

QUEERNESS AND MONTROSITY: A SHORT STORY
COLLECTION

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Creative Writing
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2025

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Emily Kavanagh for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Creative Writing to be taken June 2025

Title: Queerness and Monstrosity: A Short Story Collection

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In my collection, I aim to utilize the rich canon of gothic storytelling and its deep connections with queer themes to help create my own set of three short stories. In these stories, I will have a variety of characters, both queer and ‘monstrous,’ navigating different times, places, and dilemmas. As the character Lestat said in Interview with the Vampire, “evil is a point of view.” What one person finds off putting or grotesque, another might find beautiful and compelling, or a mix of both. Being a vampire, having magical powers, or being inhuman can be an apt metaphor for the queer experience of being treated like an outsider in society. From the start of my writing journey, I was pulled in by the idea of what the experience of being seen as ‘other’ is like. I began writing short stories when I was thirteen and in the midst of discovering my own sexuality and personal expression. Writing then became a way for me to explore my feelings and ideas in a safe and creative space. In the stories I wrote for this collection, I used my continuous passion for fiction writing to create these new stories and plots. It was an exciting undertaking, allowing me to try out new ideas and build off older ones.

Acknowledgments

Without the encouragement and support of my family and friends, completing this project would have been a thousand times harder. Additionally, I want to thank all the faculty and instructors I've worked with or taken classes within the Creative Writing department, who have encouraged me to continue writing fiction.

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Creative Statement

Throughout the tradition of Gothic literature and the writing inspired by it, queer and homoerotic themes are pervasive. The struggles for acceptance that many gothic characters face is analogous to the stresses and hardships of navigating a queer existence in a heteronormative world. Writers and artists can use the tenets of Gothicism to examine how their desires are interpreted by society and how it makes them feel. Being seen as a predator for simply being who you are is hurtful, but at the same time, monsters are powerful. Taking back that power is a big reason why queerness and monstrosity's connectedness in culture interests me so much. Reclamation can be the start to greater acceptance, both internally and by society at large.

Interview With The Vampire, *Carmilla*, *Dracula*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are pivotal to understanding both my inspirations and the landscape of the genre in general. Each of these novels contains captivating characters, queerness, obsession, and darkness in equal measure. I find the confluence of these themes essential; the characters' queer feelings often manifest as obsession, whether one-sided or mutual. Though these characters do many monstrous things, they are also beautiful, both in visage and how they speak. Even as Dorian Gray's portrait becomes horrifying, he's able to dodge guilt almost until the very end using his angelic looks. Carmilla is enchanting to everyone who looks at her, making them forget what she could be capable of. These characters, who are enigmatic and alluring, have captured my imagination. Being queer can feel oppressive but also freeing. Expanding on this existing canon, I explore the complexities of these feelings.

Inspiration has often been and continues to be the main catalyst of creating my own prose. To begin the process of story writing and push past simply being a consumer of other works, I take a number of steps. Firstly, I think over the themes, characterization, and written

style of the books that I'm impacted by. What stuck out to me the most? What made me think about the world in a way that was different from before? For example, something about *Interview With The Vampire* that I often come back to is how the main character Louis tries to analyze what exactly evil can look like, as well as his feelings of being an outcast, both of which are tied to his vampirism and implied gay identity.

Then, I think about ways to plug themes like these into my own creative domain. I consider my own repertoire of characters, as well as ideas for potential new ones, and get to work on constructing a coherent narrative. The act of constructing a narrative for a story is usually not a linear process for me. I start by considering a setting that pulls me in, where my character(s) fit within it, what the most climatic moments/beats could be, or even a line of dialogue. The best way for me to maintain a fruitful creative output is to write every day. Even if it's just a few sentences, it keeps ideas present in my mind. Another way to stay motivated is to journal by hand. Sometimes I write my prose this way, but I can also write notes on plot ideas, character details, and relevant research.

I have to take care of myself to be the best writer I can. When I encounter writer's block, I can't fight fire with fire. I have to focus my attention somewhere else or talk through the plot or characterization with someone else to figure out what I'm stuck on. Sticking points are often not obvious, especially if a writer has been toiling over the same draft for a long time.

This collection is the summation of a year of creative work and planning. By melding the qualities of queer and Gothic literature, I want to show that monsters and outcasts are never as simple as they seem. They are made of stories and adventures.

Iconoclasm By Another Name

They were everywhere. The damn fiends. Ebrah could see the members of her team spread throughout the barren concrete room, fighting off the vampires as fast as they could. From her casing a few nights before, she had gathered the den was large, seeing how many were coming at them was still a shock. Vampires didn't usually congregate in such large numbers. This was out of common sense for things like competition and risk of exposure. But this bunch were young, brutish, and stupid.

She cleaved her dagger into the chest of a vampire with ratty black hair. He screeched in pain, baring his fangs. His noxious blood spurted out, splattering onto her hands. She pulled the blade out, which made him scream again. After a few seconds, he collapsed onto the floor. He would die; losing a large amount of blood never went well for a vampire.

She whipped around, detecting another presence behind her. It was a bleach blonde woman, dried blood from her most recent kill still caked on her face. She swiped her arm towards Ebrah, but she dodged it. Ebrah used her dagger, still bloody, to cut at the blonde. The vampire's initial clumsiness wore off, and she managed to avoid all of Ebrah's cuts at her. Ebrah grit her teeth. She didn't have enough patience for a game of cat and mouse. Luckily, she had another card up her sleeve. One weapon was never enough for her, for numerous reasons: it could be lost, become unusable, or not sufficient for the threats she faced. That night, it was the latter.

Unbeknownst to both the vampires and her colleagues, she had brought a family heirloom along with her. It was a mid-sized scimitar, its curved and sharpened edges making it extra deadly. She wasn't certain about its magical properties, but they were definitely there. Her blacksmith ancestors didn't fuck around. She didn't have much leeway to grab it; the vampire

was waiting for her to have a gap in her defense. She would have to be as quick. After all, it was such moments of precision she had trained for. She reached her hand back and ducked. In a flash, she held the large blade in front of her, feet once again firmly planted on the ground.

The vampire's eyes widened in shock, then she snarled. Lured in effortlessly, just as Ebrah had predicted. Despite the small distance between them, the vampire charged at her, arms outstretched. Her nails were sharpened into points; other than her fangs, that was the only weapon she deemed necessary. For her unfortunate victims, that was likely all it took to die an agonizing death. The vampire wanted to knock Ebrah off balance, which would make her drop the scimitar, and in turn, become an easy kill. Against the average and helpless human, that was a decent enough strategy. Ebrah was neither. She didn't have the same advantage of speed as the vampire's kind did, but her precision usually filled in the gaps.

The vampire shot forward with superhuman momentum. Ebrah had been anticipating that too. Instead of stepping back, she surged forward too, swinging the scimitar in a tight circle. It skewered the vampire right in the abdomen. She tried to fight her way off of it, but Ebrah twisted the blade, making her drop to her knees. Ebrah loomed over her, an angel of death. Charmed silver in that quantity was unsurvivable for any vampire that wasn't an ancient. Even then, who knew? Her family was rarely in the business of experimenting. They just knew the hard limits of vampirism.

Impatiently, she waited as the blood and life drained from the vampire. She wanted to finish the raid, and more importantly, strike that den off her list. There were many more she had to deal with, or at least document. Finding the active ones was a game of whack-a-mole, but essential. Dens always created epicenters of violence too obvious to the human populations around them. If people kept going missing and the goings on were strange enough, people acted.

In past eras, those in a village or town didn't hesitate to take up pitchforks and torches, but her crew were far more trained for such things.

After fits of writhing and seizing, the vampire slumped over, dead, her skin becoming an even more appalling shade of white and gray. Ebrah breathed a brief sigh of relief, then looked around the rest of the dilapidated room. Before all industry had left the town, the place was a warehouse or factory floor. Her team was winning out. The remaining vampires were either trying to flee or being cornered. She decided to help out Aisha, who was fighting a vampire at foot taller than her. Ebrah swiped at his back, surprising him. Together, the two took him down within a minute.

"Thanks," Aisha said, a piece of her braid loose across her cheek.

"Of course."

They both surveyed the room again.

Aisha wiped her free hand on her pants. "I guess we're almost done here."

"Looks like it," Ebrah said.

They watched as Naseem, Ebrah's younger brother and Aisha's husband, loaded his crossbow. He squinted one eye, finding his aim. Then, he pressed his finger on the trigger. A volley of arrows rushed through the air in a blur, piercing through the chests and hearts of the few remaining vampires. They all fell to his knees, clutching their hands over the wounds.

"His aim is perfect, as always," Aisha said, smiling.

The others began to gather with them as activity slowed. If one or two vampires had escaped their clutches, so be it. Most of them were taken care of, which was what mattered. The rats always scurried away from a sinking ship. With a look of finality on Ebrah's face, the group decided to leave.

As was customary, Naseem uncapped a canister of gas and poured it over the bodies and floor. Once he was done, Ebrah took out her lighter. She made sure all of the team were beside her, ready to run out. Then, she sparked it and threw it on the ground. The tongue of fire grew by the second, a putrid stench filling the air. They all ran out, almost in a line. The process was ingrained; it was a routine they rarely strayed from.

Outside, the night was as dreary as ever. The grey clouds hung low, an icy breeze not far behind. Typical English weather, but it still made her glum. It was no wonder they had tried to invade nearly the entire world to escape it. The simplification was so stupid it made her laugh to herself. She took a deep breath, then coughed. They weren't far away enough from the acrid smoke. The group kept walking. They made for an odd sight in their sweated-through black clothing. In a dark alleyway, they gathered to clean their weapons and hands with rags stuffed in their pockets and at the bottoms of bags. Ebrah held her flashlight with her teeth, wanting to spend no more time in the gutted, vacant district. They all tossed the soaked rags in a nearby dumpster, hoping that they were disguised among the piled-up trash bags.

They kept walking along the crumbling sidewalk, chunks missing and cracks running through. Since the area was empty, most of them went into the street instead.

Naseem clapped Ebrah's shoulder, which made her roll her eyes.

"What now, big boss?" he said, grinning, which revealed the chip in one of his front teeth. Not from any sort of fight, but from tripping on his face when he was eleven. He enjoyed making up fanciful stories about how it had happened.

"I don't know. A pint?" she answered. She knew it would give them all the relief they needed, even though the idea wasn't very appealing to her.

The rest of the group laughed.

“A shower first,” Aisha said, side-eying Naseem.

Ebrah nodded. “Let’s get back to the hotel, then we can reconvene in an hour.”

“Yes,” Naseem said with a solemn nod, “we must prepare for our important dealings at the bar.”

“If you aren’t quick enough, I’ll have you under the table in less than an hour,” said her cousin Dinesh, emerging from the back of the group.

“You’re on!” Naseem said, pumping his fist in the air.

Before every expedition, Dinesh was always quiet, focused on the task at hand. But after, there was no telling what he would get up to. He was always the ringleader of whatever celebrations or hijinks followed. She wished she shared his enthusiasm. She found no excitement in the cycle, just a sense of inescapable duty.

Aisha noticed her dour expression, smiling in sympathy. “Don’t mind them. If you need to rest, do it.”

Ebrah sighed. “You’re right. Maybe I’ll come out for one drink and let them carry on after that.”

“A wise choice,” Aisha said. “We can walk back together then.”

“Sure, let’s do it,” she said, grateful to have her reasonable presence.

Naseem and Aisha met in his last year of secondary school. It was a miracle he’d gotten there at all; his rap sheet of poor grades and bad behavior spoke for itself. Marking the boundary between his daytime life and family obligations wasn’t easy and he took it out on everyone, unknowing teachers and classmates included. Ebrah understood this anger deeply, but envied that he was able to express it so freely. She had to keep it in, be the golden girl whose example everyone else was supposed to follow. There was something about Aisha’s presence that had

always calmed him, however. She listened to him, knowing he was more than a misguided brute. It all happened fast between them. Within a few months, she knew the truth about the family, and she had an engagement ring on her finger.

With all the traditional trappings, the wedding was spectacular. Ebrah had loathed putting on such a long and colorful dress, the jewelry, and the henna but enjoyed the celebration itself. It was rare for her to see her family so happy and cohesive. The spell had broken soon after the festivities, but she still remembered the whole event fondly. She doubted she would ever get such a moment of her love being celebrated. She rarely told anyone in her family about the women she dated. Naseem used to ask her in a nosy brother kind of way, but noticed it got under her skin too much.

Having any kind of relationship wasn't easy when she couldn't tell the truth about anything. Lies about what her work was, why she traveled so frequently, and what her family did. She was growing close to giving up entirely on finding a match.

She tuned back in to the people around her. Everyone agreed to stop by their hotel first so that everyone could change and shower. As they arrived in the small, run-down lobby, she knew she was done socializing for the night. A bleary-eyed woman was at the front desk, startled by the entrance of the lively group. To any that asked, they said they were on a family hiking trip. It explained the large and heavy bags of "equipment," their propensity for athletic style clothing, and nighttime departures and arrivals. Not that people cared much anyway; they kept themselves clear of trouble with other humans.

As Ebrah was about to go upstairs, she heard sirens racing by. She hoped the fire didn't get out of control, only destroying one warehouse and what lay inside. She exchanged a look with Aisha, who spotted Ebrah's attempt to slip away unnoticed. Aisha smiled but let her go.

Ebrah used the last of her energy to walk upstairs and navigate the beige hallway. It felt infinite as she walked all the way to the end. After unlocking her door, she had a reprieve from the fluorescent lights. She turned on one of the bedside lamps and left it at that. She took off her sweaty and bloodied clothes, grabbing her towel from the back of the desk chair. She showered, but it was a brief one, because more than anything else, she wanted to lie down.

After drying off and changing, she lay back on the bed. However, her mind was still racing. She just wanted a few days of peace and rest. As she wished for that, she knew it would only make her feel uneasy. She closed her eyes, hoping to sleep, but her stomach started to rumble. She groaned, knowing that the snacks in the room wouldn't suffice. She needed a full meal. What kinds of places would even be open in such a dead-end town? There was one obvious answer — not a bad one. The truth was, she wanted kebab and chips badly. She remembered seeing a kebab shop a few blocks away, the plan setting in her mind. Going alone wasn't ideal, but she decided it was worth whatever small risk it came with.

She put on a fresh pair of jeans and made sure she had everything she needed: her wallet, keys, and a knife tucked away in her jacket pocket. She could never be too careful. Her walk down through the hotel and onto the street was utterly quiet. A few cars went by, but everything on the street was dark. There was no need to wait for the signal to cross with such empty surroundings. As she made her way, her pace leisurely, she spotted a lit-up storefront. One man was behind the counter, leaning on it and staring at the wall his bored expression making it obvious he was counting down until his shift was over. He was no older than 25 and had a short beard. When she came in, he gave her a nod. She looked over the menu, full of numbered combinations and deals. She decided on the one with a basic kebab and chips — no soda.

“Can I get the number three please?”

“Sure,” he said, typing the total into the register. “I need to make a fresh batch of chips, you mind waiting a few minutes?”

“No, that’s fine.” She took out her wallet, handing him a five-pound note.

He gave her the change and receipt, turning his attention to the fryer. She sat at one of the tables, noticing a family picture on the wall. A lively, big immigrant family, likely taken on a trip back home. She remembered being corralled into similar pictures in her childhood. She picked out the man behind the counter in it, who looked to be one of several sons. His family must have been happy about that. Even when telling the story of her birth back to her, it was hard for her parents to hide the disappointment of having their first child be a daughter. Luckily for them, Naseem came next.

She and her brother were both considered for taking her father’s role at the head of the family, but Ebrah’s unwavering commitment guaranteed it as hers. Once she had truly wanted it, in an effort to please her father, but now it was just duty. Without her at the helm, she doubted their mission would be able to persevere long term. She knew generations of her ancestors before her had made the same choice: sacrificing a life of their own to continue what the family had started. What was her life in the grand scheme of holding back the tide of immortal monsters? She wasn’t going to be the first woman to lead the family either. It ‘wasn’t preferred’ as her father told her, but it happened often enough.

The soles of her shoes were sticking to the grimy tile floor. Based on how good the food smelled, she knew she wouldn’t be let down, but the shop itself had seen better days. The tables were scratched and battered from wear and tear and the antics of liquored-up customers. The chairs were holding onto dear life too; the ends of the legs eroded to unstable nubs. All of that and more was laid bare by the bright, harsh lighting. The bell over the door clanged, a group of

four men walking in. They chatted amongst themselves, not looking her way. Still, she kept an eye on them. Groups of drunk men were never to be trusted. The man behind the counter perked up when he saw them. All old schoolmates, it seemed. Before taking all of their orders, he finished bagging up Ebrah's food, bringing it out to where she was sitting.

"Cheers," she said.

She could feel the steam rising from the hot food. Her pace back to the hotel was going to be much faster.

"Have a good night," he said, going back to the group of lads.

As they bantered with each other, she slipped back outside. The air had taken on a more pronounced chill. She hoped rain wasn't going to follow. English weather was too miserable for her tastes. She couldn't wait to get out of the blasted country again, either to continental Europe or back to Pakistan. Being in England always wore on her, reminding her of the pieces of her childhood she would rather forget. She checked her watch, seeing it was almost one in the morning. As always, she was going to have to wake up early, call her father, and make sure everyone was ready to leave. It was never wise to linger in a town after clearing out a den, both because of possible scrutiny from local authorities, or even encounters with disgruntled vampires who had escaped. She didn't know what else there was to do in such a deadened town anyway. Even if they were hikers, only one trail looked any good. All the decent natural areas were gobbled up by the private estates right outside of the city limits. After all, the rich and titled always ate first.

She put her free hand in her pocket, the food emanating enough warmth to keep her other hand comfortable. As she looked at the mixture of modern blocky buildings and older, more stately ones, she grew more tired. She had been to so many places that looked exactly like it:

towns with nothing to offer and with abandoned buildings ripe for the taking. It was always a recipe for infestation. She wished the cycle would end, that the patterns she had been taught could be left behind for something else. The unceasing role of her family through the centuries proved otherwise.

She paused her train of thought. A sudden shiver ran up her spine, and she stood still. It wasn't from her hunger or the cold. There were footsteps perfectly in time with hers. A new bending of the light and shadows. She had cultivated strong instincts on knowing her surroundings; she knew was being watched. When she turned around, the street was empty. Not surprising — whoever it was wasn't human. Whether they knew it or not, all people had the ability to sense a predator circling. But she had never felt so clearly that she was the prey. This alarmed her. So many vampires had come her way, but this one was distinct. A power that ran far deeper than the run-of-the-mill ones she cleared out of hovels around the world.

She decided to keep walking but knew she wouldn't get to the hotel unbothered. The severity of the situation pressed down on her. She was alone, none of the others knew where she was, and she was outmatched. She gripped onto her dagger, knowing it could be one of her last acts. Whatever happened, she wasn't going to go down without a fight. She planted her feet, choosing a street corner for the confrontation. Was she going to be a sitting duck, waiting there for her untimely end? She took a deep breath, looking around again, trying to comb every detail in the relative darkness. Finally, she snagged something. The tip of a shoe from behind the closest building. Deliberate, surely. She crossed her arms and cleared her throat, pushing down her fear.

The shoe gave way to a leg. A woman, not much taller than her, emerged. She smiled, her blue eyes flashing in the darkness. Her blonde hair was in a simple braid, and she wore a sweater

and jeans. Her appearance was deceiving. She didn't need to dress or carry herself in a flashy way; her presence spoke for itself. It was suffocating, a hand around her neck. Her heartbeat kept rising, something she wished she could prevent. Her body's natural instincts would be her downfall.

"Who are you?" Ebrah asked, keeping her delivery terse.

"An interested observer," the woman said, in a European accent she struggled to identify. German, Dutch perhaps? She looked around 40, but her real age certainly dwarfed that.

Ebrah looked her right in the eyes. "Of what kind?"

"An affected party," she said, flashing a grin.

It was quick, but enough for Ebrah to spot fangs. Her knuckles were white from gripping the knife. Adrenaline coursed through her, one benefit from her current state.

"No need for that," the vampire said, glancing at the handle, which was now sticking out.

"You have a name?" Ebrah asked. Her shaking fingers had almost let go of the to-go bag completely. Such a small thing no longer registered in her mind.

She smiled, the hard look in her eyes unchanged. "I go by Wolf."

Ebrah knew that name. Her father had made her memorize it in a list. One of the ancients, a thousand years or older. There weren't many out there. They weathered the centuries and millennia, blending into shadows and hiding in plain sight. What had her father said about them? Turn tail and run. He rarely spoke so plainly. Too late for that. They were apex predators, experts at turning any human into their prey. Few people could recognize their true strength, but up close, they were always uncanny. At first glance, Wolf was a woman in her early 40s, but her skin was marble-like, hair impossibly smooth, and pale blue eyes shining from no light source. If she could withstand the ravages of the world for so long, very little ever got in her way.

As Wolf continued to say and do nothing, Ebrah grew confused. She didn't understand the point of their staring contest. Was Wolf sizing her up for something? Her body was buzzing, but her mind couldn't stay in one place during such a stalemate.

Her hand hovered over her father's handwritten list of names. They sat in their old living room in Karachi, in the flat they shared with her aunt and cousins. The clock in the corner took up all the silence, its ticking underscoring many tense moments in the household. The ceiling fan was also going, doing little against the cloying heat.

"But these ones don't kill us, do they?"

He shook his head, his dark beard still free from any gray. "They find us and our mission amusing."

"Then, what do they do?" She fiddled with the tight braids her mother had put her hair in.

"Nothing, mostly. Sometimes, they treat us as their servants."

She giggled. "What?"

"I know, it's strange," he said, cracking the barest of a smile. "They respect us just enough for that."

"So, what can I do for you?" Ebrah asked, hoping her question hit the ark.

"You've already done what I needed," Wolf said with a wink.

A lackey, not prey. She thanked her lucky stars, but that gesture was the most unsettling yet. It made Wolf look far more human than she was. Worst yet, it made Ebrah consider that there was joy and humor within such a formidable creature.

"Which is?" Ebrah said.

"You clear out the vermin," she said, shrugging. "Makes my life easier, I'll tell you that."

“Oh,” Ebrah said, eyebrows scrunching in confusion. “That is...my job.”

“I know. I was nearby, and it didn’t look like anyone else was going to come in time to deal with this, so it usually falls to me,” Wolf said, putting her hand in her pockets. “One of the pitfalls of being my age.”

“That must be so terrible for you,” Ebrah said, unable to hold back her disdain.

Wolf laughed, which softened her face. “You have a quicker tongue than your predecessors.”

“I don’t bother with polite words when they’re not necessary,” Ebrah said, beginning to tap her foot.

“Fiery too,” she said, still smiling, though it no longer went to her eyes.

Ebrah took a step back, overwhelmed by the intensity of Wolf’s gaze. She was trying to do something, but she wanted nothing to do with it.

“I’ve met a few generations of your family,” she said, eyes passing over Ebrah again. “You’re a fascinating bunch.”

Ebrah grimaced. She was being studied like a specimen under a microscope. “Interesting enough to stalk in the middle of the night?”

“It’s better than what you were dealing with earlier tonight, no?” Wolf’s tone was softer, more patronizing.

“That’s a low bar,” Ebrah said, forcing a smile. “Any other burning questions for me? I’d like to be on my way.”

“Of course,” Wolf said, unable to hide her disappointment. She was used to everyone conforming to exactly what she wanted, either out of fear or admiration. “I was only curious to meet you face to face.”

Ebrah didn't want to know why but had a feeling Wolf would tell her anyway. Her long life had clearly made her nosy and often bored. Trying to think of anything else, Ebrah silently lamented how cold her food was. If she had known going out for it would bring so much trouble, she would have gone to sleep hungry. Cold chips were one of the worst things in the world.

"I met your father, back when he was around your age, during an awfully bad scrum in Kolkata that I aided with," Wolf said, smirking. "You do resemble him."

"I know."

"It's the eyes and the firm jaw, I think," she said, taking the opportunity to look over Ebrah even more closely.

She was like a shark examining a particularly appetizing fish, ready to reach out and snatch it at any moment. Wolf could try to be enticing and charming as she wanted, but all Ebrah saw in her was the death she wrought.

"You mustn't fear me — too much, anyway," Wolf said, winking again. "If you're ever curious to hear more about the history of your family or anything else, do let me know."

Ebrah grimaced. A thousand-year-old vampire was making a pass at her. All she had done in life, and this is what she was given. She hadn't been prepared for anything like this. Only combat and other bloody business. Did Wolf flirt with everyone, or was she going out of her way with her? What a horrible thought. Her father had never mentioned meeting her but alluded to ancients in general. He was guarded like that. In his daily life, he was far more serious than Ebrah. The untold things he saw made for quite the gulf between him and everyone else.

"It's remarkable what you do," Wolf said, carrying on when Ebrah gave her no answer. "It's such a burden for mortals to carry."

"Someone needs to do it," Ebrah answered.

Wolf looked unconvinced. She didn't need to read Ebrah's mind to sense her doubt. She liked to pick people apart, finding vulnerabilities to expose. She absorbed the lives of others like a sponge. Ebrah was just the latest quarry. All of Wolf's compliments had a sharp edge to them. Ebrah didn't want to run up against it, giving into the provocation. But she was caught there, peering into the maw of a great beast.

"You've never met one as old as me, have you?" Wolf said, trying to hold back her pride.

Ebrah shook her head, then regretted it. Showing all her hand, just like that. But Wolf knew her answer before she'd given it.

"We're a peculiar bunch, as you might imagine. Usually, there's no need to get in your way, but I have a penchant for sticking my nose in places I really shouldn't," she said.

"Really? I never would have guessed," Ebrah replied.

Wolf burst into laughter, the sound ricocheting off of their bare surroundings. It was loud, too loud, but Ebrah didn't know if it was her own annoyance that made her feel that way or there was a real supernatural cause. With Wolf's face in motion, Ebrah could see true smile lines and wrinkles appear, vestiges from her far away mortal past. No vampire had ever tried to be so friendly with her. Any peace she shared with them was always temporary and conditional. But Wolf operated on a different system, only dependent on her own entertainment.

"You're good," Wolf said, still chuckling. "I didn't know your father had it in him to raise someone clever."

"You should be thanking my mum and grandma, not him," Ebrah said.

"Ah, yes, I see," Wolf glanced towards the night sky. "All of my children took more after their father."

“Really?” Ebrah said, surprised to hear her admit such an intimate life detail. What had she been like as a mother, or a human?

“Don’t look so surprised,” Wolf scoffed. “Many of us live full lives before we are given the blood.”

Ebrah put her hands up, not wanting things to get confrontational. It was hard for her to see them as anything like her. Most vampires wanted to be as far as possible from such an image. Being nothing but former humans made them look weaker, a great affront to their intimidating reputations.

Wolf’s expression lightened up, her smirk returning. “I shouldn’t have expected a hunter to look at me in such a sensitive light. But you have been more allowing than your predecessors.”

“That’s true. I haven’t been addressing you at the tip of a spear,” Ebrah said, crossing her arms. She meant for it to be a joke, but the coldness of her tone left it more ambiguous.

“Such measures aren’t necessary in the modern world, are they?” Wolf asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Hopefully,” Ebrah said, taking a deep breath. “I’ll be going now.”

“I’m not holding you here,” Wolf said, her icy eyes laser-focused on Ebrah again.

“No,” she said. “Good night.”

“Until we meet again.”

Ebrah refused to be baited and turned away. She kept her pace slow, knowing that going any faster didn’t make a difference against Wolf’s superior speed if she wanted to use it. Ominous, mocking, and slightly amusing. That was her summation of Wolf’s farewell and her demeanor during their entire conversation. Ebrah took one look back. Wolf wasn’t following her;

she turned in the opposite direction, going back to wherever she had crawled from. The nights she occupied must have felt endless. Ebrah didn't want to feel pity for a being like her, but her existence no doubt contained untold loneliness and loss. Nothing of the world she was from remained other than her. It was a horrifying thought. Ebrah preferred the idea of a rewarding life and inevitable death.

Ebrah was finally keeping her own company, other than lights in a few windows. She wondered if her people had pulled themselves together to go out after all. If she ran into them, she wasn't sure what to say for herself. For all her skills, she still wasn't a good liar, especially with family. Telling the truth wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would go right back to her father. She could imagine him sitting her down, turning the interaction into another lecture. She wanted to make her own choices, even if they were wrong in his book. Perhaps what had happened would come back to haunt her, but she wanted to deal with it on her own terms. She was going to head the family one day, so all her sins would be answered for.

As she finally began to ease, she approached the hotel. The woman at the front desk didn't look up at her, focused on not nodding off. There was no sign of anyone else. Once up the stairs, she headed to her room, her body running on fumes. She sat on the edge of her bed, all the lingering adrenaline dulling into numbness. With so much to mull over, she wasn't going to sleep for a while. She reached into the takeout bag, eating the cold chips. It was possible Wolf would have still found her way to her even without taking her fateful trip to the shop. She knew who Ebrah was and about her future role in the family already. She shivered, wondering if Wolf had been waiting for the right moment to seek her out. She knew Ebrah wasn't going to tell her family about it. A place where they could be alone had been the key. Prey, after all.

She put her head in her hands. One part of her wanted to scour the world for information about Wolf and to discover her motivations, no matter how twisted. The other wanted to forget the run in entirely, relegating it to the recesses of her mind with everything else that dragged her away from sanity. She had no choice but to remember. Wolf's threat of seeing her again could be empty, but if it wasn't, she needed to be prepared. Were there any real ways to protect herself? As she puzzled everything over, she lay back, eye growing heavier. As the gray beginnings of dawn clawed through the curtains, she was washed away into sleep. The light of day reassured her. Safe, for now.

Ritual Paradise

Mikkel drove into the motel parking lot, cracks showing on every inch of the pavement. He found a spot under a scraggly tree and switched off the engine. He sat in silence for a few minutes. It was kicking in that he had spent the whole night driving. There wasn't any particular reason either; he had nowhere he needed to be. He knew that was exactly why. His own restlessness was surely going to be the end of him someday. Having enough of himself, he opened the door. As he stood, his stiff and sore muscles screamed at him. He pushed back his hair, which had fallen into his face. It was greasy. The last shower he'd had was at a truck stop a few days before. He hadn't laid down on something other than his backseat for even longer than that.

He walked to the main office, stepping on the weeds sprouting up wherever they could in the concrete. The office was nothing more than a small corner of the dilapidated building. There was a desk, swivel chair, and fan. The door was propped open, and the paint was peeling everywhere. The stucco ceiling was caked with dust and tar.

The balding middle-aged man sitting at the desk looked up at him. "Afternoon, what can I do for you?"

"Are there any single smoking rooms available?" he asked.

"Yeah," the man said, sliding him a piece of paper and a pen. "How many nights?"

"Three please."

"It's 25 per night. You wanna pay up front?"

That stung ever so slightly; it wasn't worth that at all. However, the location was everything.

“Sure,” Mikkel said, taking out his wallet and counting out the necessary bills. They were still crisp, but he didn’t have much left. He signed at the bottom of the paper, not bothering to read the fine print.

After taking the money, the man handed him a key. “Ice machine will be around the corner from you. Office is open until 6pm if you need anything.”

Mikkel nodded in thanks and went back to his car. He took out one of his bags, leaving the others in the trunk. He doubted anyone in such a small town would go to the trouble of breaking in. Then again, towns like that always had surprises, some of them nasty. This one was no different, he was sure. What had drawn him to it was the vast forest up the road, chock full of evergreens, rivers, and hot springs. After seeing it on a map of the west coast, he found one of the forests specifically at a rest stop. He wanted to get lost in there, finding every hidden glen and grove. It was a better alternative to the cruel, unforgiving world he found himself trapped in.

His hands shook. No. He wasn’t going to fall back into such catastrophic thinking. It was over. He had made the choice to leave Rafi behind and now he had to deal with the consequences, mostly of the heart. How selfless had the act really been? He’d condemned them both to a heartbreak neither deserved. Back to the map. There was another layer of the landscape he had been considering: ley lines. He couldn’t speak to his accuracy but felt the power buzzing around him. If he could harness it, few could stand in his way. Though, it would be like touching a live wire. Raw energy, with the equal ability to maim or electrify. He was going to make it work. He had to.

He put the key in the lock, finding it to be sticky. He jerked it around to no avail. He inhaled, focusing on the lock. He could sense the gears within it, finding the pressure points. He saw how to make them shift correctly. In a rush of air, the bolt clicked back. He smiled, but

didn't want to do that every time. It was a drain on his already limited energy. He'd go talk to the manager after having a needed shower and nap. He put his bag down on the faded duvet, making a beeline to the bathroom. The tile and grout had seen better days, but it would do. He left his clothes in a pile on the floor, finding the water pressure and temperature to be just fine. He could feel the layers of dust and grime from the road coming off, the hot water slowly undoing the knots in his arms and back. He doubted he would be leaving the room much at all while he was in town. After he toweled off, he found a clean t-shirt and boxers from his bag and promptly fell asleep. It was a blank space in time, no dreams or periods of momentary wakefulness. He was lucky when he found such peaceful sleep. It was hard to come by.

When he woke up, completely disoriented, he looked out the window. It wasn't dark yet, but the sun was far lower in the sky. Luckily, his view wasn't of the decrepit parking lot, but the trees extending behind the place. It wasn't a full-blown forest, but not bad on the eyes either. Once he listened to the silence long enough, he picked out the sound of a passing train. The tracks weren't far, carrying along an endless volley of rail cars stacked with lumber and other raw materials. The day of the great American railroad was over for passengers, but for cargo, it was all the rage. He had heard tell of people hitching rides on them, but it was a dangerous pursuit. He would have considered doing it himself if he didn't value the solitude and dependability of driving so much.

As he lay there, considering his surroundings, his stomach grumbled. He already knew his options for food were limited, but he had to bite the bullet. Besides, it was a chance to see if the town had anything to offer. He doubted it. He put on his jeans, leaving the lamp on. He knew it was going to be dark when he got back. He closed and locked the rickety door behind himself, the lock feeling less tricky to work than before. The air was still warm, but the oven-like heat had

dissipated. He swore he felt a mountain breeze too. The air was far fresher than almost anywhere else had been in the country. No doubt it was even better in the forest. Now that it was so close to his reach, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

He left behind the cracked parking lot, walking along a fissured sidewalk instead. The main street in the town was functionally a two-lane highway, not making for a pleasant stroll. It was still in better shape than some of the other small towns he had stopped in before. Other than the cars and semis speeding by, he didn't see anyone. A few cars were parked around, but that was it. The buildings weren't in much better shape. Signs were faded, awnings peeling, and curbs crumbling. The town inhabited a transitory place that most people and things only passed through. He was curious to see if he would get to know anything about the people who lived there. He assumed they and their families had been there for a long time. That was usually how the story went.

To his relief, his walk was cut short. He found a shop with its door open. Based on the sign, he wasn't sure what kind of food they had. One fan whirred, hitting the face of the woman behind the counter, her greying hair put back in a bun. As he studied the menu, which was mainly sandwiches, she took a long look at him. She found his longer hair and pierced ears to be of special interest. He knew she wouldn't be the last to be fascinated by his looks if he hung around this town much longer. As the biggest American cities surged with radicalism and self-expression, the most remote corners refused to buckle to change, if they even felt it at all.

“What can I get you?” she asked, friendly but tired.

“Um, I'll have the BLT please.”

“Anything else?”

He picked up a bag of chips from the rack under the counter.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll ring you up and get it out in a few minutes.”

“Thanks,” he said.

He admired the faded pictures and art on the wall – all themed to the town. Mostly of the forest, lakes, and rivers, but a few of large groups of men by felled trees. He turned back when she told him the total. He handed her a ten.

“So, where are you headed?” she asked, counting out his change.

“I’m gonna go camping for a few days,” he said.

“You should go to one of the hot springs,” she said, smiling. “It’s so relaxing, especially now that the weather’s getting a little cooler.”

“Thanks, I’ll have to try that.” He slipped his change into his pocket.

She started making his sandwich, so he sat at the table by the door. He watched the cars go by, wondering if there was anything else for him to do that evening besides eating his sandwich. He considered going for a drive and finding somewhere nice for the sunset. However, he wanted to take a real break from being behind the wheel. He could go one night without seeing beautiful scenery. He fiddled with his hands, knowing he needed a smoke the minute he went back outside. He had a half-empty pack in one of his pockets. Typically, he bought a new one every few days, but he had started going through them even faster. He knew why. There was little else that provided distraction from his aching heart.

He heard the woman wrapping up the sandwich and putting it in a bag for him and stood back up.

“Here you are,” she said, handing it to him over the counter. “Have a good night.”

“Thanks,” he said, then paused. “Where’s the closest grocery store around here?”

“If you want a full grocery store, you’ll have to go back up the road from here about ten miles. But there’s a corner store just down the way.” She pointed to a road just off the main one.

“Yeah, that’ll be fine,” he said. “Appreciate it.”

She gave him a nod, and he walked out. There was no urgency, but he knew he’d want more cigarettes and a cup of coffee in the morning. He doubted he would sleep much, if at all. It had been eluding him at night for some time. At least he had a sandwich now. That eased his suffering just a little. He put a cigarette behind his ear, relieved that he was able to wait at all. When he got back to the motel parking lot, he stopped by his car, trying to think if he needed anything else from the trunk. There was nothing that came to mind, so he went back to his room. He decided to leave the door cracked open since a breeze had started up.

He switched on the TV, flipping through the paltry number of channels available. He settled on a sitcom rerun, just so he had background noise. The paper crinkled as he unwrapped the sandwich. He dug right in, sauce dripping over his fingers. Within minutes, he was on his last bite. He leaned back, wiping off his hands with the too-small napkins, feeling the fullest he had been in days. As he drove from place to place, he often forgot the most basic parts of looking after himself. The line was blurred between purposeful and pure neglect. When the laughing tracks gave way to a string of ads, he turned off the TV again.

He patted his pockets, checking if he had his lighter. It was time to go back outside. He wondered if there was a park or somewhere to linger by the river at least. People did live there; the whole place couldn’t be hostile to human life. He locked the door behind him, striking out across the concrete again. He went the opposite way down the road, retrieving the cigarette, which also displaced a strand of his hair. He lit it as he inhaled the fumes from the passing cars and trucks. When he glanced down a side street, he saw glimpses of green, but they were only

trees in front of houses. He took a drag, the pull of the smoke familiar and indulgent. Having a smoke was one of the only constants in his life. Even as everything and everyone else faded away, he could rely on the newest pack of cigarettes to keep him company.

He began to hear another sound underneath the roaring of car and truck engines: music. Not from a recording or radio, but live. It was hard to pinpoint what direction it was coming from, but the scratch of electric guitar and crashing of drums were unmistakable. He doubted it was from a house, but didn't strike the idea entirely. A bar was more likely. As he kept walking, he hoped he wasn't following an echo. He kicked the loose gravel that filled in the many holes and cracks on the streets and sidewalks. Without thinking, he started his next cigarette, the process automatic. It was how he kept his hands and mind busy. Still near the main road, seeing as there wasn't much else to the town, he pinpointed where the activity was coming from. The building's squat shape meant it had to be a bar. Its washed-out orange exterior wasn't much to look at, but people were spilling out from the front and back.

He went through the parking lot, filled with pickup trucks and mud-covered SUVs, and found an open door at the back. He wove through the tight-packed crowd, trying to get to the bar counter. Though most people stayed absorbed in their conversations, some eyes looked him over. The place, divey as it was, was meant for locals. Any unfamiliar faces were picked out right away. None of that bothered him, since he'd dealt with the same situation many times before. He was used to being an outsider wherever he went. He just wanted a cold beer and to see where the night took him.

He elbowed past a middle-aged woman dressed in all denim, securing an eyeline to the dirty counter. He decided to stand instead of sitting on one of the ripped up, stained stools. The bartender was on the other side pouring several pitchers of beer. Her tanned, tattooed arms flew

through the air at an impressive speed. After collecting wads of bills and stuffing them into her apron pocket, she smiled at him.

“What can I getcha?”

“I’ll take whatever you’ve got on tap, something on the darker side,” he said over the din.

“We don’t have any imports, hun,” she said with a laugh. “You want Coors or Bud?”

He shrugged. “Pick one.”

“Sure.” She bent down to grab a clean glass and poured him a Coors.

He fished a few crumpled up bills out of his pocket. When she started to hand him back change, he waved his hand. She smiled in thanks, then whipped her head to the next person. The glass was cold to the touch. He took a big sip, ignoring the mediocre taste. He looked out at the cramped space, noticing all the tables were taken. A makeshift stage was in the corner. The band he’d heard from outside was finishing their last song to thunderous applause. The group was made up of four men with scraggly, greying beards. Mikkel knew that they were a cover band of some well-known musician but couldn’t name any of the songs. As they took away their instruments and gear, music was piped in through the speakers. People began to move around, taking the chance for fresh air, a smoke break, or a new drink.

He slipped into a spot closer to the stage, leaving him enough room to lean on the wall. Everyone mingled with each other with years of baggage already under their belt. School years, past flings, family connections, work, and everything else in between. He didn’t need to employ his mind reading to see that. He often found his telepathy to be an empty skill. Peoples’ faces and body language told enough of the story. If he used the gift to substitute real interaction, it dragged him into an uncanny state of awareness. He became so absorbed in the thoughts and

feelings of those around him that he ceased to know his own. Taken to the extreme, it made him catatonic, absent from his own body and mind. In the end, it was better to be stuck with himself.

A woman came out with a guitar case and a stool. Her long, curly hair bounced as she walked around, deciding on the best spot to set up. Her skirt had purple flowers embroidered all over it, contrasting with the yellow fabric. The blouse was plainer, but just as flattering. She stuck out from the crowd of flannels, grimy t-shirts, and blue jeans. A few people smiled and waved at her, which she returned. Even though the room was filled with faces familiar to her, that didn't quell her anxiety. He could see it in the way she twirled her hair and clenched her fingers. With her years of practice, performing in front of a crowd was still a step into the unknown.

He sipped the beer again, which was becoming warm far sooner than he liked. The heat of so many bodies pressed close together was impossible to fight against. The atmosphere was oppressive, but he wanted to see her perform. She had a spark the cover band didn't. She tapped on the microphone, adjusting it until it sat at the level of her guitar. As she picked each string, making a last check of their tuning, people began to quiet down. She smiled out at them and rolled her shoulders back. A leap of faith, but one done entirely for herself.

She held onto the microphone, leaning forward. "Hi folks. Thanks for coming out tonight. I'm, uh, Melody, if you don't know me. I'm gonna do a couple covers and a few original ones for ya. Hope you all enjoy."

A few claps bounced around the space. Then, she began strumming. He had heard that progression before. He tried to place it. All he could picture was Rafi's bedroom. The faded blue curtains obscuring the view to the parking lot, the ashtray piled with cigarettes and spliffs next to them on the bed, and most importantly Rafi himself, lying next to him, curled up and asleep. His

dark hair covered most of his face, but Mikkel could still see his dimples. The sound of the record player came from the other room, reaching the last few songs of Space Oddity. It was one of the only records Rafi owned, but he never grew tired of it. After hearing it enough times, Mikkel had memorized the order of each song. The one Melody was singing was second to last. She gave it to her own sound, but it was still unmistakably Bowie. When he and Rafi weren't busy with each other, he usually paused to listen to it. The story in the song was simple, showing off what being helpless in an unforgiving world was like. Even the smallest of sins committed by the disadvantaged never went unpunished.

God knows I'm good/ Surely God won't look the other way

He had let Rafi slip through his fingers. He could have prevented it, fought for their love, but he didn't. He let his helplessness rule him, concrete shoes dragging him into the depths of despair. When Rafi had begged to know why he was leaving him, all he could do was tell him to live an honest life, one without the burden of his evil. That wasn't just an excuse, but a bold-faced lie. They both lived on the margins, turning to crime and other shady business to keep themselves afloat. Through no faults of their own, they were both forced to live in a lion's den.

They looked different from each other on the surface: Mikkel was made of hellish stuff, never able to choose his human half over the demonic one; Rafi's nature was even more mercurial, shaped by the Fae blood of his absent father. Rafi could drain peoples' energy at will, even Mikkel's. Though different from Mikkel's powers, they could be complimentary. Rafi knew how people ticked, but Mikkel's domain was mainly with the spirit world. He saw ghosts with ease, and they liked to talk to him sometimes. He could learn a lot about a place from its dead inhabitants. Together, it could have been easier for them to live in a world that loathed them. But now, he would never know. After leaving, he had no way to contact Rafi.

Other, darker energies also flowed within Mikkel too. He never felt comfortable showing them off to people, even the rare ones who accepted him for what he was. He could move objects with his mind, make things burst into flame just from willing it, render himself invisible, even draw up things deep from the underworld. But, if he used those tricks too much, they took a toll on his body. All energy had to come from somewhere, and when doing those stunts, it was coming directly from him. Sometimes, using such tricks was necessary. If he was up against forces stronger than himself, he didn't have much choice. Other times, it staved off more trouble down the line. Bargaining was easier when the other side was scared shitless. He was used to winning out, but the cost to him could still be enormous.

He threw back the rest of the beer, trying to forget how acrid it was on his tongue. With such a meager amount of cash left, he wasn't going to spend any more on booze. He needed to reserve it for more food and cigarettes, especially if he was going to stock up before leaving. He tuned back into the performance, tired of being trapped in his own looping thoughts. Melody had moved on to some original songs, which were also well done. He wondered how long she had been playing. Having such a passion was something he couldn't relate to. His life was forever aimless; his energy was put towards preserving himself and little else. His skills in magic, though he had honed them, were not a choice. He either had to keep taming them, or face losing even more control over his life.

After she finished her last song, one more round of applause went through the room. Then, everyone resumed their conversations and topped off their drinks. They were all making a night of it and were not going to leave the bar until closing time came around. She opened her guitar case. She latched it closed once her prized possession was nestled inside. He stayed in his place on the wall, holding his empty glass for show. He didn't bother hiding his focused gaze on

her. She would either find a polite way to rebuff him, or even better, reciprocate. She slung the case over her shoulder, nodding her head at a few people, but slipping away too fast for them to trap her in a conversation.

He stood up fully as she came closer to him. She smiled at him.

“So, who are you? I don’t see many new faces around here” she said, pausing to look more closely at him. Up close, he could smell her perfume, which reminded him of incense.

“I’m Mikkel,” he said.

“Nice to meet you. I guess I don’t really need to introduce myself back,” she said with a wink. “I think I’m gonna go for a smoke outside, wanna join?”

He nodded. “Lead the way.”

They walked out the back, past the smelly, graffitied bathrooms. A few men in overalls leaned against the wall and passed a cigarette back and forth, but paid Melody and Mikkel no mind. He stared into her hazel eyes as she took out a pack of her own. He held up his lighter before she could scramble around in her bag for her own.

“Thanks,” she said, putting the cigarette to the tongue of flame.

“So, why’d you decide to come out and sing tonight?” he asked as she took the first drag.

She shrugged. “I’ve been doing it by myself for so long. I mean, in high school, I sang in choir, but that feels so distant now. I know the manager of this place, so he didn’t mind putting me on the setlist.”

“That’s nice.” He nodded in thanks when she passed the cigarette to him.

“And it’s fun singing that stuff in front of a bunch of rednecks,” she said, grinning.

“Hey, those are your people, aren’t they? Kind of a rude word,” he replied, laughing.

She shrugged. “Yep, but those’re my roots, so I can use the word however I want, even if it’s to make fun of all of them.”

“I get it,” he said, enjoying her sass.

“Where are you from? I can’t place your accent,” she said, her fluttering eyelashes heavy with mascara.

“Denmark,” he answered.

“Oh wow. How’d you end up all the way out here?” she asked, the cigarette hanging from her lip.

“I’ve been driving around America for a few years,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets after a cold breeze started up.

“You make it sound so simple. Must be a big adventure.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. I’ve been doing it in stages, staying in some places longer than others, so it hasn’t felt too overwhelming.”

“What’s your plan here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Probably just passing through, I booked three nights at the motel earlier today. I wanna go out into the forest after that.”

Her eyes widened in excitement. “Oh yeah, you definitely should. I’ve been up, down, and around all of it, if you need any recommendations.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” he said.

“Well, have you been to a hot spring before?”

He shook his head. “I’ve gone to some saunas before, but not a natural hot spring. You’re the second person to recommend them to me.”

“Well, I think you’d dig them,” she said. “When I was a teenager, I’d go out to them all the time, but it was to get up to, you know, boozing and smoking that I couldn’t do around my house. But they’re nice no matter what you’re there for.”

He chuckled. “I grew up in a city, so I had to do all of my boozing out in the street.”

“Did you live in the capital? Wait — is it Stockholm or Copenhagen?”

He smiled; her guesses were better than most of the Americans he had met.

“Copenhagen.”

“I failed high school geometry,” she said, “but I loved looking at the atlases.”

“I like those too.” He stubbed out the finished cigarette butt. “If it makes you feel better, I never finished high school.”

“Really?”

“My family was broke as shit, so I needed to work. I never got along with the other kids either,” he lied, in part.

When he was a child, he had gone to school for a few years, but none of it had stuck. Earning extra money for the sake of his mother and sister had taken precedent and started as soon as he could navigate the city on his own. He didn’t become fully literate until he was twenty, and that was thanks to his mentor of sorts. It was also true the other children hadn’t liked him much. They could tell something was off about him, and it didn’t help that there wasn’t any sign of his father.

“Good on you,” she said. “I barely squeaked through. I think my parents would have actually killed me if I didn’t.”

He took out another cigarette from his own pack. “How long has your family lived here?”

“A long time,” she said. “We’ve been here ever since the Oregon Trail.”

“Wow,” he said, lighting it up and handing it to her. “What do you do other than your music? Working, or anything?”

She nodded. “I work part time at this little museum gift shop right outside of town, I also help my uncle keep the books at his auto shop.”

He took it back from her, grateful for the feeling of it in his hand. “That doesn’t sound bad.”

“It’s not. Kind of monotonous, though. I really only do it to pay the bills.”

“I get work when I can,” he said, trying to decide how he wanted to structure his lie on the matter. “I’ve got um...family that appreciates when I can help them with their business out here, which I take them up on sometimes. Every now and then, I do other odd jobs too.”

“You’re a resourceful guy, huh?”

“I try to be.”

“What’s your favorite place you’ve been to in the states?” she said, tilting her head to the side. She was growing giddy at the prospect of cracking his guarded exterior.

He sighed, many people and places flashing through his mind. “God, that’s a hard question to answer. I thought the desert out in the Southwest was...magnificent. But so many of the cities are really interesting too, they’re just all so different from each other. Out of them, New York and Las Vegas fascinated me the most.”

“I haven’t been to any of these places. I’ve always wanted to, but I don’t know who I’d go with, or how I’d ever get enough money to go on a trip like that,” she said, flicking ash off the end of the cigarette.

“You could tour,” he said. “You wouldn’t make much money off it, but it would be enough.”

“That’s the dream,” she said, sighing. “I don’t even know where I’d start. No one around here ever leaves.”

He took another long drag. “I’ve noticed a lot of smaller towns are like that. They have a staying power to them, even as the rest of the world changes more quickly.”

“Tell me about it,” she said. “It makes me feel so crazy sometimes. No one here wants to learn about anything. If someone is different in the smallest way, everyone will notice and judge you right away.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that,” he said, chuckling. “I usually blend in pretty well in new places, but I guess having slightly longer hair and shirts with logos are a bridge too far around here. No one cared in Portland.”

“Of course they didn’t,” she said, “but everyone around here is nosy and bored. All there is to do is work, church, and maybe a stop by the bar or a drive in the woods.”

“I don’t blame them.”

She grinned. “You’re too nice then.”

“I wouldn’t be having any fun on this trip if I assumed the worst in people. There are a few bad eggs here and there, but most of the people I’ve met have been great, at least interesting,” he said, squinting from the bright sunlight on the edge of the horizon.

She shrugged. “That’s true.”

“I get cynical a lot, but I try to keep it separate from the people I meet.”

“I really should take your example,” she said, sighing.

He shook his head. “I’m not a good example for pretty much anything.”

“I doubt that,” she said, leaning in closer.

From the way they kept smiling at each other, he could tell it was refreshing for both of them to have a free-flowing conversation with someone new. A spark, even brief, was preferable to the crushing loneliness he was accustomed to. They had talked through most of the sunset without paying any attention but finally paused. Orange clouds floated above a rosy horizon, purple appearing around the edges. Though he had seen countless sunsets, they never failed to dazzle him. It was one of the few constants he could rely on, except in the deep winter of his Nordic homeland. During the summers there, though, they went on endlessly, creating an eternal dusk. In America, he had his pick of beautiful locales to watch them from but often observed them from parking lots or while barreling down a country highway. He never found himself too far from an asphalt surface, a kitschy road sign, or a fast food restaurant.

“You wanna get out of here?” she asked.

They had reached the next step in the social contract. As night fell, neither of them wanted to stay standing and add more to the piles of cigarette butts around them.

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“Let’s go to my place. You couldn’t pay me to go to that motel,” she said, starting to walk across the parking lot. “My car’s over here.”

“Yeah, I’ve definitely seen better, but I’ve also seen worse,” he said, following behind her.

She took out her keys. “America has so much to offer, doesn’t it?”

“More than you’d think,” he replied, chuckling.

For years, the country’s massive size alone had been overwhelming for him. Over time he had grown more used to it but could still be awed. Every state, county, and town had pockets of history and culture that should have been impossible or out of place but instead wove together

and became inseparable. That process could be so gradual that the people themselves didn't notice it at all. But he did. He liked to observe and ask questions, adding everything he learned to his library of personal knowledge. Even though he didn't usually have anyone to share it with, having such an extensive mental archive still had its uses. Little surprised him anymore, and his culture shock was mostly gone. Though not having as many surprises didn't mean he wasn't entertained.

They got into her dusty blue Ford pickup, which she told him was from her uncle. Keeping the books did have its benefits. They drove away from the confines of the small downtown, veering straight into the countryside. Giant evergreens closed them in, the tall trunks sentinels in the growing nighttime. The beat-up radio played a Bob Dylan tune as they bounced up and down on the gravel road.

"So, is this the most out in the sticks you've been?" she asked him, jerking into lower gear on an incline down to a creek bed.

He shook his head. "Not quite. I drove around in Alabama and Mississippi for a while, and there were a few days I saw almost nothing but swamp. And in some parts of the desert, I saw signs that said there wasn't gas for 200 miles — they were usually right."

She whistled. "That would scare the shit out of me."

"I was always fine. I had a jerry can in the back just in case."

She tapped her fingers to the rhythm on the steering wheel. "You know, in another life, you would have made a good logger. The guys out there have to be super resourceful and smart. You have to be fearless, honestly, and you seem adventurous enough for that."

He held onto the dashboard, the rocky surface not merciful on his backside. "It's kind of a dying industry, isn't it?"

“Yeah, it’s getting there. No one out here is really sure what to do about it,” she said.

“Yeah, makes sense. The whole place was built around lumber jobs, right?”

She nodded. “We’re finally catching up to the rest of the world, I guess. I think some of the folks around here are going to have to get over themselves and take more business from the nature seekers that come around. They think all those people are dirty hippies, which has some truth to it, but without them, there’s no other option.”

He nodded, looking out into the trees. In the darkness, the forest went on into infinity. After twenty minutes of driving backroads, she turned into a side road that looked no different than a glorified dirt trail. She avoided the potholes with a practiced efficiency, humming as she went. The trees gave way a little as the silhouette of the house emerged. It looked like a log cabin from a children’s toy set. He liked the a-frame shape and the dark wood. One lamp was on in the front window, casting a warm, golden glow.

She switched off the engine, rolling out her shoulders and looking over at him. “So, what do you think?”

“It’s really nice,” he said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect.”

“Thanks. I got it after my aunt died. It’s been in the family for a long time now.”

They both got out, the leaves and pine needles on the ground covered with a layer dew. Under the tree cover, the air was cooler and cleaner. He inhaled, waiting for her to join him.

“When did you get this place?” he asked.

“About three years ago,” she said, getting out. “I get it all to myself.”

He waited while she went to the back and grabbed her guitar. He searched for the residual energy of the supposed ley line but felt almost nothing. She unlocked the front door. The house had a pleasant pine smell inside. When he looked at the decorated and colorful walls, he could

tell the house was her sanctuary away from the judging eyes of the town. The furniture was an eclectic mix of antiques and newer pieces, all finished in similar shades of dark brown. The piece de resistance was a Persian area rug in the center. It was faded and a bit dusty, but beautiful. The fireplace was also impressive. It was able to hold an enormous amount of wood, the red brick standing out against the otherwise earthy tones of the space. The hand laid bricks were mostly even, and the few divots he noticed were charming.

After putting her guitar away in a large hall closet, Melody turned on a few lamps but kept the lighting muted. Most of the space was on the first floor, but there was a lofted bedroom up a short staircase. It had no barrier from downstairs, but given she lived alone, that wasn't an issue. The open plan gave everything an airy feeling, the trees' presence ensured by the windows on every side.

"I'm gonna grab a beer. You want one?" she said, brushing his arm as she walked by.

He smiled. "Yeah, thanks."

"Make yourself comfortable."

He took her up on that, choosing the main sofa by the fireplace to settle on. The record player was on the table next to him, and there was a large shelf on the other side of it that housed her sizable collection of vinyl. He peered at all the visible ones, none of them too surprising based on the music she had already played. It was mostly rock, folk, and a bit of jazz. She opened two cans and sat next to him.

"I can put something on if you want," she said, their fingers touching when she handed him the beer.

"Your house, your rules," he said.

"I don't really care, honestly." She sat next to him, biting her lip.

Other than a wind chime tickled by a breeze on the porch, everything was quiet. There were no prying eyes or interlopers. As the tension simmered between them, he knew it was his turn to do the rest. He took one sip of his beer, then put it down. She did the same. He put a hand on her shoulder, her hair soft as silk. Before another word could pass their lips, he kissed her. The rest of the world slipped away. He needed such an escape. All he heard was her breath and the pumping of their hearts. She smiled against him, and he broke away for a moment.

“I haven’t done something like this...for a while now,” she whispered.

“I know the feeling,” he said, deciding to keep his recent past to himself.

He didn’t want to create unnecessary distance with her, but he preferred to hold his pain in a place other people couldn’t dissect it. He doubted she would, but it was hard to know with a glorified stranger. Rafi had been different. Within a few days of meeting, they were already in sync in almost everything. They made each other laugh, swapping stories from lives that appeared vastly different on the surface, but overlapped in many surprising ways. He remembered being in Rafi’s arms, his curly hair falling against his cheek. Even amidst their desolate lives, they still found tenderness in each other.

He hadn’t felt worthy of receiving it or allowing Rafi to fall into the same dreadful fate he had. It wasn’t fair. The act of leaving Rafi didn’t sting as much as the possibility of what they could have had. If they had run away together, just like both of them dreamed, anything could have happened. So many diverging paths, only held together by his own misery of never knowing. The threads were all frayed, the link severed forever. He assumed Rafi had gone back to Brazil. He knew it was probably pointless to go there and chase after him. It would likely be unwelcome too.

As his despair swelled up around him, Melody was none the wiser. She sighed in contentment, then kissed him again. Her hands were warm, beckoning him upstairs with her. He gave no resistance, letting her decide where the rest of the night would take them.

“You okay?” she said on the stairs, finally catching the distant look in his eyes.

He tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “Better now.”

She laughed, dragging him over to the bed, the quilt soft against his hands. He would indulge himself, enjoying her company for all it had to offer. She was far more engaging company than trees, rivers, and roads.

He crept out of her bed as silently as possible. The gibbous moon left bars of light across the floor. He wasn't going to leave but wanted a moment to himself. For all the promises of a long, drawn-out life that immortality offered, the shortest bursts of action were what made him feel the most alive. Passion, so quickly extinguished, was what imprinted on his mind and body. For that night, Melody was his conduit. She thought she was cynical, but her warmth and optimism were captivating to him. He hoped to be a good footnote in her life, one that would no doubt end up happy.

She was fast asleep, splayed out on her stomach. Her hair was fanned out across her pillow. The two cigarettes they had shared before she fell asleep still smoldered in the ashtray next to her. They had talked until the moment she fell unconscious. She looked peaceful, but he was left alone with himself again. He looked out one of the large windows, the milky light of the moon letting him see through the dark wall of trees. It was at its zenith in the upper reaches of the sky, soon to drop back down and disappear under the horizon. Though the bed was comfortable and the company good, he was still having trouble sleeping. He always dreaded

what he might find lurking in his subconscious. It wasn't benign, but a force working against him. His troubling history lived there, even when he was able to push it away in his waking hours. Nightmares were more than a passing trouble for him. They were incredibly real, sometimes holding him hostage for an entire night's sleep. He saw the worst of his life: people lost to death or time, moments he regretted most, and the most harrowing memories from his childhood and teenage years. He preferred looking outside into the serene landscape, but knew sleep would find him at some point before dawn.

He crept downstairs and sat on the couch again, the lamps still on. He looked through her record collection, looking for names he didn't recognize. He was getting tired of crackly AM radio stations and the same cassettes over and over again. Even as he drove to new destinations, it made him feel as if he was in the same place. The repeating songs were still better than silence. That was where true despair lay. The kind that made him want to fall away from life completely, even though he knew what lay in death was infinitely worse. When he began to doze on the arm of the couch, he dragged himself back to the bed. It was far more comfortable than the scratchy blankets and lumpy mattress at the motel. The house was so lived in and loved, not transitory and bare like most of the places he found himself in. The only constant space in his life was his car, but it was put under a lot of strain by his lifestyle. In not much longer, he knew he would have to trade it in for another one. He rarely had the money to buy one, even if it was used, but luckily, his hotwiring skills were far better.

Living on the edges meant the petty crimes he committed from time to time didn't make him feel guilty. Stealing in a place of such excess was karmic. Americans put cars in their front yards and let them rust, or let junkyards scrap perfectly good ones because their value fell so quickly after buying them. He was just one of many opportunists, a vulture taking a small peck

of meat from a manmade monster of consumption and glut. When he went on the hunt for a new car, he tried his best to avoid the so-called “gas guzzlers.” He didn’t have the funds to keep them properly fueled, especially after seeing the chaos during the oil crisis. Having a large SUV or truck wasn’t worth the hassle of waiting in daylong lines at gas stations and paying out the nose. The status they gave their owners simply didn’t matter to him. As much as he liked to laugh at the culture around him, it had its charms too. Persistence in times of great woe, for one. Despite its comparatively short history, the country had been through many times of disaster and ruin, but the people never gave up. He would have to take his own piece of American grit and internalize it.

He woke up right after she did. She smiled at him, then got up to make coffee. He lay there a few minutes longer, marveling at the way the sun shone on the slanted ceiling. When he heard the kettle whistle, he joined her downstairs.

“You sleep okay?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s very nice here.”

“Thanks. I’ve tried my best to make it homey.”

She poured him a large, steaming mug of coffee.

“Milk or sugar?”

He shook his head. “Black is fine.”

“Not for me,” she said, laughing. She dropped a few sugar cubes and dollop of cream in hers.

When daylight began to stream in, he could see the forest in all its glory. He noticed a squirrel dashing along the branches of the nearest tree, its fluffy tail pushing against a cluster of moss.

“They’re cute, aren’t they?” she said.

He took a tentative sip of coffee, but it was still too hot. “Yeah.”

“So, I don’t want to hurry you, but I have to go to work in about an hour. Want me to drop you back at the motel?”

“That would be great, thanks,” he said.

He needed a shower anyway. He also needed to decide if he wanted to extend his stay in the town. Now that he had found someone to pass the time with, he didn’t need to clear out right away. He also wanted to get a true local’s guide to the forest. After they finished their coffee, they went out to her truck. Because of the morning chill, she let the engine run for a few minutes before they got back on the road. The morning light washed over him, waking him up more than the coffee. The bumps and jolts did the rest.

“When I’m off work later, you want to do something?” she asked. Her tone was nervous; his silence was troubling her. He hadn’t meant anything by it. He wasn’t ever talkative in the morning.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” he said, turning back from the window. “Where do you want to go?”

“There’s this great spot that looks over the train tracks. You get a view of the lake too,” she said. “It’s nice to just...look down on everything sometimes.”

“That sounds perfect.”

She smiled. Her fears were unfounded. He assumed those thoughts came from past behavior of other men. That wasn’t surprising at all. He had been on both sides of it, sometimes all at once. Relationships of any kind weren’t his strong suit, but he did try. Knowing this one was short term did alleviate some of the stress. If it went well, good. If he fucked up, he would just move on. He tried not to factor in his regret. There was enough of that on his mind already.

He didn't like breaking peoples' hearts, but his indecisiveness and guilt did him in. All of that on his mind, and he had met this woman a night ago. But, it wasn't about her. It always circled back to Rafi. He knew she could never be a replacement for him, but he was doing it anyway. He had to keep his mouth shut about some of his peculiarities. If he did tell her, she would just think he was crazy. It was hard to tell a modern-minded person that he was hundreds of years old and had magical abilities. Nothing more than the rambling of a lunatic. He was used to that treatment but tried to avoid it when he could.

They emerged out of the forest and back onto paved roads. He missed being in the grip of the forest already now that he was surrounded by pavement again. She pulled in front of the motel, the engine idling.

“See you around 5:30?” she said, gazing at him longingly.

“Yeah, see you then,” he said, smiling back.

He dug the key out of his pocket and went into his room. In the daze of the weekday morning, things were quiet. He noticed the room's musty smell, far more obvious after being somewhere that was properly cleaned and lived in. But he would get used to the squalor again. More importantly, he was sweaty, tired, and hungry, making him far less occupied with the friendliness of his surroundings. The first order of business was a shower. He could feel all the sweat clinging to his body, and he hoped the jolt of the water would wake him the rest of the way up. He grew tired of his own drowsiness. He picked up the towel he had used the day before and turned the faucet. He stood for more than a minute waiting for the water to warm up. It stayed lukewarm, but he went in anyway. The water still felt good on his scalp, and he stared at the moldy grout.

Most of his showers in the weeks before had been at motels or truck stops. Some were better than others. For truck stops specifically, he used the word of mouth from the truckers he liked to chat up. They gave him lots of information and tips about different highways, cities, and towns, interspersed among their many stories. There were many tales of exaggeration, but he enjoyed those. As he well knew, lying was a useful form of creative license in life. It could get one out of many scrapes, or forge connections that otherwise would never have happened. The lies could never be too extreme. They needed at least a speck of truth. He usually included more than that. Unless he was dealing with someone particularly egregious, he didn't enjoy totally deceiving people. Pulling wool over their eyes to obscure what he really was meant he could survive, but not with much happiness. He didn't like hoarding secrets.

He dried himself off with the rough towel. He put it under his head and lay down on the bed. He knew his window for sleeping was closed. He examined the decades of tar stains on the ceiling, adding to them by smoking another cigarette. He knew he didn't have many options for food. Instead of going back to the sandwich shop again, he decided to go into the corner store. They would at least have coffee and snacks. His cigarette stash was also running low. That motivated him to get dressed and walk out the door. He spotted the store a couple blocks away. He picked up his pace, his stomach nagging him to get there faster.

The door squeaked loudly when he opened it. He noticed the rust on its hinges.

The cashier nodded at him, then went back to his newspaper. Another man wearing a baseball cap looked at the shelf of sodas and other canned drinks, paying Mikkel no mind. He went right to the coffee machine, gazing at the doughnuts next to it. Powdered, glazed, jelly. He knew they were all going to be subpar, so the type didn't really matter. He opened the plastic case, picking out a powdered and a glazed donut. After that, he served himself some coffee in the

largest size of styrofoam cup. Once full, it was blistering hot to the touch. There was a watery film on top, but he hoped a good stir would deal with that. After consolidating everything, he went up to the register. The cashier started to ring him up.

“Could I also get two packs of Marlboro Reds, please?”

He nodded, going to the case behind him. After paying, Mikkel stuffed the packs into his pockets and walked out. He wanted to find a bench somewhere but knew that was likely a pipe dream. The sun was shining bright, and he didn't want to be stuck in his motel room for a majority of the day. He put his hand over his eyes, the asphalt warming up. As he stuck one foot out from the curb to cross, a car blocked his path. He started to go around it, but noticed the police insignia and sirens on top. He knew he hadn't done anything to warrant a police stop, unlike past times, but cops didn't operate on any sort of logic other than power and fear. He sucked his breath in through his teeth as the man stepped out.

“Morning, how can I help you officer?” he said, putting on his most diplomatic tone.

The cop stared him down in silence, the bridge of his nose wrinkled, only the whir of passing cars and trucks breaking the tension. He was young, looking to be around Melody's age, but was already reveling in his position of authority. A gun and walkie-talkie hung off his belt, his hand hovering over them. Mikkel knew he was out of place in the town, but a broad daylight confrontation seemed unusual. There was something personal about this. Boredom often drove small town cops to intimidate anyone they could get their hands on. They smelled fear like a shark trailing blood.

The man cleared his throat, finally done sizing Mikkel up. “So, what's your business here?”

“I’m staying here for a few days before I get back on the road,” Mikkel said, keeping his voice calm and level.

“*Mmhm*. You have any other business here?”

“No sir,” Mikkel said.

His eyes narrowed, and they returned to a silent staring contest. It wasn’t the first time Mikkel had been hassled in a small town. New faces always piqued the interest and scrutiny of local authorities.

“Look, I know your type,” he said, nodding to Mikkel’s appearance.

“Okay,” Mikkel said, trying to hold back laughter. If this was his attempt at playing God, it was rather pathetic. “As I said, I’m just passing through.”

He huffed through his nose. “I’d like to see some ID then.”

Mikkel placed his donuts on the ground, slowly reaching into his pocket. It wasn’t big enough for a gun anyway, but he knew how that type of ornery cop liked to shoot first, ask questions later. He needed to stick with one story with everyone in town, so he decided to show his Danish driver’s license. He had had it made a while before, but its expiration date was still a few years away. If the cop decided to search him, things would get more interesting. He had a few other IDs on him that were American or German, including other names. That was a rabbit hole not worth going down unless that scenario came to pass. He began concocting a getaway plan as he handed over the Danish one.

“You’re far from home, aren’t you?” He held it up, squinting against the sun. “This is from...”

“Denmark. I’m traveling.”

“Where’s your passport?”

“In my motel room.”

Mikkel would get a kick out of seeing him try to point out Denmark on a map.

Meanwhile, he was running out of ideas on how to keep Mikkel there.

Mikkel glanced at his badge: C. Clayton.

“Officer Clayton,” he said. “Is there any reason we needed to continue our conversation, or can I be on my way?”

He scowled, offended that his authority had been undermined even slightly. “This is a town with good, honest people. We don’t appreciate it when new people barge in with types of lifestyles we don’t particularly agree with. So, when I saw you walking down the street, I put two and two together and wanted to talk to you.”

“Uh huh,” Mikkel said.

This cop seemed particularly good at concocting tall tales. He still couldn’t figure out where the source of his disdain was truly coming from. After a second of deliberation, Mikkel decided to look into his mind. After all, he had nothing else to work with. He inhaled, peering in. He found a mishmash of rage, confusion, and envy. The man wasn’t just like Melody; he knew her well. At least, he had. High school sweethearts. Everyone thought they would get married, living out a blissful life together. Based off of his self-important, haughty conduct, Mikkel knew that ideal view was only ever a delusion. He was a controlling, arrogant boyfriend.

Mikkel inhaled, making his eye contact more intense. “I think we’re both men who appreciate honesty, officer. So, tell me, what is it you want from me?”

“I hear things from people,” the cop said. “You were at that no-good bar last night, talking to someone I happen to care about.”

Mikkel raised his eyebrows. “And she can’t make her own choice about who she talks to?”

“That’s not what I said,” he answered, crossing his arms. “I do what I can to look out for her, so man to man, I’m telling you to leave her be. Last thing she needs is more trouble.”

“Thank you for your wisdom,” Mikkel said, forcing a smile. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to go eat my doughnuts and drink my coffee.”

Mikkel watched the gears turn in the cop’s mind. Mikkel wasn’t in fear of him and his station at all, something he hadn’t been expecting.

“Fine,” he said, but I better not see you around here in a couple of days.”

Mikkel shrugged. “You got it.”

The cop got back into his car, gunning the engine. It spit up dust, which barely missed Mikkel. He laughed to himself, picking up all of his things. His coffee had started to cool down but was still warm enough for his liking. As he finished crossing the street, he bit into one of the doughnuts. A bit stale, and probably not worth the run in that followed, but he was hungry enough not to care. Instead of going back to his room, he walked to the back area of the motel. It was barren, the tall grass slowly going brown. He heard running water. He made his way down a short bank to a creek. He found a rock in the grass that was large enough to sit on, and he settled in. A piece of nature all to himself, finally. Some back windows of rooms faced it, but he doubted anyone was looking too closely. He lit a much needed cigarette and downed the rest of the coffee before it was completely cold. The sun felt nice on his skin, but it wasn’t warm out, especially in the shade. He lingered there for around an hour, pacing by the water once he was tired of sitting.

He was still running his encounter with the cop through his head. Gossip was passed around in that town with remarkable speed. There must have been someone at the bar who was close to him, keeping tabs on Melody throughout the night. It was true that they hadn't been that conspicuous, talking outside and leaving together all in plain view. He hadn't been expecting someone to feel so possessive over her. He knew he needed to tell her about the run in but wasn't sure what her reaction was going to be like. Probably not surprising, based on how infuriatingly stubborn he seemed, but she could do anything between laughing it off or having a full-fledged breakdown.

He went up the bank and back into his room. He wasn't tired anymore, so he decided to read. It was a hobby he didn't indulge in often enough. He sat cross legged on the bed, reading a paperback copy of Flannery O'Connor's latest short story collection. Its cover was torn up from when it had fallen between car seats and he'd wrenched it out, but all the pages were in good condition. As he got immersed in the book, a few hours went by. He put it down when he reached the second to last story, wanting to save the last two for later. He reminded himself to ask Melody if there were any decent places for books, preferably used, somewhere not too far away. If his plan to go into the forest was really going to happen, he needed some decent reading material. Books always made for good companions in the absence of anything else.

He checked the time, relieved that it wasn't long before Melody would be there. He changed into a t-shirt with less stains on it and combed his hair. Once 5:30 hit, he kept glancing out the window, hoping his wait would soon be over. He wanted to make the most of the last couple days he had with her. But, depending on what she told him about her troublesome ex-boyfriend, he would think about staying longer. The forest, though still on his mind, was less urgent.

Finally, he saw Melody's car pull into the parking lot. He shot up from the bed immediately, grabbing a jacket. She waved at him when she saw him come out from his room.

He got into the passenger seat, listening to her Led Zeppelin cassette.

"Hi again," she said.

"Hey," he said. "How was work?"

She shrugged. "Nothing special. What were you up to today?"

"I was planning to not do much, but something very...interesting ended up happening to me."

"Go on," she said, so intrigued that she let the car idle instead of getting back on the road.

"When I was walking back here from the corner store, I had an unexpected conversation with a cop."

Her eyes widened. "You're fucking kidding me."

"So, you know who I'm talking about?" he said, once again amused. He was no longer just a spectator to small town drama, but an active party in it.

"Of course I do," she said, her hands clenching around the steering wheel. "What happened? I hope he didn't threaten you."

"He kind of did, kind of didn't," Mikkel said. "Just seemed annoyed that I was spending time with you and wanted me to get out of town."

"I know he puts on a whole act, but please try not to worry about him too much. He just got his badge, but I think the sheriff already hates his guts. I keep hearing that he's getting stuck with the worst shifts."

"That's good to hear, but I still don't want to get too much on the wrong side of him," Mikkel said, sighing.

“Yeah, I get it. Cole can never keep his nose out of shit. It drives me crazy. I have no idea why I ever thought I loved that guy.”

“Things are different at that age,” Mikkel mused. “You’re just getting to know yourself and where you fit into things. And sometimes, people who aren’t good in the end are what we need at the time.’

“You’re right. Easy for me to say that now that it’s been years.”

“And he’s still stuck on you?” Mikkel said.

“Oh yeah. I think, in a way, he regrets that he lost me. He’d never admit that though.”

“As he should,” Mikkel said.

She shook her head, flustered, but said nothing.

They left the town behind, going in the opposite direction than the night before. The sun was still shining but dipping lower. The road gradually widened, hugging the train tracks. After twenty minutes, a large lake appeared on the other side, its vast body of blue water sparkling. The water looked magical, like touching it would give someone special abilities.

“A lot of people go swimming out there once it’s a little warmer,” she said.

“Yeah, it looks nice.”

He tried to think of the last time he had gone swimming but couldn’t recall. He rarely did anything purely for fun. Too much weighed in his mind, and anything indulgent like that made him feel the pointlessness of his ongoing existence. Only other people, who were usually unaware of his true nature, could take him out of it. Even then, the feeling of freedom didn’t tend to last. His infernal responsibilities dragged him away from any happiness he gathered kicking and screaming. That’s why he had started to take himself away from potential happiness before it even finished blooming. It was easier that way, at least in the short term.

She turned into an unremarkable pullout on the side of the road. The gravel cracked and popped under the tires as she parked. He looked to see what was around them, but all he saw was trees on one side and the outer edge of the lake. She moved with confidence, switching off the car and going outside. He got out too, still confused. She slung her bag over her shoulder and beckoned him to follow her into the line of trees.

“I promise I know where I’m going,” she said after seeing Mikkel’s doubtful face.

“I guess I’ll have to trust you on that,” he said, following her in.

They soon hit a hillside, which grew steep. He hoped that his worn sneakers would survive the trudge. Heaps of dried pine needles hid the knobby roots underfoot, so he was careful not to trip. She kept going far ahead of him, familiar with every twist and turn, stopping every once in a while, to let him catch up. Even though he was starting to sweat, he tried to stay nonchalant. Due to all his long-distance driving, he hadn’t gone on a hike recently. He went up the slope, trying to gauge how much longer they had to go. Though he feared it was his own desires speaking, he saw light from overhead. Right after, he saw her fully disappear over the bend. He picked up his pace, impatient to reach her. His heart hammered from the effort, but he met her there.

At the top, they were rewarded with a sweeping view of the train tracks and the forest below, which stretched to the end of the horizon. Distant mountains were set against the lowering sun. He paused to absorb it all.

“I always come here when I’ve got things on my mind,” she said.

“I can see why. The scale is...unreal.”

American landscapes never ceased to stagger him. So much distance, only sparsely populated with people or any signs of human activity. She rustled around in her bag, taking out a few snacks, a lighter, and lacquer cigarette case. But, it didn't smell like tobacco.

“So, no pressure, but I brought a couple joints with me.”

“Sure, I'll have some.”

“I'm thinking when it's closer to sunset,” she said. “I just love the combination.”

“Yeah, it's nice.”

He remembered staring at the sinking desert sun with Rafi, already on their second joint. The window was open to the cooling air, a relief from the stifling heat of earlier. Their day had been full, but sitting alone together made it all wash away. He missed that feeling of mutual understanding he had with Rafi. No room for judgment or confusion, just constant clarity. At least, until the moment it had counted the most. Mikkel's hesitation to Rafi's proposal of leaving their lives behind together had cost him everything. His silence and following refusal broke their spell forever.

He never enjoyed smoking weed alone. His thoughts became too overpowering, his mind too open to the world around him. Even when he had been there with Rafi half a year before, other presences made themselves known. Describing any of them as one concrete entity like 'ghost' or 'spirit' wasn't always accurate. Forces past the understanding of the corporeal world were always right below the surface, ready to be stirred. Since he could hear them, they often clung to him. He was able to drown them out most of the time but was more susceptible when sleeping or when under the influence. He was usually too sluggish to be affected when drunk but weed and even more psychoactive things were another story. He knew he was taking a risk by

saying yes to smoking with Melody but decided to put aside his worries. He could handle himself.

Golden light started to run down the tree trunks like spilled honey. Immersed in their surroundings, they sat on the mat of leaves and loose dirt. The sky morphed into orange soon after. She opened her case, making sure the rolling looked acceptable.

“My cousin gave these to me,” she said. “He grows in his backyard and rolls some up too, but he doesn’t always do great at it.”

“Looks okay this time,” Mikkel said, leaning over and looking closely.

She smiled. “Dylan hasn’t let me down.”

He cupped his hand around the lighter to shelter it from the building breeze. After a few tries, she got the tip fully lit. She took a deep hit and leaned back on her other arm. Once she was done, she held it out to him. The smoke wreathed around them, thick and pungent. As he inhaled, the burn of menthol and tobacco he was used to was absent, replaced by the lighter perfume of the herb. The smoke slipped out from his mouth slowly, and he was hit with a wave of lightheadedness. He handed the joint back to her, blinking slowly. He wasn’t expecting the high to hit him so fast. They went back and forth, building a rhythm of sorts. Towards the end of it, he got bits of ash in his mouth, spitting them out.

“Sorry, the filter on this thing isn’t the best.”

“It’s okay,” he mumbled.

He tilted his head to the side, and he looked at a songbird flying between trees below. He could hear every beat of its wings, every other worldly sound falling away. His own breathing deafened him too. A large gust of wind kicked up, whistling through his ears. Melody zipped up her jacket, but he felt a growing warmth building inside. He knew it couldn’t just be the high, as

strong as it was. He took in a ragged breath, trying desperately to come back into his direct surroundings. But he couldn't. Melody talked and laughed and though he nodded along, he couldn't comprehend any of the words. His hearing was taken up by something else, a low but growing torrent of whispers. From what source, he didn't know, but it felt dreamlike. He must have been closer to the ley line that he had thought.

His altered state of mind was preventing him from exercising his usual control over such forces. The voices didn't speak to him in precise words but pulled on his spirit. A unified, unbroken sentiment. Come closer. They wanted to tempt him away from everything he knew. Was he truly opposed to that? They had found him at an opportune time. He drifted farther into the trees, no longer bound to his body.

Miserable world, isn't it?

That came through to him in one voice, louder than the rest.

What do you know about misery? He replied in his mind.

They all chattered, a chorus of indignation. *The greed and excess of man is our burden.*

He sensed the pain, the raw destruction of the forest, which had once been so much larger. It was a shell of its former self, confined not by the boundaries it wished for, but that of humankind. Even then, new hillsides would be denuded, the few spots of old growth that were left targeted for their value.

We are still strong.

He didn't doubt it. They wanted to add his power to their ranks, to give him a new place of belonging. He wasn't someone to be ignored and forgotten any longer. Wispy shadows crowded the periphery of his vision, but they weren't the threatening kind he was used to. They held a kind of magic that was pure and true. Could it wash away the sins of his?

A train horn blared, echoing all around him. Then, lights brighter than the sun streamed up from below. He was thrust back into his body. Everything that wasn't around him physically faded back to where it had come from. He looked over at Melody and started laughing. The whirring of the train drowned him out, meaning he could be as loud as he wanted. It held endless cars of logs, stripped of the plumes of leaves and branches they had in life. All for endless consumption and building, lining the pockets of a few at the expense of the many. He'd seen variations of that same story play out for his entire lifetime and knew he would continue to see it for perpetuity.

The hold of the voices was gone, and he noticed Melody staring at him and trying not to laugh. He shivered, both from the cold and the control he had lost. He wasn't going to let that happen again. The forces and power within the forest still intrigued him, but he knew he needed to keep hard limits. Finally, the train sped into the distance, all of its mass passing by.

She leaned in, grinning. "Welcome back, that really put you on your ass. When was the last time you smoked?"

"Five months ago, I think," he said. Five months and two days. The second to last night he and Rafi had spent together. His heart had been so light, but it wouldn't have if he'd known it was all going to be snuffed out.

"Yeah, that's a while," she said. "I've also heard the pot we've got here is stronger than other places."

"Oh, yeah. I can tell."

She laughed. "I get most of mine from my cousin. He's got a whole backyard operation going on, and I get the family discount."

"That's nice," he said.

He listened to the crickets humming and saw the edge of the moon breaching the horizon. His high had reduced to a low ebb. Back to tranquility. She sparked up the second joint, but he let her have it to herself. The voices had made him feel less lonely, but the risk of falling away from his body wasn't worth it. It was akin to death, a complete exit of the corporeal world. He knew the emptiness and despair of death, the connection to his body forcibly severed. Getting it back was the most difficult journey he had ever embarked on. Letting it happen again willingly went against everything in his past. He had to persist, no matter how miserable he was.

“So, is tomorrow your last night here?” she asked, stubbing the finished joint out on the ground.

He nodded.

“Anything I can do to convince you to stick around a little longer?” she asked, struggling to keep her tone light.

“I can't,” he said.

“Then let me show you a good time tomorrow night. At least, as good as it can get around here.”

He smiled. “I'd like that.”

They stayed out on the bluff until the stars shone in their full glory. He could see a lot of them, but less than in the remote desert. He admired the bare contours of the Milky Way and the sets of constellations. He liked to study and familiarize himself with them. It broke up the tedium of many empty nights. He pointed the most obvious ones out to her, tracing his finger against the sky to illustrate the many shapes and stories. She recognized some and others were new. After holding out against the cold as long as they could, they packed up and left, scrambling down through the brush and trying not to fall over. The drive back into town was uneventful, the dark

waters of the lake lapping nearby. He was lulled into relaxation by the hum of the engine and quiet surroundings. He had spent countless nights like that but was used to being behind the wheel. It was a relief to have a break, even for such a brief time.

When she pulled back into the motel parking lot, she wished him a good night. He didn't understand why she was putting so much thought towards someone barely more than a stranger. Even though he was leaving in a day, she wanted him to have something good to hold onto. And he did. The motel room and dive bar wouldn't have stuck in his mind on their own. He had seen things like that more times than he could count. Every town did have a character of its own, but some were far fainter than others.

Despite the mattress springs in his back and even more on his mind, he couldn't stay awake. As he slept, the voices seeped back in. They were quieter than before, since he was farther away from their domain. He found them more pleasant than the other forces that liked to barge into his mind. This set wasn't demanding anything from him, merely inviting his presence. There were no debts, no demands, just a sense of curiosity.

He didn't wake up until noon. His curtains were mostly closed, but a sliver of light fell across his face. He groaned at the time but knew he would fall asleep again if he didn't at least sit up. He rubbed his eyes, his head pounding. The only things that would rid his headache were a cup of coffee, a cigarette, or both. He wondered if the front office of the motel had any coffee on offer. He didn't care if it was any good or not. He couldn't dilly dally all day though. He needed to get enough food and gas to last him a few days, either for being in the woods or until he chose which town to stop in next. He had started to meander south, but he wanted to see more of Washington. California wasn't new territory to him, so he wasn't in a hurry to return.

He drove to the one gas station. He bit back his sticker shock and paid for the full gallon of gas at the elevated small town price. He assumed any groceries he picked up would be priced the same way. His cache of money was going to hold out a little longer, but he was starting to push it. If he became destitute, which had happened plenty of times before, he had his ways of surviving, but they often proved exhausting. He resorted to stealing even more than he usually did and had to be even more on the move to avoid scrutiny. He could hold out until his next job, but he never knew when they were going to come. His infernal bosses liked to keep him on his toes. The burden of the debt itself wasn't enough.

He bit the bullet and bought bread and other sandwich supplies, snacks, and some fruit. He hoped that would cover his basic nutrition for a few days. He was bad at taking his health into consideration, but didn't want to be stuck without enough food in the forest. Once back at the motel, he packed up everything he didn't need back into his car, so he wouldn't have to do it later.

Melody came back in the late afternoon, all smiles after getting off work early. For the rest of the day, they drove around the forest, dipping their toes into ice cold streams and lakes, eating berries, and stealing kisses. The day was idyllic, sunshine coming through the depths of the thick foliage and trees. He was trapped within the confines of a polaroid, faded to sepia with age and neglect. The world within it was ephemeral, but joyful. After their adventures in nature, they made an appearance at her cousin's house, eating hot dogs for dinner and taking a bag of bud with them when he offered.

After that, they went back to her house, making the most of their remaining nighttime hours together. He held onto the intimacy, not knowing the next time he would touch something that felt so real. She would just become another memory, a face reserved for sleepless nights and

empty days. He had let her see the side of himself that he didn't hate. He didn't like scaring people with his powers and tales of his unending life. Eternal life was often viewed as a miracle or blessing, but it was just one of the many things he had to bear.

He slipped out of Melody's house in the dead of night, deciding to walk back. It took around an hour and even though the night air was cold, it refreshed him. He had the entire town to himself, every light off or business closed. He wanted to take it all in before he left for good. He put his motel key through the slot in the office door and threw the last of things in his car. As he got behind the wheel, he wasn't tired at all. He thought about where he wanted to stop first in the forest. The lake again, a tucked away campground, or a hot spring came to mind. Melody had given him good directions to her favorite hot spring, and he tried to remember them. He went up winding roads full of potholes, his bumper jerking up and down. The car wasn't built for backroads, but he would keep testing its limits.

After almost an hour of driving, he pulled into a small parking lot, which was empty. There were two narrow trails branching from the lot. His gut told him to take the downhill one. He took solace in the birdsong all around him. He walked for ten minutes, then heard the sound of water. The swift moving creek widened into three cascading pools, circled by rounded stones. The sun broke through the mesh of evergreens. Each pine needle was gilded in the emerging light. He made his way down a set of stairs carved roughly into the hillside. As he watched the dawn, he dipped his feet into the shallow pool. The heat shocked the cool surface of his skin. He sheafed off his clothes and stepped in farther, the rock smooth under his feet, so he was careful not to slip. The steam mingled with the sunlight, a balm against the chilly morning air.

He went all the way in gradually, letting his body acclimate to the warmth. The temperature was most intense by his feet, where the solid rock was. He found a comfortable

position, enjoying the way his muscles relaxed. Like a warm bath, but better. The water would never go cold, and he was surrounded by the trees and awakening world. He put a hand on the heated rock, shocked back by another force emanating from it. The ley line. After so much consideration, he had stumbled upon it on his first try. He went towards the rock more slowly, placing his fingertips on it. Every time he breathed in, he took in new energy. It made his vision vibrate and body jolt. His own reserves of energy felt miniscule in comparison to what he was getting. The whispers swirled back with a vengeance. He was firmly in their grasp. They were watching him and waiting. He drew his hand back, giving himself a chance to feel the difference.

Don't stop. We have plenty to share.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. *I won't stay here long. But tell me more.*

Soothsayer & Confidante

“Can you really tell the future?” the woman asked in a shrill voice.

Leo leaned back in his armchair, resting his chin on his hand. “That’s what you hired me for, isn’t it?”

She huffed, saying nothing.

“To answer your question,” he said, his red hair catching the slanted light from the window. “I do exactly what I say I can. My other clients can vouch for that.”

She nodded, her large pearl earrings swaying. A merchant’s wife. He’d seen that type before. Social climbers, but clumsy ones. The tresses of her violet dress spilled over her chair and onto the floor. It was wearing her, not the other way around. He recognized the style. It was from one of the most illustrious dressmakers in all of Amsterdam. With no longstanding ties to the actual higher class, he was sure she had paid an even higher premium than most to get her hands on it. Her carefully plaited brown hair was beginning to go gray. She had a while before her age was really going to show, but its approach no doubt rattled her.

He already had a good idea of what she wanted to know. Her type was preoccupied with what lay ahead, either for them or their children. Who would their daughters marry, would their sons continue the family business well, were their societal lives on the up and up. The list of concerns never stopped. Then again, they were some of his most reliable clients. They sought out answers as they disrupted the long-held social order. Some of them he found truly enjoyable, but most were cut from the same tiresome cloth.

“Now, Mrs. Koopman, how can I help you today?” he said, tucking away a strand of his red hair as discreetly as he could.

“I wish to know about the future of my son,” she said, folding her gloved hands in her lap.

“His prospects, or something else?”

“Everything you can divine, I suppose.”

He stood up from his chair, beginning to pace. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He looked around his parlor, filled with an eclectic collection of objects from across the world: Chinese fans, a Turkish teapot, and an Indian tapestry bursting with red and gold stitching. What looked like chaos to many guests was perfect for him. Since he had begun living among humans, he decided to understand how they ticked. Much of that work was done for him through observation alone, especially in the line of work he had chosen. Fortune teller. Psychic. Heretic. Many words for the same thing. Try as they might, they could never vanquish time, both its mysteries and its ravages. He operated just outside of the scope of human ability and knowledge.

She waited for him to continue.

He fiddled with his maroon waistcoat. “Tell me about him, if you please.”

“Gerhard is a kind boy. He works just as hard as his father, and he’s so quick with his books and writings. However, he is...quiet. He cannot even look girls his age in the eye. So, I worry that finding a match for him will prove difficult. It’s important that he does have one soon, obviously. His intelligence will carry him, but only so far.”

He nodded, already sensing the gulf between them. A sensitive son and an overbearing mother. As she continued, in much the same line of thought, he began to see the boy. As he peered into her mind and beyond, her words acted as an ink that bound everything together. Only in his eighteenth year, Gerhard was strangled by the machinations of his mother. His father, often

away from home, knew little of what was happening and was no match for her will. She watched everything Gerhard did, demanded to know everywhere he went, and keeping any friends proved difficult. Though helpless on the surface, he roiled with loathing inside. He knew he needed to find a way to break free, even if it required time and patience. All of that was worth it to him. He wasn't simply "quick" with books but had a special eye for markets and trading. He outpaced his father, who was already a standout.

After painting a picture of the present, the future was at hand. Leo inhaled and closed his eyes. The fabric of the human world was more fragile than any of them knew. With a little prodding, it could warp, but never in the exact same way. This made his explorations difficult, but also exhilarating. With all his might, he lurched forward. No single, clear thread, but a web of interconnected ones, like veins branching through flesh. So alive and so fickle. He entered the path he was most drawn to. He couldn't describe why certain ones felt more correct than others. He simply knew — most of the time.

He heard the peeling of church bells, jubilant and alive. There was going to be a marriage — at least, it was likely. A strong union at that. Despite what his mother wanted, Gerhard would find a woman that could love him for who he was, not merely after the family money. In hushed tones in their wedding bed, the happy couple would discuss what to do about her. What could they do to create enough distance? She had presided over every aspect of the wedding, but they knew such oversight from her couldn't continue. Gerhard's position in his father's business was already cemented, but what if he could strike out on his own? His wife nodded along as he talked, offering suggestions.

The icing out would then proceed gradually, but effectively. Once their first child was born, his mother's influence would be a distant memory. All of her inquiries wouldn't be

returned, and they were conveniently never home when she made house calls to them. She never knew why or even wanted to admit that it had happened at all. As age began to wear at her and she became homebound, she was enshrined in her solitude. Her husband would die a few years before her and even though she would continue to live in the lap of luxury, there wasn't much for her to do but reminiscence, but she still struggled to see her fault in everything. An uneventful passing, which would only give her son brief pause. A pretty gravestone, adorned by flowers, which would wilt to nothing and never be replenished.

His eyes shot open, body coursing with energy. The final realization, even though it was dire, always made him feel alive. He had a view few could ever dream of seeing, and he tried not to take the responsibility lightly. The strings of fate were always intriguing, but rarely fair. Energy sapped from the exercise; he sat back down. He looked Mrs. Koopman in the eye, finding a mix of anxiety and impatience in them. He took a deep breath, beginning to respin the story to give to her. He needed to have her walk away satisfied and have her money in his pocket. The full truth wasn't going to bring that.

"Your son has great success ahead of him. His mind is very sharp, as you've said. He will find a good mate, using his own discretion to do so," he said, stopping to breathe. "Stand by him, always."

She nodded, fiddling with her ornate fan. "Of course I will. When you say good mate, do you mean a girl of high standing?"

"Yes," he said, "one who is ready to support him in even greater success."

"Good," she replied. "I want nothing short of that."

He smiled thinly. "Do you have any other questions for me, or anything else you want clarity on?"

She sat in silence, staring at the ceiling as she thought. “With my son out of the house and my husband away on business so frequently, how will I occupy myself?”

“Well, you may be able to answer that yourself. What do you enjoy? Reading, sewing, another artistic pursuit, perhaps?”

She laughed harshly. “I put my attention on things far less frivolous.”

“There’s nothing wrong with some time spent being idle. It refreshes the mind, I find,” he said, knowing he was fighting a losing battle with her stubbornness.

“Speak for yourself. Perhaps charity work would suit me.”

Despite her continued resistance to his suggestions, she was there to see him less as a fortuneteller and more of a confidante. She was paying him to listen to her to assure herself that she was headed in the right direction. Her worries and fears, otherwise secret, were safe with him if he had her money in his pocket. An almost stranger was preferable to someone who was closer, who she feared could use her troubles as social currency against her. Her high status circle of friends were advantageous to have but soulless. But, if one of them hadn’t recommended his services, she wouldn’t have been sitting across from him. Gradually, he was getting to know each of them. Their obsession with their own standing in the social hierarchy ate them alive. They didn’t have time for anything else.

“A maxim I often say, which you are free to disagree with, is that life takes its course like a river carves through sediment. If we try to divert it into a path we want, it rarely goes as planned. This flow never stops, even when we want it to. It simply is.”

She chuckled. “An interesting proposition.”

“You have accomplished a lot through sheer will. Let yourself celebrate that. Sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labor.”

She nodded. "I do try. May I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course," he said, staying ever amenable. People often had questions about who he was, where he had come from, or how he had gotten his powers. He always kept them vague because the truth was far more ridiculous than any lie he could conjure.

"How on Earth did you get into such a line of business?"

He folded his hands together, beginning his dance of half truths. "When I was growing up, I didn't know my skills were so unusual, but once I did, I realized it was a good way to support myself. I don't exactly fit into many traditional lines of work, after all."

"And what is your background?" she said, eyes narrowing.

"Quite humble, I assure you. A fishing village a few days' ride from here."

That was where he had first arrived in the mortal realm, anyway. It had always struck him as random, but he didn't put it past his kind to have had crueler intentions of some kind.

"You've done well for yourself then."

He smiled. "Yes."

"Does your family have similar...abilities?"

"I've never had a family. I was found," he said. True, in a sense. His true "family" was around a different bend of reality, cutting him off like dead tissue for daring to step out of line. He didn't miss the absurd rules and tedium of the fae court, but occasionally, he yearned to be around others who could truly understand him. Though that was rare. His own stubbornness kept him from abject despair.

"Oh."

He smiled. "Not everyone is privileged enough to know their own pedigree."

"No indeed. Shall I pay you then?"

“If you have nothing else you want to speak about.”

She took out her purse, counting out a stack of bills for him. She handed them over, keeping her hand from ever touching his. She was still cautious of him but admired the assortment of rings he wore.

“Good day, Mrs. Koopman.”

“Good day, Mr. Vanderwheele,” she said, gathering all her belongings and rushing out.

She was already on her way to her next engagement, never slowing down for a moment. He couldn't say whether she would ever be back or not. That type, despite their constant uncertainty, were incredibly stubborn too. If she believed he could allay her anxieties further, she would seek him again. He left the stiff backed chair for the divan, lying down and enjoying the late afternoon sunlight. Most days in the city were cloudy or rainy, so he cherished any appearance of the sun. Despite its gloomy weather, he liked the enterprising heart of the place.

Parts of it were built on land that wouldn't have existed without human intervention and manipulation. It was less of a unified city than a sprawling network of islands between canals. After growing bored of sitting still, he put the kettle on for tea. He spooned a variety imported directly from Ceylon into his teapot. He had one for show and one for real use. Others in his profession made a show of reading tea leaves, using occult decks of cards, or calling on spirits to share their supposed insights into the future. He didn't have any gimmicks to peer into the kaleidoscope of time. His own mind was enough. He could reach into the crevices other so-called soothsayers only dreamed of accessing. When the kettle whistled, he got his tea steeping. He breathed in the fragrant smell, eyes growing heavier. Mrs. Koopman was his third client of the day. That was his limit. Any more people than that in one day, and he began to strain himself. It was like flexing a muscle until it tore.

Some called his ability a second sight or a sixth sense. For him, it was deeper than that. It was a vestige of his home, where the concept of linear time was utterly foreign. Time was far more fluid there, sometimes moving quickly and other times slowing to a dribble. It depended on where you were within the realm, where it could vary even from one field to the next. Time was much more of a tricky, playful creature, not unlike the reputation his kind got in human mythos. On top of all the other upheavals from his exile, the strictness of time on Earth had taken some getting used to. By stretching himself out so often, perhaps he was trying to return to his original form. It saddened him to know he now lived most of his life outside of it.

He sipped his tea, trying to focus on more uplifting subjects. While he didn't know any other fae, he had come across many other kinds of magicdoers in Amsterdam and his other travels. They were an eclectic, but intriguing bunch. He managed to be the oddest man out; even they found him exotic. He was a rare specimen from a distant, mysterious land. Many of them gave him an unearned deference, intimidated by his origins. He didn't let it get to him. In fact, he took it as a compliment. It was nice not to be underestimated.

As he lounged, he kept getting the nagging feeling that he was forgetting something. He ran through different possibilities in his mind. Bills? No, he had paid the rent for his flat a few months in advance. A client inquiry? He kept an appointment schedule he updated daily for that. Some sort of letter he kept meaning to read? Probably. He shot up, rifling through the papers strewn on the parlor table. He didn't know what he was searching for, only that it was important. He didn't see any surprise bills, so he ruled it out being a matter of money. He looked at the outside of each envelope and picked up a blank one he didn't remember seeing before. The paper was incredibly soft to the touch and fragile. Someone must have delivered it personally. As he

opened it, he felt a push of energy. It dissipated in a moment, but it felt familiar. When he unfolded the card inside, all of his confusion went away.

You're cordially invited to an enchanting soiree.

He could recognize that spidery handwriting anywhere. Jonas, a warlock with a penchant for dazzling displays of wealth and grandeur, often invited Leo to his parties as a guest of interest. He wasn't paraded around but felt that Jonas touted a friendship that didn't really exist between them. But, the premium liquor and wine flowed freely, and the other guests entertained him well enough. All the magicdoers in his circle were skilled in their own right and many retained clients too but provided different kinds of services than him. Potions, transformations, trickery, seances, and much more. The variety in abilities was almost endless and so were the ways to sell them to humans. Everyone needed money and immortals often liked to have a lot of it.

Jonas was one of them. He lived such a high profile and illustrious life with his income that Leo worried that the wrong kind of eyes would scrutinize him. Someone who wanted his money for themselves could look no further than deviance and black magic. He hoped Jonas was smart enough to understand such risks. Jonas was a few years shy of a hundred, which sounded impressive, but was dwarfed by other immortals they knew. Those on the younger side, like Jonas, could be too caught up in their own excitement to realize when the walls were closing in. Leo knew he had to attend the party but was woefully unprepared. He liked to have multiple days to consider his outfit.

He couldn't disappoint Jonas or any other esteemed guests, after all. Also, as bittersweet as it was, such parties reminded him of the pomp of the fae court. He had never attended that frequently, but it was always an event when he did. So many games were being played around

him, alliances formed, and rivalries battled out. He had enjoyed it, at least when he was just a spectator of the intrigue. The party started at 10, and realizing evening was already falling, the process of getting ready would set him far past that. He threw open the doors of his large wardrobe. It had been in a state of disarray for months, but he knew where everything was for the most part. He couldn't stand the idea of showing up poorly dressed — it was a worse proposition than not going at all.

Other than “enchanting” there was no other directive on the theme. That gave him more carte blanche than usual, but the lack of direction was a challenge as well. As he rifled through his sizable collection of clothes, he wished that there was someone there with him to judge his different options. He was solitary at heart, but he still yearned for companionship. He decided to get started with the underlayers. He picked out a ruffled white shirt, more on the cream side, and a dark blue necktie to go with it. The waist on trousers worn by the creme de la creme of the city had begun creeping up over the past decade. It mimicked the trends of cities held in the highest regard, like Paris or London. The clothes worn in high society often felt oppressive, but the impression they made on others was what mattered.

For the coat on top, he chose one of his most recent purchases, a rich green brocade dripping with silver thread used to make a cascade of flowers. It shone in the light, especially under the flickering of candles. He liked looking unearthly, a reflection of who he was inside. After living away from his realm, his body had changed but maintained most of his previous appearance. His fingers were far less spindly, and his height conformed to something more normal among mortals. His hair thankfully had its same volume and shine. It was one of his most cherished possessions. Its curliness meant it was impossible to brush all the way through unless it

was wet. He cursed himself for not having time for a proper bath. In lieu of his usual routine, he tied it back, wetting his fingers in the washbasin to tame flyaway strands.

He thought about what accessories he wanted to wear. He also often wore multicolored pieces of jewelry, as his eyes never stayed one shade long. That night was going to be no different. He switched a few of his plain rings out for flashier ones. He then chose two mismatched earrings, one a pearl and the other a small garnet. Getting there had been less laborious than he had anticipated. He sat back down, growing more nervous about going than he expected. The intrigue at Jonas' parties was nothing compared to what he had once endured but could still get to his head. Some of the people there asked him endless and rather pointed questions about his powers and origins. They wanted information from him that he wouldn't reveal on the pain of his own death. His kind may have abandoned him, but he saw no need to expose their traditions and secrets to people that would gladly exploit them.

He glanced at the clock over and over again, the last remnants of the sun long wiped from the sky. Time had a way of sneaking up on him when he got too wrapped up in himself. He checked every element of his clothing and styling a final time, electing for an overcoat and a sturdier pair of boots in case it rained. He stood by the door, breathing in and getting ready for the world outside of his precious flat. He locked the thick door behind him and went down a flight of stairs to the street. He didn't need any guidance to get to Jonas' house. He knew the twists and turns of the cobblestone streets almost anywhere within the city. He liked to find hidden corners and oddities; that was often where he had the best time. But the most important part of the nighttime scene was the canals. The water was a mirror of the stars above.

He strolled, deciding that hurrying wasn't becoming of him. The party would no doubt go on until the early hours of the morning, so tardiness wasn't a concern. As he stared at the

reflected sky in the water, he grew uneasy. The fae and human worlds were not completely apart. There were certain points where they brushed up against each other, allowing for people or things to cross through. He had been thrown out through one of them, and he worried he could be taken back the same way. What if they decided they weren't done with him, that not enough of an example hadn't been made? He shuddered. The only taste of their presence were stray whispers he heard, laughing at or mocking him. His life hadn't taken the course he pictured at all, but it wasn't disappointing to him. The unexpected, and even painful, parts of his past were what had brought him to something relatively stable. Being among such new people had given him the chance to reinvent himself and not be tied to the same burdens he shouldered among other fae.

He walked for around an hour, darting through busy streets and empty rows of houses and shops closed for the night. Since his brocade coat was covered by a plain one, he didn't stick out more than necessary. He knew that someone too flashy was an easy target. The air grew cold, especially with the intense wind chill building. He became worried all over again that something would be out of place on him. He tried to tell himself not to care, to no avail. He sensed the buzz of activity in the house before he turned the block. People spilled out into the sprawling and manicured yard, and others clamored to get in at the front gate. But nothing short of a personal invitation would do. It was hard to take in the whole scene. The entire property, inside and out, was in a frenzy. He heard multiple sources of music, people screeching, and glasses being dropped.

He got his invitation out of his pocket and held it out to the man at the gate.

“Welcome in, Mr. Vanderwheele.”

“Thank you,” he said, smiling.

To his relief, he was barely noticed as he walked down the main walkway, walled in by carefully cut shrubbery. That was until he dropped his outer coat.

“Where did you get that made?” a woman in a pink dress walking next to him asked.

“I can’t tell you just like that, my dear.”

She giggled. “I thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

“Of course not,” he said. “I’m Leo, what’s your name?”

“Saskia.” She looked him over again, growing confused.

He could tell she was a witch. A simple one, but decently strong. “Guess first, then I’ll tell you what I am.”

She covered her face in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, my expressions are so unseemly. Please don’t mind me, it’s none of my business.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, “I like to see what people can tell about me.”

“Well, you’re...not something I’ve seen before,” she said, her face growing red.

“Thank you!” he said, grinning. He responded to every remark on his hard-to-identify profile as an automatic compliment.

When they walked inside, their brief interaction was washed away by the din. She shot him one more look before vanishing into the crowd on the broad ground floor. Most furniture was cleared away, allowing for an entire crowd to inhabit it. Ladies wore elaborate, poofed dresses, many reminiscent of past eras. Most men were dressed to the nines too, but less refined, as always. Leo was certain almost every person with magical inclinations in Amsterdam was there and likely beyond.

He saw musicians, acrobats, and magic tricks at every turn. All of them were aided by their inhuman abilities in some way. Sleight of hand was nothing compared to something being

turned invisible at a moment's notice. Servers cycled around the room with trays of champagne and stronger libations with gin and other top shelf liquors. When offered one, he graciously took it. He stood in one place, beholding the spectacle around him. He fit in well, lots of others wearing metallic or bright colors too. A fragrance traveled on the air, light and floral. Jonas always thought of every detail, each party planned out for months at a time.

“Leo!” a familiar voice yelled.

He looked all around for the source with no success. Then, someone tapped his shoulder. Jonas was so close their arms were touching, appearing from thin air. Most of his skills were of the party trick variety, but Leo knew they went deeper than that.

“You always have to make an entrance,” Leo said, sighing. “Or a lack of one, in this case.”

Jonas laughed; it was a deep and hearty sound. “You are more difficult to surprise than most. I had to catch you while you were distracted.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “It’s hard not to be. This place is packed to the gills.”

“I think it’s one of my biggest yet,” Jonas said, carrying himself with pride.

“People do enjoy a good party, and yours seem to fit the bill,” Leo said.

That was about as close as he could get to a real compliment. They didn’t come easily for him. He took a thorough look at Jonas’ getup for the night. His entire look was so gaudy, he could have walked into Versailles at its prime without a second glance. Other than not wearing a wig, his red and gold coat and silk stockings were that of royalty. Jonas wore his hair long too, but it was dark and only curled at his temples. His eyes were grey, and it was hard to catch him without a smile. He was high on the splendor of his own life, and Leo couldn’t blame him. They walked to the side near the grand staircase to better hear each other.

“What have you been doing since I last saw you?” Jonas asked him.

“My work, as always,” he said.

Jonas nodded, eyebrows raised. “And I’m supposed to believe that’s it?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. With Amara being away for so long, I’ve been left to entertain myself,” Leo said.

Amara was the closest thing he could call a best friend. She was a witch, originally from the West Coast of Africa, who had spent her lifetime of many millennia traveling to the ends of the earth. Why she had chosen Amsterdam of all places for her newest home was beyond him. But, even with a thriving clientele and social circle, she still got the yearning to travel for long stretches every few years. She never spoke much about what she did, and Leo knew it was better not to pry.

“Yes, her presence has been missed. I did send her an invitation, but I have no clue when she’s planning to come back,” Jonas said, sighing.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath,” Leo said. He had received a letter from her sent from Venice during the Carnivale a few months before, and that was it.

“Well, if you’re ever bored, come call on me. I promise I’m good for more than event planning,” Jonas said, patting down his collar and sleeves in the small mirror hanging next to them.

“Thank you. My work is exhausting is all. I like my stretches of boredom.” Jonas smiled. “Yes, what you do is incredibly impressive. As you know, I have directed numerous clients of mine to you.”

“And they come back satisfied, I hope?”

“Of course.”

As Leo thought of what to say to continue their conversation, he looked out at the crowd again. It was still growing, especially as a new round of musicians came to replace the last. Jonas stuffed the pockets of performers to keep entertainment going the entire night long. Leo didn't like to look into the future of people he knew who weren't clients, but he was tempted to know about Jonas. How long could he really keep up his fast-paced lifestyle? Would he tire of Amsterdam and move somewhere with new faces? He resisted the urge every time. That crossed a line, and immortal lives were far harder to decipher anyway. With no end point, the threads were even more tangled and subject to change.

When the new music began, the energy of the crowd shot up a thousand-fold. Everyone rushed to find a partner to dance with. Man and woman, woman and woman, man and man; it didn't matter. He spotted one person taking a step back from the scrum. Even from across the room, he knew who it was instantly. Amara, back at last. She wore a wide-sleeved, lacy shirt and trousers. Despite wearing only two pieces when most guests were piled in layer upon layer, she exuded poise and sophistication. She wore matching earrings and necklaces made from turquoise. The blue was electric against her dark skin. He didn't know how to best get her attention. He was tempted to run over but was worried he wouldn't get to her before she moved and was swallowed up by the crowd for good.

She met his eyes. Her sharp senses and awareness were doing his work for him. She waved at him and Jonas and wove through the room over to them.

"This is good news," Jonas said, grinning.

"I know, I can hardly believe it," Leo answered. There was so much for the two of them to discuss. He had missed how free flowing their talks were, walks through parks and along canals, and the many sage pieces of advice she had after living on Earth for so long.

She immediately gathered Leo into a hug. At first it startled him, but then he reciprocated. She went to Jonas next, who gave her a kiss on both cheeks.

“It’s so good to see you both!” she exclaimed.

“When did you get back to Amsterdam?” Leo asked. He was almost offended she had come to Jonas’ house before calling on him.

“Just last night. Your invitation was right on top of all the mail I’ve missed, Jonas. So, despite how tired I am, I knew I had to come,” she said, tossing back her hair, which was styled in braids with golden accents on the ends.

“I appreciate it,” Jonas said, “and I’m happy to have reunited such dear friends.”

The trio exchanged pleasantries, but Leo wished he could speak with Amara alone. But he beared it, given Jonas was the host, and he didn’t want to be too impolite. Amara and Jonas had a good report. She definitely spent more time with him than Leo did. She was more socially capable than him in many ways.

“What were you two talking about before you discovered me in the crowd?” Amara asked.

Leo and Jonas both started to speak at the same time, then laughed. Jonas nodded, letting Leo go first.

“We were catching up,” Leo said.

“And I was telling him to come out more,” Jonas added.

She chuckled. “That is a difficult task.”

“I had to try,” Jonas said.

“Just come over for tea sometime then. I’m much happier when I don’t have to leave home,” Leo said, flustered at being the topic of the conversation.

“I can verify that is true,” Amara said. “And you have a lovely flat. I wouldn’t want to leave either if I had such fantastic decor.”

“I just know where I’m comfortable, I suppose, and I prefer not to break the routines I’ve set for myself.”

“You may not believe me, but I’m the same way you are,” Jonas said. “Without my routines, I am nothing.”

“You’re both such meticulous men.” Amara leaned against the wall. “It wouldn’t hurt either of you to try something new or see new places.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Leo said. “I know you were in Italy, but where else did you go this time?”

“I made my way all the way home,” she said, “which is why I was gone for so long.”

“And how was that?” Jonas said.

She sighed. “It had its ups and downs. But it was nice to see everything again.”

Leo knew there was no point trying to force any more information out of her. She had shared far more than usual.

“Now that you’re back, what else do you have planned?” Jonas said, also aware of her private ways.

“I let my most frequent clients know that I’m here again. I tried to give each of them a good amount of supplies before I left, but I’m not sure if they all lasted.”

She was an expert in potions, especially of the healing variety. Many of her friends had tried them, but he was cautious, since his composition was so different from everyone else’s. Thankfully, she understood that.

“I’m sure they’re grateful you’re back,” Jonas said.

“Yes, I’m having my first appointment with one tomorrow,” she said, “but enough shop talk. I want to use the little energy I have for some dancing.”

“I would be happy to accompany you,” Jonas said, excited to do something more energetic.

“Wonderful, I knew you would be easy to convince,” she said, looking over at Leo. “What do I need to do to get you to come with us?”

“More wine at least,” Leo said.

Jonas flagged down one of his servants, who delivered a second glass of champagne to Leo. Leo made a show of drinking it in dainty sips, holding them all up.

“I’d rather just talk, but I don’t want to stop you two,” he said.

“You’re not doing a good job of disproving the reputation of your kind as tricksters,” Amara said, smirking.

“Oh please,” he said, throwing his head back and downing the rest of the glass. “Can I get something a little more potent?”

“Yes, I was thinking the same,” said Jonas, turning to Amara. “And you, my dear?”

“You can count me in.”

Jonas dashed away in search of a concoction with liquor. The two friends were alone, amid the unfolding scene.

“Jonas will not despair if you take a night off from wearing the most dazzling, high-quality fabric you can source from head to toe,” Amara said, getting at something he wasn’t sure of yet.

“It’s not for him,” he said. “I don’t like the idea of coming here without looking the part, that’s all.”

She hummed in doubt. “His kind words for you never stop coming. You must be aware of his adoration for you.”

“Well, I have no interest in Jonas. I don’t have the same afflictions of the heart as all of you do,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Ah, and yet they say fae never lie,” Amara said, smiling.

“You shouldn’t believe them, my dear.”

“I can read intentions far better than words,” she said, her gaze boring into his soul.

“If you insist on being so nosy about my relations, does that give me permission to ask about yours?”

She laughed. “Obviously.”

“Did you leave anyone behind when you went on your latest adventures? Or, did you take the opportunity to reconnect with lovers in old places?”

She said nothing but smiled even wider.

“Both?” he said incredulously. “How do you have time for all of that?”

“I make it work,” she answered. “You could too, if you wanted.”

He huffed, shaking his head. “It all sounds so tiring. First someone wants one thing from you, then another, and finally, nothing you do is good enough. Then, onto the next!”

“It can be. However, such connections can also be beautiful, if you’re willing to open yourself to them, even knowing you could be hurt in the end,” she said, not ready to give up her ground.

They saw Jonas walking slowly back to them, grasping onto three glasses with all his concentration. If someone as much as brushed against him the wrong way, disaster would strike. Leo started to laugh, which Amara joined in on. He felt a little bad until he saw Jonas trying his

hardest not to laugh too, since that would also end in catastrophe. After another minute of suspense, he was back, handing them their glasses and heaving a sigh of relief.

“You’re truly going above and beyond as a host,” Leo said.

“Yes, thank you,” Amara added.

They clinked their glasses together and drank. A hint of lemon, gin, and elderflower.

“Wow,” Leo said. “This is good.”

“I tried everything myself,” Jonas said. “If my guests aren’t enjoying themselves, it’s impossible for me to.”

“You were born for this,” Leo said. “Unfortunately, I don’t care as much about the enjoyment of others.”

“I don’t blame you.” Jonas touched his shoulder briefly. “There are times where I worry I’m too heavy handed, like some sort of tyrannical monarch.”

“You are nothing like that. I would know,” Leo said, shuddering at the thought of the fae court compared Jonas’ soirées. “I assure you this is far better.”

“An expert of courtly life,” Amara said, doing a mock bow.

“Our very own Saint Germain,” Jonas said, winking at Leo.

“I am far more skilled than him,” Leo said, offended at the implication, “and I stick to one origin story — most of the time.”

“I meant more in the sense that you appeared from thin air, aweing everyone with your mere presence,” Jonas replied, softening his tone.

“Oh,” Leo said, bowled over by the praise.

“I think your origins are far more shrouded in mystery than his,” Amara said. “A truer version of the myth, you could say.”

“You two need to calm down,” Leo scoffed. “You’re feeding off of each other.”

Jonas and Amara shared a loaded glance he didn’t understand. They kept nursing their drinks in silence. Leo was confused why Jonas wasn’t dashing off to talk to more guests or take care of something else. He never knew what Jonas was after, or at least didn’t want to admit it. People had flirted with him before, but never so persistently. He didn’t want Jonas to stop, but he also didn’t know how to respond. Among fae, courtship was only ever about power. Though earthly immortals mostly did it for pure enjoyment. After finishing the strong cocktail, he was finally feeling tipsy. The frenzy of his surroundings became more bearable.

The same woman in the pink dress from earlier walked up to them. He couldn’t remember her name but offered an awkward smile.

“I changed my hair,” she replied, chewing on her lip.

“It looks nice,” Amara said. “I assume you know Jonas, but this is my friend Leo.”

“We met earlier,” Leo said. “And to answer your question from earlier, I’m a fae.”

“Oh!” she said, smiling, relieved there was no more awkwardness between them.

Amara and Jonas waited to be clued in.

“We came in at the same time,” Saskia said, “and once we started talking, I realized he wasn’t a warlock, and I wracked my brain.”

“A common occurrence,” Amara said. “It happened when we first met too.”

“She guessed correctly on the first try, I was impressed,” Leo said.

“I knew who you were before I met you, so I don’t get to brag the same,” Jonas said.

Saskia also asked Amara about her trip, but she was more tight-lipped about it with her. So much for being open with one’s lovers. Jonas and Leo shared their own look over that.

“Would you like to dance?” Amara asked her. “I’ve been trying to get these two to come with me, but I haven’t been successful yet.”

“That sounds...perfect,” Saskia said, taking her time to select a suitable last word.

Amara took Saskia’s hand. “Maybe I’ll see you two later tonight.”

“Bye then, have fun,” Leo said.

Jonas waved, and Amara blew them both a kiss. When Amara and Saskia took their leave from the men, they were unable to look at anything but each other. They went straight to the dance floor. Amara twirled Saskia around on every flourish of the violin, which delighted her. They laughed in each other’s arms, caught up in the revelry. Leo and Jonas looked at them, a growing tension of their own simmering between them.

“Want to have some absinthe?” Jonas whispered in Leo’s ear. “They can get along without us.”

Leo tried to process what Jonas was asking of him. He wanted to say yes, but his answer caught in his throat.

“But I’m not even wearing green tonight,” Leo replied.

Jonas laughed, taking the quip as an affirmative. “Here, we can go to my rooms upstairs. It’ll give us a break from the noise, in any case.”

Leo decided to play along, pretending to not know where things were heading. If he did, he would become too scared to continue. They went upstairs, passing by rooms filled with more finery. One room had its door ajar, the cloying scent of opium smoke spilling out. Leo waved his hand in front of him. He loathed the smell, and the way the drug made people into shells of themselves. But any large, opulent gathering had people using it.

They went all the way to the end of the hall, stopping in front of an ornate door, bordered by painted flowers and birds. Jonas took out a large key ring and unlocked it, beckoning Leo to go through first. His personal rooms. Who else had ever seen them? Other than clients in his parlor, Leo had only let a few people see his flat, especially his bedroom. He knew not everyone kept to his level of privacy, but he still felt the vulnerability of Jonas' gesture. They walked through the first room, and Leo looked at all the paintings on the walls. All of them were of the finest quality, no doubt very expensive and time-consuming to acquire.

The second room was dark.

Jonas went and touched his finger to a few of the candles scattered around the room. A flame burst from each of them after he was done. An impressive trick, personally for Leo. Once the light erupted, Leo saw there was a mahogany table, liquor cabinet, chairs, couches, and even more impressive art. A Renaissance-style statue of a Roman god — Leo couldn't recall which one — took up an entire corner of the room. There was enough space to entertain a decent-sized group, making it feel gigantic for just the two of them. As promised, Jonas took out two glasses and a bottle filled with the stuff. Naysayers accused absinthe of being the source of delirium and deviance, but the truth was, that was just the crowd who preferred to drink it in the first place.

“Sit wherever you like,” Jonas said, still preparing the drinks.

Leo chose the sofa piled with velvety throw pillows. It was so soft that he collapsed into it. Jonas came over to give him a glass, then sat in the chair across from him.

“I sweetened it a little so it will go down a little easier. You haven't tried it before, right?” he asked, swirling the liquid, which was slightly viscous.

“No,” Leo said.

The glass was miniscule, but he knew the liquor contained in it was more potent than everything else he had had that night so far.

“*Proost*,” Jonas said, clinking their glasses. “Now drink up.”

He did as Jonas told him, and he felt his head grow lighter the instant it was down his throat. The stinging aftertaste made him cough a few times. Jonas downed his with practiced ease but still struggled to keep a straight face. Leo cleared his throat a few times.

Jonas laughed, breaking the silence.

Leo let out a large exhale. “I should have believed people when they said it was so god awful.”

“That’s the fun of it,” Jonas said. “And it’s worth it.”

“We’ll see about that,” Leo said. He leaned back, feeling woozy. He looked up at the ceiling, and some cherubs stared back at him.

“Everything you have in here is so...you,” Leo said. His tongue was already feeling looser.

“Thank you. I’ve spent a lot of time picking out the right things.”

“I did the same for my flat. It felt so good to finally have a space of my own.”

“Where were you before that?” Jonas asked.

“Nowhere,” Leo said, offended at the sudden and direct question. “Nowhere good, at least.”

“That didn’t come out the right way, I’m sorry,” Jonas said. “It’s none of my business. I haven’t even told you the first thing about my past, and here I am, prying into yours.”

“It’s all right,” Leo said, sitting up, surprised at his upset tone.

“I feel like everything I say irks you,” Jonas said, looking away and blowing a piece of hair out of his face.

“No, that’s not true. If that was true, why would I come to all your parties?”

Jonas nodded, still not believing him. He inhaled, clasping his hands together. “You haven’t been avoiding me purposely, have you?”

“Of course not. I just...don’t go out much. I hate the kind of scrutiny that brings,” Leo said. “Your parties are one of the few places I feel like I can actually enjoy myself.”

“Why would anyone judge you? If anything, they should envy you,” Jonas said, eyes shining with a new fire.

“Why?” Leo asked, growing confused.

“You are singular. The way you carry yourself, how you talk, what you know,” he continued.

“Everyone tries to set themselves apart from others, but you don’t even have to try.”

For the first time that night, Leo felt heat rise in his face. Jonas’ affection for him went beyond a flirtatious interest.

“I’ve always wondered how you do it,” Jonas said at almost a whisper.

“Well, the lines between man and woman are not as sharp among my kind. So, I have always felt comfortable being exactly as I am,” Leo said.

The fae had many issues, but being so strict about what men and women were supposed to do or not do wasn’t one of them. Though it was unfair and despotic in many ways, they were ruled by queens, not kings.

“That’s nice. It’s taken me a long time to embrace my true self,” Jonas said, running his hand on the edge of the table. “Traditional Dutch households don’t exactly like boys that refuse to marry or run their father’s business.”

So, he had come from money after all. Leo doubted it was the same level of wealth he had amassed on his own, but it made sense.

“And here you are, proving them wrong,” Leo said. Compliments became easier with multiple rounds of liquor and good company.

“I hope that’s true,” Jonas said, rubbing one of his temples with his hand.

“It is,” Leo insisted. “Why don’t I go and get both of us a second glass?”

“Please do,” he said, managing to laugh.

Leo picked up both of the glasses, the bottle still uncapped. He poured in more than the first round and didn’t add syrup. If it was difficult going down, at least it would distract both of them from any lingering awkwardness. He handed Jonas his glass back and stood next to him while they drank. He hadn’t needed to glimpse into the future to predict how they both struggled afterwards. Leo gripped onto the arm of the chair, feeling like his stomach was going to collapse in on itself.

Jonas wiped his forehead, then cautiously put his hand on Leo’s arm. “How long can you stay?”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be,” Leo said.

“Good.”

They talked late into the night, going from laughing to almost crying, to just staring into each other’s eyes. Leo was shocked by how natural it felt. Like confiding in a friend, but even more transcendent. Was this the feeling Amara had spoken so fondly of? He was starting to

understand her words, but it startled him how quickly it had happened. He would never admit to her that she was right.

“I’m happy I got to be here with you like this,” Jonas said, tripping over his words.

“This has been nice,” Leo said, nodding reassuringly.

“It’s getting very late, early at this point. I shouldn’t keep you any longer,” Jonas said, rubbing his eyes. “And I need to make sure nothing is going horribly wrong downstairs.”

“I understand.”

They both stood up, leaving the sanctuary and quiet of his rooms. At the top of the stairs, Jonas stopped.

“Can we do this again?” he asked Leo, shaking like a reed.

“Yes. Come over for tea any day. My last client of the day is usually gone after four.”

“What about next Wednesday?”

“All right,” Leo said. “Amara can give you my address. Or, if I can find a piece of paper somewhere, I’ll write it down.”

“Wait here, I’ll go get one.” Jonas went back to his rooms almost at a run. He came back a minute later, sweating, and pressed a pen and paper into Leo’s hands.

“Thank you,” Leo said, letting out a laugh.

He used the railing as a hard surface, writing it as neatly as possible as he could manage in his state. He handed it back to Jonas, who put it in the breast pocket of his coat, clearly intent on keeping it safe.

Leo looked down. The guests had cleared out considerably, but there was still a decent sized group going. There was one spirited cellist amusing around half of them, while the other half was dispersed and doing whatever they pleased. Amara and Saskia were nowhere to be seen.

Leo assumed they had left to be truly alone. He was going to make sure he visited Amara soon. They would have so much to talk from that night alone, not to mention what they had gotten up to in their months apart.

Jonas morphed back into the confident host as soon as people noticed him. Many people came up to him, clamoring for the opportunity to talk. Jonas was used to it, but not in the mood. In a break between the various guests, Leo took the chance to say goodbye.

“I’m going to start my walk home,” Leo said, “but I’ll see you soon.”

Jonas went back to the same lovelorn boy he was with upstairs. “Goodnight, get back safely. Until next week.”

“Goodnight, Jonas.”

The high ceilings and tall doorways on his way out made his head spin even more. He didn’t remember much of the walk back. Just that it was very cold, too wet, and muddy. But, he had enough of his wits about him to make it in one piece and with all of his valuables. The sun crested above the horizon, beckoning him to sleep and everyone else to begin their day. Leo trudged up the stairs to his flat gratefully. He felt good about how the night had gone, even if so, much uncertainty remained. However, Amara was right. He needed to try opening himself, even just slightly. Before he could ponder on that anymore, he needed to lie in bed and close his eyes. Despite his skills for toying with minds and time, he rarely dreamed. To truly rest, there needed to be nothing disturbing him. As he fell asleep, he thought of Jonas’ warmth and Amara’s sly remarks.

Even as the sunlight spilled over him, it only made him more drained. He would try romance, just once. What harm could there be in having him over for tea?