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ODDS

by sumayyah a.

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## Synopsis

‣→ A quarry, two cousins and a daredevil act that has far reaching consequences

‣→ A never-ending desert, a lost traveller, and a fennec fox with a lisp

‣→ A pair of brothers on the run from an enraged dryad

These are a but few of the short stories to be found in this collection, varying in length, genre, and tone. The prompts are bolded, and each fill runs at about 500 words long.

[\(prompts via Fictober 2019\)](#)

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## The Quarry

"It'll be fun, trust me," Danny says, his pale toes curling over the edge of the cliff. The water below—far, far below—is grey and mirror-still and reflects the blocky crags of the enclosing quarry and the similarly grey sky above. Despite the thin cloud cover, the sun is blazing and the air heavy, humid, warm. Later, maybe, there'll be rain. It's quiet around them but for the muted whine of bugs in the yellow-green, scrubby grass rooting stubbornly through the rock to the clay-like soil below.

"Come on," says Danny. "Don't make me jump by myself."

"This is the dumbest idea you've ever had," Miranda declares, inching forward to stand beside her cousin. "And you've had a lot of dumb ideas."

Danny nudges her—not as hard as usual, lest she wobble and topple over, but still pointed. "Come on, we've done *nothing* all summer. And no one's so much as *swam* here, let alone gone cliff jumping."

For good reason, probably, Miranda thinks, peering over the edge and swallowing at the drop before her. It's not much. Fourteen or fifteen feet, max, but everything seems taller when you're standing on top of it. It definitely hadn't seemed so frightening when Danny'd decided it'd be a good place to jump from.

"Just think, we'll finally have something cool to say at school!"

"Ok," she sighs, because the longer she looks, the deeper nervousness hooks into her belly. "Ok."

She doesn't say, *what if there are rocks at the bottom?* She doesn't say, *what if the water isn't safe?* There're no signposts saying it *isn't* safe, and the water looks clean anyway, smells fine too, unlike the pond bordering Danny's house, and they swim in *that* all the time.

But no one swims *here*, no one so much as touches the water here, because there are stories about the quarry. About weird sounds, people going missing only to turn up disoriented and without any memory of what happened to them, and weird sights on new moon nights.

Danny doesn't believe any of it. Miranda doesn't either, not really, but the quarry is undeniably *weird*.

"Ready?" Danny asks again, reaching for her hand and squeezing tight.

Miranda nods, unable to get her voice past the lump of her heart in her throat. She feels vaguely sick, and everything's gone a little blurry, but—

"One," says Danny, "Two." He crouches. "Three!"

They jump. Danny whoops. Miranda feels a scream rise in her chest as they plummet down, down, down, time stretching like taffy and then—

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Miranda wakes up soaked to the skin and flat on her back on her aunt and uncle's front lawn. She sits up shakily, feeling sore and weak and cold and confused. She can't remember what she's doing here, why she's wet or what day it is or—

She hears Beans barking his big woofing *alarm* bark, staggers to her feet and turns just in time to see her uncle poke his head out the door, the confusion on his face draining away to be replaced with shock—and then he's barrelling toward her, Beans hot on his heels.

"Uncle Chris?" she rasps, as her uncle sweeps her into a crushing hug.

"Miranda, Miranda, oh my god, are you ok? Where have you been, it's been days, what's happened to you? Where's Danny? Why are you wet?"

Uncle Chris shoves her back, checking her frantically over for hurts and then around as though Danny is hiding in her shadow or on the drive, still throwing question after question at her. Beans wiggles around them, panting and barking, but it all turns into noise for Miranda because *Danny*.

Oh god, *Danny*.

"Uncle Chris," she warbles weakly, "Uncle Chris, they took Danny."

"Who? Who took Danny? What happened?"

"The rusalka," Miranda says, knees buckling. Uncle Chris catches her before she can fall.

"The rusalka they—we didn't *know*. We didn't know it was all a fairy ring."

## The Desert

You're pretty sure you're hallucinating when the fennec fox starts talking to you.

You've been wandering the desert long enough that you've run out of food, water, and almost all energy. Your tongue is swollen in your mouth and your eyelids grate with every blink. The blowing sand has turned your skin numb with all its scraping.

Overhead, the moon is fat and orange. There are no stars. The sun is a memory. The air is dry, dry, dry, neither cool nor warm. You're pretty sure you're mostly dead, but you keep moving anyway. Why not? So long as you can shuffle forward, you will, until you shuffle off this mortal coil entirely.

The fox is the first living thing you've seen in—well. Time died along with the last sips of your water, so. A while.

It emerges from a dune just ahead of you, scrambling out from under the sand and shaking its little body wildly until the fur settles, before scampering down the dune and straight to you. It stops a foot away and plops down on its hindquarters to stare up at you with its big eyes, its even bigger ears twitching like two satellite dishes and its pointed little nose quivering.

"You're lost," it says, in a childlike voice, a vague lisp mangling the *s*.

You stare at it. It *spoke*. Clearly you've lost your mind. Death should be just around the corner. What a relief; you've been waiting. You don't answer. Speaking requires moisture, and you're pretty sure even your blood has been desiccating into iron and salt, let alone your saliva.

"I can help you," the fox says, curling its bushy tail primly around its paws. **"Just follow me, I know the area."**

You nod, slowly, bones creaking, and the fox springs to its paws and sets off at a right angle to the meandering path you were making. You follow after, not unlike a zombie, slow and clumsy.

The fox never goes too fast, and pads on straight as an arrow.

You follow.

And follow.

And follow.

Until you can't. Until with your next step, your knee folds, and the rest of your body folds with it, and you fall, a collapse of bones and suffering flesh. You lie in the sand, wheezing. A



wet, small nose pokes at your cheek. A raspy tongue licks at your ear. With monumental effort, you open eyes you hadn't realized closed and squint up at the fox.

"Hey," it says, "Come on, we're nearly there."

*Can't*, you want to say, but your sprawl says it just as well.

The fox gives you the impression of a frown, tucking its head down between its front paws. "What's the matter?"

*Thirsty. Dying.*

"But you're so close. Come on. One more step, and then you'll be out."

If you could cry you would, but you can't. You can't do anything.

The fox huffs a breath that blooms warm over your face. "Ok," it says. "Ok, I'll help you."

It opens its tiny little mouth wide, needle-like fangs bright in the light of the rusty moon, and bites at your mouth. For a moment, you feel nothing. Then, like an afterthought, a pinprick of pain in your lip. And then, quite suddenly, you feel a great weight pressing you down, down, down. Something like panic, like adrenaline, floods through you.

You thought you were resigned to death, but this—a slow, crushing heaviness, is unbearable.

You scramble forward with every iota of strength remaining to you and—

The weight vanishes.

"There you go," says the fox, only it's changed. It no longer seems quite so small, but is of a height with you.

"Ready?" the fox asks.

"Yes," you reply, surprised that you can. You feel revitalized, rejuvenated, made new. Together, you make your way onward, through the endless desert.

You don't look back. If you did, you would notice a shape in the desert already being claimed by the sand. And you would be surprised to find it was you.

But it isn't really, not anymore.

## The Dryad

"Now?" Omar panted. "Now you listen to me?"

"Shut up," Hamid replied, skidding and scrabbling for purchase through the dead leaves layered wetly, slickly over the cobblestones. "You can't honestly—," they ducked in tandem beneath a low archway, "—have expected me to believe—" they leapt the last three crumbling steps, landing with a jolt on squelching grass, "that dryads were freakin' real."

Behind them, the very real, very angry dryad, bellowed. It sounded like the creaking of many trees lashed by a strong wind—hurricane strong, though Hamid had never been through a hurricane and could only compare it to the movies.

Omar took a moment to shoot him a dirty look, nearly tripping over a rabbit hole in the process as they careened down the hill. "I don't lie," he snapped, "You know I don't! That's like, my whole thing."

Omar was right, but Hamid wasn't about to admit it. Honestly, dryads? Aside from the fact that they weren't supposed to be real, they were supposed to be like. Hot. Mostly naked. Girls.

He chanced a look back. The dryad was neither hot, nor naked in any human sense, and didn't seem to be girl-like at all. It looked mostly like a sapling with arms and legs made of vines, leaves for hair, and bark for skin and/or clothes. It had oval eyes and a slash of a mouth like hollows of endless darkness.

It was terrifying, and fast, and gaining on them.

"Road," gasped Omar, pointing ahead.

There was indeed a road, and even better—a semi was trundling down it, still a bit off, but gaining.

"I have an idea," Hamid says. "But it might kills us."

"Dryad will definitely kills us, so, shoot."

Hamid shot his brother a grin. "Cool. See the truck?"

"Yup."

"We're gonna do the roadkill thing. Like in the movies."

Omar shot him a wild-eyed look. The dryad roared again, sounding altogether too close, and Omar's mouth thinned. "Ok, yeah, what the heck, let's do it."

The road was only a few feet away. The truck was going fast without any competing traffic to slow it down, and they were mostly screened by bushes. It wouldn't see them until it was too late.

"Hand," said Hamid, reaching for his brother.

Omar didn't even argue, flailing out and holding tight.

"Fast as we can," Hamid reminded them both, and pulling on all the reserves of strength and energy left to him, put on a final, desperate burst of speed.

They tore through the bushes, the dryad hot on their heels. The truck loomed in Hamid's peripheral, red and huge and fast. They heard the high squeal of sudden brakes, the blaring of the horn so loud it shook through their bones, felt the heat of the engine. Omar's hand was slippery in Hamid's and he felt the brief, terrifying certainty that he'd lose hold of his brother--

And then there was a hard snap-crash-shriek and they were on the ground on the other side of the road, hands and knees stinging and gravel pricking into their hot cheeks.

They lay, wheezing, stitches in their sides, miraculously still alive. As one, they turned over to look at the carnage behind them.

The dryad was nothing more than kindling and splinters shattered across the asphalt, and the truck was stopped about ten feet ahead at an angle over both lanes.

"Oh my God," said Omar. And then, louder, "Oh my *God*."

## The Calling

"I know you didn't ask for this," Mom said.

Tris looked askance at the jagged dagger lying on the table across from her bowl of now soggy cereal. It was like something out of a video-game, the blade a series of nightmarish curves all shining with the promise of swift death or, at the very least, a serious paper-cut.

"Uh, no shit Mom. What the *hell*."

"Language," Mom said, frowning as she brushed a smattering of crumbs away from the dagger. "Honey, listen, it's a long-standing tradition to pass this down. It was handed to me by my mother, and to her by her mother, and so on and so forth, since. Well, forever, really."

Tris eyed the dagger dubiously. It seemed too shiny to be that old; even the hilt seemed to be made of robust, black leather lacking in any kind of marks of wear and tear.

"We take care of it," Mom explained, correctly interpreting Tris' expression, something like fondness in the smile that flickered across her face. "Sharpen the blade, replace the leather when it needs it. I'll introduce you to our blacksmith later."

"Um." *Blacksmith?* "I know its my birthday but honestly? I was hoping for like, a car. Not a freakin' *knife*."

"Tris. I'm trying to tell you something important. Can you pack the attitude away for a second?"

Tris subsided mulishly and her mother let out a long sigh, like *Tris* was the one being ridiculous or something, and finally sat down beside her instead of looming like some kind of two-bit movie villain.

(She was about to find that thought horrifically ironic in five, four, three, two...)

"We bestow the dagger on our eldest daughter on the day of her eighteenth birthday. It's mostly ceremonial, but along with the blade comes a calling. No one knows what the calling will be; it's different for everyone. Your Nana, for instance, was tasked with disposing of the CEO of a big box store a few years back."

"Excuse me?" Tris squawked. "Did you just say that Nana murdered somebody???"

"I was twenty-seven when I received my calling," Mom went on dreamily, completely ignoring her. "It wasn't the most impressive calling, nothing like your great-great-grandma-- she eliminated the VP of a small nation on her honeymoon. But it was mine, and the woman

was awful. Sometimes you don't see the effects of disposal right away, you know, but the school did so much better with the new principal."

Tris gaped, sure this was some kind of sick joke, only her mom didn't have a sense of humour. *Dad* was the funny one. "Are you saying we're—what, hitmen? Like Keanu Reeves?"

"Oh no, we aren't for hire," Mom said, snapping out of her daze. "No, no. The dagger tells us who and when and where. No, Tris, this is really, really important. You can't ever try to dispose of someone unsanctioned by the dagger."

"I'm not gonna dispose of *anybody!*"

"Don't say that!" Mom hissed, shooting a sidelong look at the dagger which—did nothing but continue to exist among the breakfast dishes like a legit glitch in reality.

"You can't ignore a calling either! That's rule number two!"

"Is there a third?" Tris asked, half-resigned and half-sure her mother was having some kind of psychotic break.

"Yes," Mom said, taking her hand and squeezing it. "The most important one. *Don't ever let it taste your blood.*"

## The Golden Ball

**"I might just kiss you."**

He is deliriously relieved, which is why he says it at all. I roll my eyes at him to hide the effect his words have had on me. It's a strange thing to see in a frog, to be sure, but I'm no ordinary frog.

"It's no trouble," I tell him, patting his thigh, which is as high as I can comfortably reach of him, perched as I am beside him on the well.

"No, you don't understand," the Prince says, eyes wide and earnest. He leans near so that I do not have to strain to look up at him, which is kind of him. "That ball is—well, it's not a toy, even if it looks like one. It was my grandmother's, and it's been in the Reliquary for years and years, locked behind glass. I used to stare at it for hours as a child."

I look at the ball, golden and shining in the sun. There's something strangely alluring about it. I suppose I can't blame a child for the infatuation.

"So you took it?"

"I just—I was angry."

"Angry?"

The prince flushes, looks away. "It's my parents. They want me to marry my cousin, but I can't stand her. She's...cruel. The way she treats the servants, the dogs, her horse, even. It's awful, and she just stares at me with her dead eyes if I say anything to her about it. But she's rich, and we're not. And I'm their only child, and they're getting old, and the kingdom needs an heir. So."

"Hm," I say. "And I thought being cursed was awful, but at least the only thing I have to worry about is something trying to eat me, not lifelong bondage to an awful person."

The prince laughs grimly, but when I don't join him he subsides, mouth twisted. "Are you...are you really cursed?"

"Do you think all frogs can talk?" I ask him, dry as stone. He flushes again.

"Thought you were special," he says, embarrassment sitting ill on his noble mien.

"Well. I am. Because I'm cursed."

"Oh."

I take pity on him. "My brother upset the local witch, and she meant to turn him into a frog, only she has really bad eyesight and caught me instead."

The prince looks aghast. "That's *horrible*."

"Eh," I say, even though it is. I've just had time to become mostly used to my fate.

"Is there anything I can do? You helped me; it's only fair.

"You're sweet," I tell him, because he is.

"No, please. If I can help—"

I grimace. "I—listen. I can't ask you—the terms of the curse. It's...coercive."

"But I'm offering," says the prince, and then pauses, seeming to consider. "It's not...when you say coercive..."

"It's a kiss," I explain, both amused and horrified at what he's implying. "Just a kiss."

There's more to it of course—it needs to be a kiss from someone pure of heart, but for the life of me I can't figure out how to figure out the state of someone's heart, let alone convince them to bestow a kiss on a frog. It's why I'm resigned to my fate. The curse is nearly impossible to break, with just enough leeway to let hope linger like a poison no matter how I try to root it out.

The prince makes a strange face I can't decipher. "Well, that doesn't seem too difficult," he says, the antithesis to my own thoughts. "May I kiss you?"

I blink up at him, nonplussed. "I—really?"

He nods seriously.

"Well. Why not, if you truly—it might not work. But. Yes?"

The prince nods again. He leans down, hesitates, and then holds out his hand.

"Climb on," he says, and I do with a hop, feeling vaguely mortified for the first time in a while to be what I seem to be. He doesn't grimace or otherwise make a sign that he's discomfited, just lifts me slowly to be approximately face-level with him.

"Ready?" he asks.

"If you are," I reply, my heart pounding hard.

He leans forward, lips gently pursed, and I close my eyes. The kiss is soft, a brush of his mouth against mine. He pulls back, and I open my eyes, disappointed but unsurprised that nothing has happened. The prince, however, looks crestfallen.

"Why—" he begins.

And then something not unlike the feeling of sunshine suffuses me, fills my vision. I gasp, the prince gasps, and then—I find myself in the prince's lap, human-shaped again. The

prince totters under my sudden weight, I flail to steady us, and with a plop the forgotten ball rolls and falls into the well.

I can't help myself. I snort. The prince grins, and then we both burst into peals of laughter.



## The Concerned Citizen

"Excuse me, dear?" the woman says, moving uncomfortably close and laying her hand on Leila's arm.

Wil makes a muted growling noise, and Leila gently pulls herself free, taking a discreet step back. The woman doesn't seem to notice, her eyes flickering over Leila's shoulder towards Wil before fixing back on her.

"I don't mean to frighten you," she says, her tone hushed, "But you're being followed."

Leila sighs through her nose. God, not *again*.

"Do you need me to stay with you? Should I call someone?" Again the woman looks toward Wil, and Leila can sense her unease and fear, a miasma like smoke swelling around her.

"No," Leila says, holding tight to her patience, of which she's never had much. The woman is just trying to be kind, she probably doesn't mean to be offensive. She's older, her kindly face lined and hair grey-going-white. The older generation is still struggling to adjust to a world without segregation, but this happens way too often, and Leila is...tired of it.

"I'm fine," she explains, stepping around the woman, who shadows her in an uncomfortable hover. Starbucks is just across the street and she is so close to the salted caramel latte calling her name. "He's a friend."

The woman gapes at her, rearing back like Leila's said something horrific, her watery blue eyes wide. "But—but it's an *orc*."

"He," Leila corrects, coolly. **"Yes, I'm aware. Your point?"**

The woman stammers, flushing pink, and Leila's officially reached the end of her tether.

"Whatever, listen. Thanks and all, but I'm not in any danger." *And*, she doesn't add, *the only reason you got so close to me is that he deemed you Not a Threat*. She pushes forward and onward, and Wil follows along while the woman is still sputtering. *It*, honestly.

"I know it's never gonna happen," she says, tilting her head back to meet the glint of Wil's half-amused, half-resigned gaze. "But I wish people wouldn't judge based on frickin' looks."

Wil shrugs. In his soft, deep voice, he says, "Things have gotten better for us. Even five years ago I would've heard worse."

"Still," Leila replies, jogging across the crosswalk as the timer sinks three, two, one, hand-flash, hand-flash. "Of the two of us, I'm more dangerous. But no one ever thinks it,

because you've got tusks and you're seven feet something and built like a brick house and I'm like. Five-seven with cheeks chubby enough to rival a chipmunk."

Wil laughs his rumbly laugh as he pulls open the door to Starbucks for her. The welcome waft of roasting coffee beans floods their noses, underlaid by the chatter of cafe-goers and nu jazz. "After you, fearsome leader," he says, gesturing her in with a broad hand.

Leila rolls her eyes, ducks under his arm. Starbucks, at least, as used to all kinds of customers, and no one looks twice at the big, greenish orc or the hijabi girl at his side who has two shadows stretching out behind her.

## The Chime

There's something shiny in the human's bedroom window and its haunting him through the screen. It catches the light just right, glinting in the morning light and dappling the other side of his nest. Swiftbeak don't know what it is, except that it's pretty and colourful and new and he wants it.

He stares at it every day, when neither of his parents are looking his way. He's not old enough to leave the nest unchaperoned yet, and though he's doing well in his flying lessons, he still falters more often than not, is still learning the whisper of the wind and the rules of its capricious play. He's *definitely* not allowed act on covets yet—that's for full-wings only, those who are ready to build their own nests and choose a zephyr companion.

Still, he looks at the pretty thing and sighs, and worries it will attract someone else's attention, and become *their* covet. After all, covets are only yours if you steal them, no matter who saw it first. Only nests and covet-hides are off-limits to pilfering.

Swiftbeak mustn't have been as subtle as he hopes, because Grandfather Ironwing eyes him beadily on a visit one day, and says, "Bit young for coveting, aren't you?"

The nest, raucous with the noisy chatter of his nest-mates and parents, goes quiet, as all turn their attention to the youngest nestling. Swiftbeak refuses to quail under the weight of their looks, even as his feathers puff up reflexively.

"Well," he says, after clacking his beak nervously a few times. "Well, yes, I am. But it's very lovely, so I can't help it."

His family, as one, crane their heads to study the thing.

"It's a chime," says Mother. "Made of coloured glass. A lot of work went into it, you can tell by the shapes and the delicate string." Mother is a scholar, and so she knows about these things.

"It would be an excellent first covet," says Grandfather, shifting on his claws until he finds a comfortable position on the knobby branch. "Just the right amount of difficulty with just the right amount of delicacy at risk. You'd make a name for yourself if you got it."

"He's too young," says Father.

"He's just a baby!" cries Swiftbeak's sister, in tones of false concern.

"The littlest," adds his brother, with a sharp peck.

"I'm the best flyer though!" Swiftbeak squawks back, indignant.

"I was his age," says Grandfather, "And he is the best flyer."

Swiftbeak swells with pride and pleasure at this unexpected commendation. "Can I go after it then?" he asks, and his siblings immediately start up a riot of complaints it takes the combined screeching of both their parents to silence.

"No one is going after any covets any time soon," Mother says firmly.

"But—" all three nestlings begin.

**"No,"** says Father, **"And that's final."**

All three subside with only mild complaints and entreaties, but the parents stand firm, and soon Swiftbeak's older siblings are distracted by tomorrow's lesson plans. Swiftbeak settles glumly beside Grandfather, watching the chime sway in a light breeze. Even the wind is teasing him for what he can't yet have.

"You know," says Grandfather in a conspiratorial whisper. "My parents thought I was too young too."

"They did?" Swiftbeak asks, a little heartened by this news. "How did you convince them to let you go?"

"I didn't," says Grandfather, eyes bright. "It's always better to ask forgiveness than permission, especially if you're successful."

## The Ghost

*author's note: this snippet is based on a work in progress about a psychopomp named Reaper and the ghost she falls in love with*

**"Can you stay?"**

Reaper cocks her head, straining to hear the whisper that almost, almost sounds like the wind.

"Can you stay?" the voice asks again, soft and sad and lonesome.

It's a ghost, an old one, weathered away to nothing but an echo among the trees. There's no sign of drained life anywhere nearby, no evidence of rifts in reality, no haunting, unsettling presence.

"Can you stay?"

Reaper allows her energy to flow around her like ripples in a pond, spreading outward wider and wider in concentric circles until it buffets against—

The ghost drinks from her energy, spooling it into its almost-forgotten shape. A young man, early twenties when he died. Unruly hair curling over his forehead, brown eyes dark as his skin. His lips and the tips of his fingers are tinged blue.

"Can you stay?" he calls, one last time. "It's so cold. Please don't leave me."

"Of course," Reaper says, opening her arms to him. "Come here. You don't have to be cold anymore."

He sighs on a hitched breath, folds into her embrace.

"There now," she says, tucking his head into the crook of her shoulder and plucking her scythe from the place it goes when it's not in use.

She swings, silent and unerring. The ghost-boy falls, eyes already closed, a beatific smile across his face. For a moment, she sees him as he must have been at the time of his death, curled into himself in a futile attempt to keep warm, and then he's gone. Truly gone.

There are no more voices on the wind, and Reaper is alone again.

## The Interview

**"There is a certain taste to it."**

"To what?"

"Grief. Anger. Love. Lust. Fear. Take your pick."

"Do you mean—in the blood?"

"Of course. It adds...flavour."

"Could you expand on that?"

"Grief adds a certain saltiness, a certain liquidity to the blood. Not unlike the taste of fish, if I am remembering correctly. Anger has a heavy, smoky spice that nips at the tongue, at the palate, and burns deliciously. Love is...sweet, if it is new. Full-bodied and lush, if it is aged. An aftertaste of bitterness, as in certain chocolates, if it is conflicted or resented."

"And lust?"

"Bright and bubbling, like champagne, and at the same moment heady and warm as the flush of strong liquor, amber and golden and intoxicating. Endangering."

"What about fear?"

"Cold and electrifying as a mouthful of mint on a cold day. Awakening and enlivening and thrilling."

"And what of complacency?"

"Flat. Flavourless. Boring. Like water. Nourishing still, as it is needed. It is why we prefer the hunt, or the haze. Why blood banks are disregarded by those of us untroubled by such human frailties as guilt. We are predators first and foremost. Never forget that."

## The Stranger

The stranger grabbed my hand out of nowhere, a look of frantic urgency on his face. I tried to pull free but he tightened his grip, pressed close—too close.

**"Listen, I can't explain it, you'll have to trust me,"** he hissed. "But something terrible is about to happen and you have to come with me."

"What—but—," I spluttered, still futilely trying to get away. "Let go of me! What do you mean, something terrible's gonna happen?"

Around us, the crowd continued to flow like the currents of a river, enjoying the sunlight, the music of the buskers, the smells of the bakeries and cafes wafting through the air, the sidewalks crowded with their patrons seated at tiny iron-wrought tables under umbrellas like huge, inverted flowers. It was idyllic, like something out of a movie. The recent rain had even made the cobblestones glisten cinematically.

The man huffed, ran a trembling hand through his hair, eyes darting everywhere like he was being hunted, and my first thought was--this is a really weird way to rob someone. My second thought was--am I about to be kidnapped? My third thought--oh God, terrorists. In the time it took my thoughts to ricochet, the man seemed to come to a decision.

"Rhea, it's a really long story and there's no time to tell it all to you."

I started at the sound of my name, heart tripping in my chest. "How do you—"

"I know you better than anyone else," the man said, grim and soft. "And you know me. You just don't—"

Whatever he was about to say was interrupted by sudden screams at the end of the street. Everyone around us paused, craned their heads back. The screams grew, more people joining in, and then—they began to run. I couldn't see what they were running from, why they were screaming, but the man cursed fluidly under his breath.

"Rhea, please. Please. It's after you, and people will get hurt if you don't come with me."

It sounded like both a threat and a plea and despite myself, despite logic and reason and sense, when he pulled me after him...I went. He took off down a side street I hadn't even noticed, pulling me after him as people around us fled and yelled and generally acted as if the world was ending.

I still couldn't see or hear what was terrifying everyone, only that they were terrified, and a part of me thought this was a huge, coordinated joke, a weird version of a flash mob.

"What's—" I panted, as we careened around a corner and narrowly avoided crashing into an overflowing garbage container, startling feral cats out of our path with yowls of indignation.

"What is it? Why's it after me? Who the hell are you?"

The man pushed me into the shadowed entrance of a suite and crowded in next to me, and I realized suddenly the height difference between us, the size of him. If he decided to hurt me—

"You can't see it?" he asked, ignorant to the spike of fear lancing through me.

"See what?"

There were sirens splitting the air now, and a police car came roaring down the street, blaring its horn to get pedestrians out of its way.

"That!" The man pointed aggressively—at nothing.

Or what I *thought* was nothing. Because the police car had screeched to a stop, ejecting two officers who came out guns blazing and shooting at—

The air where the bullets hit rippled like water and fell to the ground, and for a split second I saw the shape of something huge and winged.

Something that, not to sound completely nuts, looked like a *dragon*.



## The Neighbour

"It's not always like this," his neighbour said one day, apropos of absolutely nothing.

Ben had waved her way as he got out of his car, made some comment about the gorgeous weather, because that was the polite thing to do, and the neighbour had then jogged over, perky ponytail swinging and said *that*.

"Er, sorry?"

She waved as though to encompass their surroundings—a quiet neighbourhood with old, towering trees flaming in the late autumn sunlight, cobblestoned sidewalks, and heritages buildings that looked like something out of a period movie were it not for the cars in the driveways of the homes and tasteful signs on the walls of the businesses.

"You know," she said, "It's very...chill, right now. You chose a bad time to move in—or a good one, I guess, depending on how you look at it."

Ben gave an uncomprehending and uncomfortable chuckle to cover the fact that he didn't know what to say to that. He'd moved here a couple weeks ago and thought he'd hit the jackpot, to be honest.

His housemate was a quiet, normal, respectfully busy 30-something, he had the whole top floor to himself and money for rent, groceries, Netflix, gas, and whatever he wanted to buy, within reason, and the mall only twenty minutes' walk away had a huge movie theatre and an impressive selection of stores, restaurants, and even glow-in-the-dark mini-golf.

Ben was from the middle of nowhere, farmland for people who mostly didn't farm, and while this wasn't the city he'd gone to university in, it was a nice compromise. Plus, the house he rented backed onto a ravine perfect for running through.

They called this place a village, but only 'cause it was too small to be a city, sandwiched as it was between two other proper towns that it had resisted being cannibalized by. He liked what he'd seen of it so far. It seemed safe. His neighbour—what was her name again?—was kind of giving him the heebie-jeebies now though.

She raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow at him as he made noises about turning in after a long day in an effort to escape this conversation. "You have no idea what you're in for, do you?" she asked.

"Uh, not really, no," he stammered, wracking his brain for what the hell she could be talking about. "Is it—Halloween's around the corner. Should I be worried? Back home the pranks could get a little outta hand..."

He trailed off as she smiled, a slow and creeping stretch of her mouth over far too many bared teeth. For a second, Ben swore her eyes flashed red. It was just the sun hitting the brown of her eyes at a weird angle, right? Picking up on the reflection of the fall colours around them?

"Oh honey," she said, sweet as molasses, "I'd stock up on salt if I were you."

## The Stars

They're on a bald-topped hill surrounded by the crowns of trees wreathed in heavy fog, like islands in a strange sea. The sky is a pale wash of lilac darkening overhead as the sun disappears below the horizon, the first stars already glimmering in the heavens.

They sit together on an unzipped sleeping bag, pressed up against each other to share warmth under the second sleeping bag spread around their shoulders, chins buried in scarves and mittens warm around their hands.

It's strange how fast the sun goes down—to quote an author she can't remember, it happens slowly, and then all at once<sup>1</sup>, and then she's blinking into the gathering dark and the stars are glistening overhead like a net of jewels or a spray of sugar, and the longer she stares the more she can see and the bigger the sky feels, the smaller she becomes, the deeper the emptiness between pinpricks of light seems to be.

It steals her breath, and she almost forgets she's cold and that there's a stone digging into her leg.

**"What if I don't see it?"**

She startles out of her trance, blinks at her sister and then leans more heavily against her. "You will," she says, with the confidence of having asked their mother that same question, years ago, and gotten the same answer, and had it proved true.

"Just keep looking. Keep watching. Let it fill you, like air."

They do. Time passes, and neither mark its passage. They're taken up with the stars and the sky and infinity, and it is taken up with them, and draws near, near, near, until—

Her sister gives a great gasp. There is movement in the aether, almost indiscernible but for the way it causes the stars behind it to sway and dance and ripple as it moves, like the reflections in a still body of water disturbed by a breeze.

She sighs, a smile that seems drawn from her heart blooming on her mouth, and they watch it dance to a music they can almost hear, the music of the world, of light and darkness and the long endurance, the music of life and love and silence.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Fault in Our Stars*, John Green

## The Riverbank

*author's note: this snippet is based on a work in progress, a gender-swapped retelling of the Hades & Persephone myth*

**"I never really knew it could be this way."**

"Hm?" Hades stirred, blinking sleepily over at her companion who sat, knees drawn up against his chest, on the riverbank beside her.

"Just," Percy waved a hand around, smiled uncertainly. "Easy, like this. I mean, it's not so different from home. The water and the trees and the nymphs and all. But usually I'm...annoyed. Feeling trapped and antsy and bored."

"And you're none of those things now?" Hades asked, arching an elegant brow.

"No," Percy said stoutly. "I'm not. Because I know I can go. I can leave. I can spar publicly, or I can ride the falls, or I can just wander without a minder. And no one will be angry or dogging my steps or giving me a time limit. And it's....nice. To be treated like an adult."

Hades sat up and drew an arm around Percy, tucking her head against his shoulder. "I can't imagine," she murmured, watching a silver leaf swirl in the eddies of the current. "I've always been free to do as I willed. No one has ever looked out for me. My mother tried, when we were younger. But you know what our father was like."

"Sort of," said Percy, ducking his face against the crown of her head. "Mother didn't like to talk about Grandfather."

"Hm. None of us like to dwell on it."

Silence fell between them, gentle and enveloping as a cloak.

"But yeah," Percy said, returning to his light train of thought, "This is nice. I'm glad I'm here."

"So am I," Hades murmured, pressing a kiss to his rounded cheek, which flushed under her touch. Small pink flowers bloomed like a smattering of stars in the grasses between Percy's long-fingered hands before he smoothed them away.

"Don't," said Hades, amused and charmed as she very rarely was with anybody else. "I like them."

Percy's flush deepens, but he lifts his hands and the blooms return and flourish until they run like water down the bank and drip over the edge, to nod their pretty heads above the river of forgetfulness and peace.

## The Letter

*My dearest Annie,*

By the time you receive this letter I will be a fortnight at sea upon the *HMS Larkspur*. You may well be shocked, but pray do not be grieved, no matter what it is you hear of my conduct with the benighted Lady Auriga. I need not tell you that it is all untrue. You know me, and you know I strive ever to be the consummate gentleman. I confess that the only misconduct on my part was to make the pains to court her and in secret.

I am a fool, Annie, I must admit to it. She convinced me that it was for my protection against the derision of the ton, my fortune being what it is. But my attentions have never been untoward, have never been what they oughtn't be. I conducted myself always as I should before the sight of God, as though our parents—bless their souls—were always before me, as surely they look down upon us from Heaven.

Do not weep for me Annie, for I do not weep for myself. And do not be too angry—it is not worth it. I have narrowly escaped a terrible fate, and circumvented not only my own ruin, but yours as well, for your attachment to me. It is for this reason I brave the peril of the sea. **I cannot come back**, but rest assured that I had all the necessary papers made up properly.

(Richard has been indispensable in that regard, and a most stalwart friend. If you cannot trust anybody, trust him, my dear, to always have our best interests at heart, through thick and thin, come hell or high water. I really do admire the fellow, and if, as I suspect, you admire him too, you have my full blessing).

You are now the heir to a fortune that—while meagre for two—is now sufficient for the life and style of a gentleman's daughter, provided she is wise with it. And I know you will be—of the two of us, you have always had the better head on your shoulders.

I wish I had even a modicum of your good sense. You would not have entertained that Lady's suggestions for a moment. But I will not dwell, and regret is pointless. I am gone, sister mine, gone forever, or at the very least until the charges are dropped and rescinded and my good name restored to me, though I have little hope of that happening.

I am for the Continent, and I will write you again once I am landed. Think well of me, though you have little cause to.

Your fool of a brother,

*Alec*

## The Fever

"Listen," Caleb said urgently, grasping Malek by the face in a too-tight grip that mashed his cheeks together, distorting his normally aloofly handsome demeanour. "*Listen*," he said again, wobbling precariously in place. "Nour is being *weird* as *heck*, bro."

Malek wriggled free of his best friend and then hastily reached out to keep him from toppling over. "Nour is always weird," he said patiently, "Come on buddy, you need to lie down. I could fry an egg on your face."

"But," said Caleb, though he cooperated as Malek led him back to his cot. "But, Nour. *Bro*. We gotta—that shit 'aint *normal*, bro."

"What isn't normal is getting a fever from a pixie's bite. Not at your age anyway. Can't believe you haven't been immunized. Sit."

Caleb obediently dropped down onto the cot and then turned a worrying shade of pale green. "Don't like sitting," he moaned, and Malek nudged a bucket under him just as he began to throw up. *Gross*. He handed him water from the flask when he was done and Caleb gargled, spat, and looked up at Malek with weepy eyes, the very picture of pitiful.

"Lie down bud," Malek said gently, pressing on his shoulders.

"Lying down bad," Caleb whined and Malek snorted.

"Lying down good. Stay there while I clean the bucket. Nour'll watch over you."

Caleb face twisted with abject terror, eyes comically wide as he grabbed for Malek in a panic and nearly fell out of the cot. "No, no, not Nour. Don't leave me bro."

Malek sighed. "I'll be back in a second. Nothing's gonna happen. You're just delirious from the fever and it's made you paranoid."



"But look at her dude! Look at her and tell me you don't *see* that."

They looked. Nour was standing by the window, wreathed in white flames of heatless fire, hovering six inches off the ground. The shadows on the wall behind her suggested invisible wings.

Malek said as much to Caleb.

"But **that's what I'm talking about!**" Caleb exclaimed indignantly.

"Dude," said Malek, "That's just what she looks like when she's communing."

"BE NOT AFRAID," Nour said, and Caleb whimpered.

Malek took the opportunity to escape.

# The Haunt

*content warning: depiction of figure of apparent suicide by hanging*

**Listen. No, really listen.** There are secrets in the walls, buzzing their wings like trapped flies.

There is movement in the shadows and the light is sickly. Whispers in the night you must not heed, and echoes in the day you must not follow, for all that they suggest hidden rooms and passages just around the corner. The clock's chimes herald a change in fortune, but always for the worse.

Listen. No, really listen. It is the witching hour now.

The creaking of the floorboards sound tortured because they are. The weeping willow's drooping branches trail against the glass like so many fingers seeking a way in. If you peer too closely beyond the shimmering flicker of their trickster leaves you will see a maiden fair, but for her eyes. White and unseeing as a corpse's, and the necklace about her pretty throat is knotted rope. She did not tie it herself, no matter what it looks like.

Listen. No, really listen. You shouldn't look.

There is a knife weeping blood in the kitchen and white bones in the ashes of the fireplace. You will hear the wailing cry of a hungry child drifting from the attic on a chill wind. Shiver, and wrap your cloak more tightly around you. Close your ears to it and shore up your heart. This house has born no babes.

Listen. No, really listen. If you are inside the house, it is already too late. You have breathed its dank and musty air. You have passed beneath the lintel.

Listen. No, really listen. The door is shut. You heard it close with the finality of a crypt.

Listen. No, really listen. You cannot get out. It will not let you leave.

Listen. No, really.

L i s t e n .

## The Stalker

Ok, before I even start, I'll admit. I'm totally being a stalker. In my defence—ok, so my defence is pretty weak. Non-existent even. But! **There's just something about him.**

So there's this guy, right? And like, he's not conventionally handsome. Some might even think he's kinda ugly—I know my sister does. But everybody agrees that he's....alluring. Something about his too dark, slightly too large eyes. Something about his black hair that, when the light hits just right; it's a deep green-purple-blue that no dye in the world can achieve. It freakin' *shimmers*. Like a raven's wing!

Go google it, you'll see what I mean.

You back? Ok, yeah, so where was I... Oh yeah!

His face is kinda like, squashed? But he still has pretty cheekbones. And his mouth is too wide to be strictly attractive but damn it, all together he's just. *Interesting* looking. And like, I don't mean that in a snarky way like some people do when they say 'interesting'.

Strangers stop him in the street and ask to draw or photograph his portrait. He got asked to be a model at the mall, which I thought only ever happened in Lifetime movies. And like, he's too short to be a model, so it's extra weird, you know? He's kinda like...stocky, but when he moves it's like he's dancing. Just graceful and delicate and stuff. It's *maddening*.

Yeah, I know I sound obsessed. Just like, hold your judgement, ok? If you haven't seen him then you don't know what it's like to be around him. And that's just his *looks*.

His voice? Like—gosh, he could make statues cry. It's just so beautiful, even when he's humming. You never want him to stop. He could walk into a burning house and if he was singing literally anyone who heard him would follow him in. It's insane, but he always goes quiet if you compliment him on it or try to get him to sing for you. Once, he didn't speak for a whole week after Mr. Trent tried to get him to join the choir.

It's not *normal*, the reactions people have around him. I'm not the type to get fixated and I am *well aware* that I should probably be arrested for how focused I am on him, for my own safety if anything.

But there's just something about him, which is the only excuse I can give for why I followed him home one day after school. Except he didn't go home. He went into the woods, and

I only realized he was heading to the beach when the sun had started to set and I realized how long we'd been walking.

I don't know how he didn't notice me, I wasn't being all that quiet, even though I was trying to be. He seemed really focused and kind of like he was rushing.

And then the trees started to thin and I could see the water, all pink and purple with the sunset, and he straight up just started to strip. I looked away, obviously, and only looked back around when I heard a splash.

He was crouched so everything but his head and shoulders was underwater. And then he leaned back—and instead of legs, up came a huge fish's tail, flashing silver in the last of the sunlight.

# The Registrar

INT. ANGELWOOD ACADEMY REGISTRAR'S OFFICE. DAY

Seventeen-year-old JEMIMA TALBOT sits on a chair across from a stern looking woman typing away at a sleek computer. The brass and wood nameplate reads TILDA KUZNETSOV. The chair creaks as Jemima shifts nervously.

MS. KUZNETSOV

(pauses in typing, long nails poised like claws)

Alright, you're officially registered. Your academy email has been set up, and your course choices have been approved. Your roommates are, of course, pre-assigned. Before I release you, do you have any questions or concerns?

JEMIMA

(clears her throat)

No, miss. Thank you, miss.

MS. KUZNETSOV

(hums in either disapproval or approval, it is difficult to tell)

If any concerns arise, you may address your RA or professors directly, or email the registrar's office. After, of course, checking the Frequently Asked Questions section of the portal. I only have one more question, and it is important that you answer honestly.

(she folds her hands, leans forward to fix Jemima with a sharp, paralyzing look)

How do you feel about secrets?

JEMIMA

(a slow grin unfurls across her face as her eyes sparkle with delight, all evidence of nerves vanishing)

**Secrets, miss? I love secrets.**

## The Ship

"Yes, I admit it, you were right."

"No, *really?*" my sister asked, her voice heavily sauced with sarcasm. She even tacked on a dramatic gasp for extra effect. "You think so?"

I side-eyed her so hard I gave myself an instant headache, but all she did was cross her arms and raise her ever expressive eyebrows at me, and then at the ship.

Well, alright, so 'ship' was stretching it a little. It was a boat with more sails than it should be able to handle, so that it looked a little like that one time I'd accidentally knocked Ms. Fitzpatrick over the balcony and all you could see was her starched stiff petticoats standing on end, her tiny feet waving frantically as she'd yelled abuse my way. (The petticoats had saved her from a nasty fall, getting wedged between the balcony and the tree, so I hadn't felt too bad about laughing).

"Marieeee," I whined, turning away from the ship--*my* ship. "You know I've always wanted to be a pirate! And now I can be! I don't even really need a crew to handle this! I can start off small and move up. I just...should have maybe, perhaps, asked to actually see it before I put my bid in? I just didn't think I'd get another chance! It was such a good deal!"

Marie dropped her arms and looked to the heavens as though they'd save her from me. Honestly, she should have gone into the theatre, but no, it was horses and cattle she loved, and screw anybody who said no lady should be a cowboy. Marie thought she was lady enough to do whatever the hell she wanted.

Right now it looked like she wanted to sock me in the jaw, but like, affectionately.

"Jack. You don't even know how to swim."

"I can learn!"

## The Inmate

*content warning: non-explicit mentions of rape, murder, and other violent crimes, drug abuse, and solitary confinement*

**"You could talk about it, y'know?** What you did to get in here. Everyone else does. This whole—strong and silent thing, it 'aint fooling' anybody. Either you're too much a coward to own it, or you're innocent." The man laughed, an ugly cracking sound. "Now we all know there 'aint no such thing as innocent. But some folks *do* get locked up in here for the wrong thing. You one of them?"

The inmate didn't answer, didn't respond, just kept pumping iron, gaze fixed on the middle distance. Around them, the prisoners had gathered into posturing groups, or were playing basketball, or were watching everyone else, looking for a fight or avoiding one. The guards patrolled the walled courtyard behind coils of barbed wire like wingless vultures on the watch for violence.

"Come on," the man said, looming over the inmate. "Fess up. What'd you do?"

When no response was forthcoming and the inmate only blinked sweat out of his eyes and went on lifting weights, the man began to list offences, rapid-fire, probing for a reaction.

"Was it murder? Rape? Did ya steal somethin'? Buy somethin'? Sell somethin'? Get too happy with fire, or guns, or whatever the kids are findin' online these days to get their kicks? Go somewhere you weren't supposed to? Be with someone you weren't supposed to?"

The inmate set his weights down and began to do push ups.

The man squatted across from him, eyes narrowed, fingers twitching.

"Come on. Come on, spill. Spill the truth or spill your guts." He laughed again. "Ya gotta tell me somethin'."

Finally, the inmate paused, met the man's gaze and fixed him with a look that was flat as glass. "Why do you want to know?" He pronounced the words slowly, carefully, like they weren't his language, or like his teeth and the shape of his tongue were unfamiliar to him.

The man shrugged, fingers curling into fists before loosening. "I dunno. I like knowing. I know everything about everyone here. Even the guards. Even the warden."



The inmate's gaze attained a little more depth, like hollows being gouged into a hard earth. "What will you give me for telling you?"

The man scratched his cheek, rough with stubble. "Cigs?" he offered.

The inmate shook his head.

"Drugs?"

The inmate shook his head again.

"Well shit, I 'aint got much else. 'Cept...a secret?"

Then the inmate nodded, eyes brightening with twin pinpricks of interest. "A good one," he said, with such heavy, low emphasis it weighed on the man's bones like nothing ever had in his long life, not even incarceration and what led to it.

"Sure," said the man, unnerved and not knowing why.

The inmate beckoned the man close. Warily, he drew nearer, but not too near that he couldn't do some damage if this was a trap to get him to let down his guard.

"I'm here," the inmate said, in a whisper soft as snow and just as chilling. "Because I *want* to be. I'm here to *stay*."

The man reared back and stared narrowly at the inmate, who smiled, a slow, long stretch of his mouth that made the man's insides shiver and curl up, and he had seen the worst humanity had to offer and done some of it too.

"Want to be?" he repeated, his voice a croak.

The inmate nodded, just once, sure as an anvil blow.

"Wh-why?"

"Because I'm here to collect. You said innocence doesn't exist, and I would know that better than you. Better than anyone ever has or ever will. But I don't deal in innocence. I deal in *guilt*."

The inmate paused, and the man noticed for the first time that his shadow, shrunken like all the others under the glare of high noon, writhed independently of his stillness, a restless formlessness that made some instinct in the man, long repressed, shriek a warning high as any klaxon bell.

"Now," the inmate continued. "You owe me a secret."

Abruptly, the man didn't want to give it. He didn't want to give this inmate anything. He wanted to be anywhere but here, even back in his cell, even in solitary, where he'd been put once and nearly lost his grip on sanity to it.

But he had promised, and though he had broken promises before, he couldn't now. He wanted to, he tried, he thought of a lie, but his mouth opened of its own accord, and out came a secret so long hidden, so precious, it left the man weeping.

The inmate collected it gently, tenderly, and put it beside the others of its kind in the cavernous darkness of himself and bowed his head in thanks.

The man began to scream.

## The Lament

Can't  
hear  
anything  
now,  
gone  
empty.

·  
I  
sigh.  
·

All  
nerves,  
not  
over  
you.  
I'm  
numb,  
ghostly,  
lost,  
yearning.

·  
Damned  
intense,  
feverish,  
foolish,  
irrecoverable,  
consuming,  
untimely  
love:  
tormenting.

## The Battle

The sky was a flat, brittle grey, the world echoed with its stillness. The cold sank into my bones, into my clothes as the snow melted under me enough to soak through and thoroughly chill me even as the dampness itched. My fingers and toes were numb through my boots, socks, and gloves. Even my lips were clumsy with cold, but my words were still coherent enough. I wasn't yet violently shivering.

"**We could still have a chance,**" I said with more bravado than I really felt.

My comrade-in-arms glanced over at me, her breath puffing out in a cloud that briefly obscured her expression—when it faded, it revealed her expression as grimly sceptical.

"Do you trust me?" I asked her. "Because clearly they're out of missiles. We could take them now, if we storm them together."

"Wh-what if it's a t-trap?" my sister asked through her chattering teeth, "Wh-what if they're w-waiting for us t-to d-do that?"

"We've gotta take that risk," I replied. "I don't know about you but I can't take the cold much longer."

"A-alright," said my sister.

We took a deep breath in tandem even as it pierced our lungs.

"One," I said, gathering half our last armful of missiles to my chest.

"Two," my sister said, the fire of battle-madness flickering in her eyes as she gathered the other half.

"Three!"

With high yells that shattered the frozen air we launched ourselves over the lip of our rampart and thundered towards the opposing fortress. The enemy was visible beyond their defences, wide-eyed and beginning to be furious—they hadn't expected our charge. Still howling ferally, we began to pelt them wildly with the last of our snowballs even as they shrieked in outrage and eventually—half buried and blinking snow out of their faces—cried out their surrender.

Panting and flushed with victory, my sister and I high-fived each other as our brothers groaned dramatically and flopped over onto their backs, defeated.

## The Bargain

My mother told me, when I went to see the witch, not to give more than myself. She told me to have patience, that when the time was right, I would have a child. **Patience is not something I'm known for**, and yet I waited a year, then two, and then three, until seven had passed since my wedding day and still I bore no heir.

My husband, it was whispered, would turn from me, *should* turn from me. The thanedom needed an heir, and no matter how much he loved me, the thane would find another who's womb was not so barren as mine.

I went to the witch alone. I told my attendants I wished to ride, and then I lost them in the wood, for my mare is as fleet-footed as a doe, and goes where I will her. The witch was not there when I arrived. I stared at her hut, cold and empty and long abandoned, and fought to keep a wail at bay, pressing my face into Fiadh's side until the urge subsided. Fate had cursed me, and all my hope withered.

I turned to go, and as I did, the air before me shimmered, and a small figure appeared. He looked like an old man, shrunken and bent, except that his eyes were green as grass and bright as gems, youthful as a babe's.

I dropped a curtsey, because my mother also taught me how to deal with fae.

"You want something," said the being, eyes glinting up at me.

I nodded, too overcome to speak.

"It will cost you."

"What is the cost?" I asked, tremulous.

The man-who-was-not-a-man smiles and showed teeth pearlescent and sharp as little knives.

"The heart of the thane," was his reply.

My mother's warning rang in my head. **You can't give more than yourself.** So I said, "I thank you, fair one, but his heart is not mine to give."

"Isn't it?" asked the creature, but he didn't seem offended and only smiled wider. This did nothing to put me at ease. "No matter. Well then, what of the love of your child?"

Fury and anguish nearly overcame me, so I bit my tongue lest I said something foolish and damning. "Love is not mine to command," I said.

"Well done," said the creature, amused and pleased and cruel. "Well played. Well then, and this is my final offer."

I waited with bated breath.

"I will bless you with a child as beautiful as the sun and another as gentle as the moon, for the twin lights of both your eyes."

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Fiadh brought me home without my guidance. My maids cried out in horror at the sight of me, and my husband wept, but I smiled even as the blood streamed down my cheeks. I would never see them, but what did that signify, when I would hold my children in my arms and love them with all my heart?

## The Storm

It's almost cozy. The thick fall of the snow outside, blinding, silent flurries muffling the world. The cabin, a tiny, one room shed with an old-fashioned wood burning stove and the hand-woven rug spread in front of it. The flames crackling merrily, in cadence with the rhythm of their breaths.

It's almost cozy—except for how cold, wet, lost, and tired they are, how unnerved. They had begun their hike on a charming spring day, new buds on the branches, green grass poking their heads through the warming soil, the sun's rays filtering down from a blue sky devoid of clouds. Hannah had been wearing leggings and a moisture-wicking, long sleeved shirt and worrying about sunburn. Davey had been wearing hiking pants, his old university t-shirt and a baseball cap he'd stolen from his dad.

The clouds had come in gradually, filmy streaks through the sky that gradually grew in weight and mass, but they'd hardly noticed. Not until they'd crested a hill that promised a brilliant view and come to the top and gasped—at the sight and also at the sudden drop in temperature. The sky had been by then a gunmetal grey.

Davey had said they'd better head back. Hannah had agreed. The first snow had fallen as they'd made their descent.

"Just the last of winter," Davey had said.

Within half an hour the snow was falling thick and fast and they'd gotten all turned around in their panic, the trail gone unfamiliar and slippery. The cabin had been a godsend. They'd stumbled into it shivering and half-frozen and soaked through, and more than a little

freaked out. It was barren and empty and long abandoned, sure. But they'd seen the stove, the stack of wood in the corner, the solid, leak-free roof, and been relieved.

They curled up together on the rug, stripped of most of their clothes, and hoped the storm would end soon. Their phones were both useless—there wasn't any signal out here. They had no food—their picnic was waiting for them in the car.

As though sensing the train of her thoughts, Davey said, "**I could really eat something** right about now."

But they'd finished the trail mix, fruit, and beef jerky they'd brought along for the hike. All they had left was a bottle of Gatorade and half a bottle of water and some crackers. Hannah offered them, but Davey wrinkled his nose.

"It'll just make me thirsty, and then I'll have to pee, and no way am I going out in *that*." He pointed out the single window, where the world was a wash of white static, sighed, and drew her closer with an arm around her waist.

"At least we're warm," Hannah ventured to say.

Davey smiled, pressed a kiss to her forehead. "**You keep me warm,**" was all he said.

"Dork."

"You love me."

"Yeah, I do."

Outside, the strange snow continued to fall and fall and fall. They huddled together, feeding their little fire, and hoped the storm would end before they ran out of fuel, got too hungry for words, or further calamity struck. And they hoped that when it did, the world would still be the familiar place it had been before the snow came.

It wouldn't be, but they had no way of knowing that.



## The Orb-Weaver

*author's note: i've added this snippet to my mythology collection A Net of Stars, Woven but it was originally part of October Odds*

She should have realized, that night, when he asked her. They had been sitting a little apart from the others and their campfires and their laughter and songs and merrymaking, the sky dark and wide and spangled with many-storied stars, and she had never felt more alive, more vibrant.

"Can you wait for me?" he'd asked, his eyes flame-bright. "Could you, if you had to? Would you?"

He had been uncharacteristically grave then, much more like the Theseus of the labyrinth, the Theseus doomed to death and afraid and trying not to be, the Theseus she had first seen and loved and mourned, all the glow of victory, triumph, and escape smothered, for the moment.

She should have realized what he'd meant, but she hadn't, had only laughed and kissed him and felt secure with his strong arms about her. She had only said, "Of course, my hero, of course I would."

And she had fallen asleep, in a cradle of sand and his cloak over her, exultant and revelling in her freedom and her love, and woken up—

Alone.

Trapped.

*Forsaken.*

There had been no sign of his having been there with the fourteen damned youths and maidens and sailors and traitors, as though Theseus had been an apparition, and like her mother before her, Ariadne woke from a dream to a reality worse than any nightmare.

As though she were cursed by the Fates for her betrayal of her father, for the murder of her monster half-brother, to taste freedom only to have it torn away. Only to leave her suffering and utterly alone, lamenting the cruel whims of fortune, the falseness of men's hearts, and the malediction of her bloodline.

And lament she did, wandering the isle like a wraith, her eyes turned ever upon the horizon for sails that never appeared. Nothing but the gulls returned her forlorn calls, until she

began almost to forget the sound of human voices, and became drowned in the crash and sigh of the surf and the mocking laughter of the birds and the furious howl of the winds at night, and all her hope dwindled and turned to utter despair.

*Can you wait for me*, he'd asked, and her answer now was *no, I cannot, no, do not ask this of me, no, please come back, no, I cannot bear it, no no no*.

Ariadne lost herself, but it was then that she was found.

Not by Theseus, betrayer and deserter, but by another. He appeared as a man but he was not of mortal kind, for he was beautiful and terrible in his beauty, the colour of him so rich it caused all else to appear faded before his glory, his form so striking as to cause all else to appear indistinct.

And his voice, when he spoke, was the voice of those crying out in ecstasy and madness and love in shadows deep, a voice that seemed to her ears to have the undercurrents of raucous laughter and the baying of hounds upon the hunt, of exultant sighs and oaths unbroken and damning and true, for all that they promised calamity and blood and glory, glory, glory.

"Enough," he said, soft and sweet, though his words seemed to pierce her very spirit and shear away the veil of misery that had ensnared her.

"Enough," he said again, "Orb-weaver, labyrinth-breaker, I have heard enough. Your sorrow is such that would make stone weep. Cry out no longer, sweet one, lost one. You are not alone."

And she looked into his eyes and thought them dark and devouring and ruinous, and thought also that she was already devoured and ruined and eaten up by all her pain, and could not be afraid, though she knew she should be.

And he smiled at her as though he knew her thoughts, and his smile was as sweet as honey and intoxicating as wine and so mournful that she thought her heart would break twice over at the sight of it, and he held out his hand to her.

"Enough," he said, "You need wait no longer. Will you come with me, sweetheart, and find solace with me? Will you come with me, clever daughter of a foolish king, and be held by me? Loved by me?"

And she said *yes, I will, and yes, I am yours, and yes, I am with you*.

## The Jabberwock

*"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"*

- Lewis Carroll

The Tumtum tree was a vision of orange and palest green, her boughs waving in the playful wind. I stood beneath it with my hand on her warm bark and wondered when I would next stand in this place, watching the sunset over the farm that had been my family's home for generations. As soon as the first star began to shine in the dusk I would leave—and more than likely never return.

"Papa!"

I half-expected the voice that called out for me, but still sighed as I turned. My son half-walked, half-ran toward me. His mother stood in the doorway, clutching the lintel in a white-knuckled grip, but didn't stop him, and didn't follow.

"Papa!" he called again, "You can't—why would you—don't go!"

He crashed into me and I held him tight for a long few minutes before I pushed him gently back. "I have to," I said, even as his eyes watered and his mouth wobbled, though he bravely tried to hold the tears back. "The vorpal sword is mine, and I must wield it. Besides," I smiled, and thumbed a stray tear off his cheek. **"I'm doing this for you."**

"But it's the *Jabberwock*, Papa. No one ever survives—no one ever comes back."

I couldn't tell him I knew that, and I couldn't tell him I'd accepted it as soon as I'd heard the Jabberwock had risen again. Our family may be farmers, but the vorpal sword is tied to us, and we are the only ones who can fight and subdue the monster before it can rampage across Wonderland.

We almost always fall in the battle, but never without leaving an heir behind. And it doesn't happen every generation—just often enough that we never allow ourselves to forget the doom of our bloodline.

I don't tell my son any of this. Instead, I squeeze his shoulder, and I say, "**I'm with you, you know that.** Always and forever. My blood runs through your veins. You'll always have me."

My son rubs roughly at his face, looks down at his feet, and then at the sword hanging at my belt. "Aren't you...aren't you scared?"

"**Scared? Me?**" I joke, but my smile slides away at his grim expression. "A little," I confess. "But I'm more scared of what'll happen—to you, your mother, our land—if I don't do this. I wouldn't be able to face myself afterwards. It's important. You understand?"

He nods, reluctantly, and I pull him into another hug. "I love you," I tell him, and he clutches just that much tighter at me. "I love you so much. But it's time for me to go."