotion. Perhaps I have been gone for years and years, and everybody I knew is long dead. At this point, there isn't much that would surprise me. A sound makes my head snap up. I stop moving abruptly. A few feet down, I see another traveler is coming down the path. I squint, trying to make out who it is. It appears to be a man. He balances a pole between his shoulders, on which is held two pales, most likely filled with water. His ponytail is slung to one side as he struggles with the weight. My breath catches and my jaw trembles.

"Devin!" I call.

He looks up, staring at me for a moment. I watch as his arms go lax, the buckets sliding off the pole and the liquid held inside pouring onto the ground. For a moment, we just stand and

look at one another. In the end, it's him who makes the first move. He comes toward me slowly, his feet almost dragging against the dirt. He continues to move until I can see the features of his face clearly. Once he gets close, he ceases his walking.

“Laney?” he whispers, his voice cracking.

I nod to him. “I think so.”

He shakes his head disbelievingly, looking me over.

“I can't...I can't...”

I purse my lips and take a few steps towards him. I smile.

“I know.”

At that, his face crumbles completely. He lunges and picks me up, his arms around my back, crushing the life out of me. I wrap my arms around his neck as he swings me in a circle. I can't tell if we are crying or laughing, I suspect he can't either. I look up and down the path from his shoulder, and my eyes widen when I see who's racing towards us.

“Aunt Laney!” Roe's little voice cries as he sprints in our direction.

I push myself away from Devin just enough to hoist my nephew up with one arm. I kiss him twice on the forehead and press my nose into his white hair. Devin keeps one arm draped over me.

“Elain?” I hear Ceren's call questioningly.

I shift my eyes upward, and see my sister-in-law wringing her hands, clearly unsure what to do. Her eyes are bright yet clearly confused. I set Roe down, leaning forward and all but

crashing my forehead into hers. She lets out a shuddery breath, putting both hands on the base of my neck. Devin's pales lay sprawled across the dirt road, utterly forgotten. \*\*\*

"She's doing very badly, you know," Devin says gently, one hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to see her like this."

I swallow, placing my hand over his.

"Yes. I do."

I stand firmly outside of the healer's tent, my toes on the very edge of the entranceway. My brother looks down, breathing out slowly. I know he wishes he could spare me from this, but nothing he could say would change my mind now. It's too late for that. After all this, after all the time I've made Faunia wait for me, the least I can do now is allow her to leave. Ceren nods at her husband.

"Let her go," she tells him.

Devin looks back at her, licking his lips and nodding. He steps back to stand by his son and wife. I look back at the entrance, filling my chest and lungs with air. My feet fall forward and I step inside. I catch the attention of every healer right away. They stare at me in shock, frozen in mid-movement. They clearly weren't expecting me. I'm sure most of them assumed I was dead. I hear footsteps coming from the back of the hut. Tabitha steps out from behind a curtain and looks at me, fully adorned in her healer's garb. She stares in my direction for a while, then chuckles. She comes up and places our foreheads together.

“I’m glad you’re back, doe.”

I smile, removing my head from hers.

“Me, too. It’s good to see you.”

She cocks her head, putting her hands against her hips.

“You’ve changed, you’re different. I can tell.” My grin fades, and I nod.

“I suppose I am.”

“Hmm,” she says quietly. “Well, go on. She’s waiting for you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, rubbing my hands against my pants to remove the sweat.

“I’m afraid,” I whisper.

Tabitha furrows her brow, shaking her head.

“No, no. Not now. There’s nothing to be frightened of now.”

I blink, running my fingers through my hair. My heart pounds, my stomach churns. Every muscle and nerve in my body comes alive. I’m fully awake. I pace forward towards Faunia’s room, throwing back the curtain to stick my head inside. I see her lying on her bed, her body against the mattress as it has been for the last two years. I enter the room fully, tears already gathering at the corners of my eyes. I feel ill and soothed at the same time. I step forward, perching on the edge of her bed. She’s nothing but a skeleton. Only the very essence of her existence remains. I move my trembling hand to grasp hers.

“I’m sorry, my darling,” I begin. “I’m sorry I’ve made you wait here all this time. It was never my intention to make you suffer, I hope you believe that. But, knowing you, you never

really thought I'd be able to heal you, did you? I don't think that's why you stayed. I think you stayed for me. I think you stayed because you knew I wasn't ready to let go."

I swallow the lump in my throat, rubbing my hand over my palm. I grin with the side of my mouth.

"It's time now, it was time long ago. I'll learn how to accept that, I will. You don't have to worry about me anymore. You can go now. It's alright."

Tears trickle down and plop onto the floor below me. I lift my hand to stroke her head.

"In truth, my love, I'm not sure where it is you're going. But I'd imagine it's beautiful. There'll be endless fields of flowers and a sky bluer than anything either of us have seen. You'll be with the stars again, you'll be with the wind and the moon and sun. You'll be with the dirt and the air that rustles the leaves in the trees. You'll find somewhere that's worthy of you. So don't be afraid."

I lean down, pressing my ear against her chest.

"I love you, don't be afraid. Don't worry about me. You can go now. And I'll see you there someday."

I listen to the beating of her heart as it slows. Her palm grows cold in mine. Her pulse becomes quiet and soft. I wait until it pounds one last time, then comes to a halt. I squeeze my eyes closed, whimpering. I lift my head up again and kiss her hand. I force myself to stand back up again, moving to exit the room. I stagger out into the lobby of the healer's tent. They all stare at me in expectation, waiting for me to do something. Tabitha's arms are crossed over her chest, her eyes are watery. She comes up closer to me and reaches out for my hand. I grasp it



thankfully. She helps me exit the tent. Outside, the sun still shines. The wind still dances. The birds still sing. Nothing has changed, yet everything is different. I can feel it, like a shift. I turn my eyes forward, and see my family watching me.

“She’s dead,” I say.

Devin nods, fighting back tears.

“Yes, sweetheart.”

I suck in air through my teeth, feeling faint, and look over to Tabitha, then back at my brother, nephew and sister-in-law. Something begins to crawl up out of my chest, and I make a sound that could almost be classified as inhuman. My whole body shakes out of control as I wail, my knees weakening. I look down at the ground. Earthworms wriggle out from underneath the dirt. They’re still alive and well, but Faunia isn’t. Faunia isn’t alive anymore. My mind flashes back, flashes back to when I first saw her eyes. It flashes back to watching her hair as it waved in the wind. It flashes back to her lips, and the way they felt against mine. Every atom of every memory rushes against me like a wave. I’m knocked back by the force of it. Devin steps forward, taking me from Tabitha. She lets me go and stand back, watching me. Finally, when I can no longer hold myself upright, I crumble. My legs go out from under me as I slide. Roe runs over and wraps himself around my waist. Ceren and Devin clasp me firmly, pushing their bodies close to mine as I go down.

I go down.

They stand there and catch me.

\*\*\*Epilogue\*\*\*

~Three years later~

“Oh, damn,” Ceren hisses under her breath.

“Hey,” I scold. “Not in front of the child.” Roe  
looks at me, taken aback.

“I’m not a child. I know what that word means.” I smile.

“That doesn’t mean you ought to be saying it.” Ceren  
doesn’t grin, but nods.

“Yes, yes. Sorry,” she says, remaining focused.

I look at myself in the mirror, examining the intricate braid Ceren is attempting to create.

“It looks perfect. I haven’t the slightest idea why you’re so upset,” I say her calmly.  
Ceren shakes her head.

“No, it doesn’t look like the picture,” she says. She flings the painted image of the last  
High Priestess at her crowning ceremony at me for added effect.

“Nobody is going to notice,” I tell her, giving her a pointed glance from my reflection in  
the mirror.

“I’ll notice,” she says, continuing to work.

Roe paces the room, stripping a piece of grass between her fingers.

“There hasn’t been any High Priestess in a thousand and fifty years. Who’s going  
to know if it’s right or not?” I chuckle.

“It hasn’t quite been that long,” I say.

Devin appears in the threshold of the room, grinning excitedly. “Are we almost ready to  
go?”

Ceren purses her lips, spinning on her heels to look at him.

“Does it look like we are?” My brother frowns.

“We don’t have that much time; it’s getting late as it is.” I turn away from the mirror, glancing up into his eyes.

“One thing is quite certain; they will not start anything without me.” Roe giggles, and Devin offers me a sheepish grin.

“Yes, I know. But it doesn’t do to be late.”

He walks off toward the kitchen, and I turn back in my chair towards the mirror.

“Oh, feed Winnie, will you ?” I call to him. “I don’t want her getting hungry while we’re at the ceremony.”

“Right,” Devin says.

I hear Winifred's excited pants as my brother readies her meal. Ceren mutters to herself as she finishes my hairstyle, placing in my headdress. She steps back, holding her hands up and examining me. Our reflections make eye contact.

“What do you think?” she asks.

I cock one eyebrow, still grinning.

“I think it looked fine some time ago.”

Ceren snorts and slaps me playfully on the shoulder.

“Stand up, let me tighten your robe.”

I do, holding my arms out as if I’m about to take flight. Ceren fiddles with my outfit, adjusting and readjusting. Suddenly, there is a hard knock at the door. The rap occurs only once.

My stomach fills with the fluttering of moths, and gasp without expecting to.

Ceren and Roe both look up into my eyes. Ceren puts her hand on my back.

“What is it? Are you alright?”

I blink, putting my hand to my head.

“Yes. Sorry.”

Roe tilts his head, his mouth parting as if she wants to say something.

“Devin, sweetheart, see who that was that the door would you?” Ceren asks.

She continues to watch me for a few moments until she’s sure I’m alright. Devin steps up jauntily to the wooden door, whistling. He flings it open and looks out. I watch him through the mirror. He puts one foot out.

“Hello? Anyone -”

He goes silent, and I hear rustling. He stands still for a moment, then steps back and shuts the door behind him. I can see him clasping something in his hands. He walks towards us slowly, the lightness gone from his step.

“What?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

He looks up at me, dazed, and holds his fist out for me to see. I see now that’s he’s holding my purple, silk ribbon. The very one I lost in the woods almost three years ago. I turn around, removing it from his grasp. All four of us stare down at the object.

“Who could have left it here?” Ceren asks.

Roe’s face brightens and he begins to bounce on the balls of his feet.

“It’s Godiva!” he squeals. “It’s the Stag!”

Ceren wraps her arms around her stomach.

“Now, don’t get your hopes up about that. We don’t know it’s her.”

“But we don’t know that it *isn’t* her,” he argues.

Devin waves his hand.

“We can discuss it later. Right now, we need to go. Right, Laney?”

All three pairs of eyes turn to me. I continue to look down at the ribbon, but nod.

“Yes. We need to go.”

I step forward, exiting the house with Winifred at my feet. My family follows close behind. Every few minutes, Ceren alters the state of my robe or braid. I hardly notice.

It’s been three years since I last saw Godiva. More people venture into the forest now, but it remains a dangerous place. Some have claimed they’ve seen her, some have even claimed they’ve spoken to her. I hardly know how to pick out the liars. After Faunia died, I kept thinking I saw her, too. Whenever a bird’s fluttering echoed through the wood or a flowing dress passed, I’d imagine for a moment it was her, but it never was. Months went by, I began my work as a Medium again and started to ascend in the ranks. Birds and crows become just that, snow colored gowns and night-blooming flowers stopped catching my attention in that way. I thought our time together might have convinced her to come closer to the village. Perhaps she’s just needed time, as I have. Perhaps it’s simply her fate to be lonely forever. The thought makes my heart ache, and I shake it from my mind.

“Laney?” Ceren whispers, “Laney, we’re here.”

I look up, still holding the ribbon between my hands, and see that we've arrived at the center of the village where the ceremony is to take place. I push my shoulders back, wrapping the fabric around my wrist.

The villagers have gathered in a horseshoe formation. They've all dressed up for the occasion. They smile gleefully. The custom of watching an Oracle become a High Priestess is a rare sight. Most have not seen it in their lifetimes.

It's strange to think that all of this is because of me.

I smile, stepping forward. My family hangs back, melding into the group. I look back, my grin wide. I've waited for this for a long time.

I turn back, my cheeks already aching from the force of my smile. I see Tabitha in the crowd, and reach out to touch her hand before continuing on. She bows her head slightly to me, glowing.

I make my way towards my fellow mediums, the people surrounding murmur with excitement. My peers welcome me with open arms.

"Are you ready now, Elaine?" says a young woman, who will perform the ceremony, asks sweetly. "To become a High Priestess of this village?"

I scan the eyes of the crowd before me. They are all waiting for me, they are all glad to do so. I look out, past the woman, and fix my eyes on the forest. I see it before anyone else does, two massive antlers and a pair of black eyes staring back at me.

I breathe out, smiling as I nod my head.

"Yes. I'm ready."

## VITA

Taylor Denton earned their BA from the University of Colorado in 2020 and is currently an MFA candidate at Louisiana State University. Before coming to Louisiana State University, Denton primarily worked in online magazines and journals. Their focus was on article production, advertising, and social media promotion. Following the publication of their debut novel, they transitioned away from SEO writing to hone their artistic voice and work towards their goal of becoming an English educator. During their time at LSU, Denton served on the fiction staff for the New Delta Review. Their work explores the liminal, divinity, and how humans impact our environment. You can find their work in Anti-Languorous Project, The Merrimack Review, Coffin Bell, Red Weather, Grim and Gilded, and Scribble. Their first novel and novella are both out through Running Wild Press.