

Unbound

journal

Fall

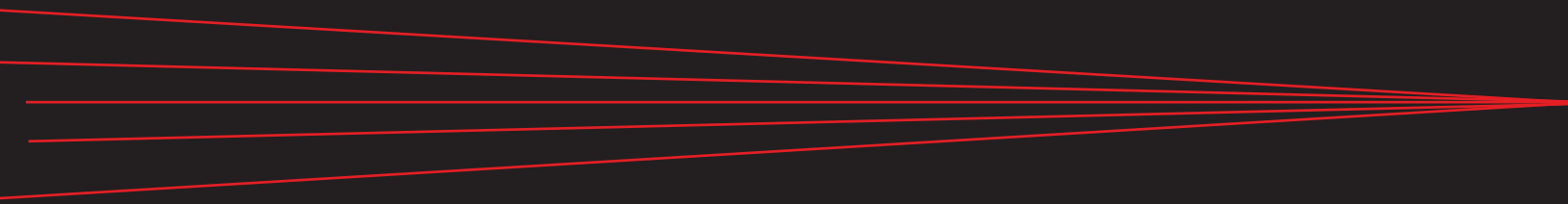
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and swung at Morgan.

But it didn't connect. His sword hung over her head, mere inches away. Something was preventing him from going further.

“Why can't I strike you?” Albert screamed out as frustration boiled in his voice. “Is this more of your doing?”

“No magic here. It's simply your own conscience holding you back.”



Albert understood the feeling that weighed down his heart. He was a knight reluctant to follow his king. He was a soldier who hated to kill. He was unhappy. Morgan took out her hand and reached up toward the blade. Using only two fingers, she gently lowered it away from her head. Albert, exhausted from the adrenaline and his ordeal, dropped his sword. He collapsed to his knees before Morgan caught him. She knelt down and drew him into an embrace.

“All your life, you were bound to the service of a lord, to your king.” She whispered to him. “You were taught to fight and kill your enemies. Today, you have served yourself and made

your own decisions. You are free.”

“I don’t deserve your sympathy, Morgan.”

“That’s not for you to decide, is it?”

The shadows around the two of them receded away. The observatory returned to its original state, with the moon and the stars bearing witness to one person comforting another. Feeling a great sense of relief, Albert started to sob uncontrollably. Morgan continued to hold him as his cries echoed throughout the tower.

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“Tell me, Morgan, do you believe there is a God?” Albert said, trying to hold back the trembling in his voice. After having dried his tears, Albert and Morgan laid on the ground with their hands intertwined and looked up through the glass dome above.

“If he was real, he would have probably smitten me a long time ago.” Morgan replied.

“I’m just saying, if there was one, do you think he could ever

forgive me?”

“Who cares what he thinks? Even if he did forgive you, you would never know. I think what’s more important is finding an answer you can rely on.”

“And where can I find one of those?”

“Within you. Your first step towards a better life is learning to forgive yourself.”

“But, how? With all the people I’ve killed, it doesn’t feel right.”

“The slate will never be clean, but it’s the burden we all must carry.” Morgan released her grip on Albert’s hand and got up from the ground. She dusted herself off before turning around.

“This is goodbye, Albert. The night has been long and my patience for hosting guests is running low. I believe you deserve a good rest for once. When you wake up, I’ll be gone, and you’ll be left only with the choices you make going forward.”

“But why must you be gone? There’s still so much I will need your guidance with.”

“If I stick around too much, you’ll never learn to find answers on your own. Your king still has that bounty on sorcerers, and I don’t want a repeat of the near disaster we had today. We’re both lucky you’re a pacifist at heart.”

Albert was disheartened by her words. Morsfidei could benefit from someone as insightful as her. In another time and day, Morgan’s talents would have been more appreciated. But the unfortunate circumstances they found themselves in meant none of it would come to pass, and Albert had to begrudgingly accept Morgan’s decision.

“I know this may be improper to ask, but will I ever see you again?” he asked.

“Maybe in your dreams, Albert. For my part, I certainly hope not too soon. If you, as lost as you were, could find my home so easily, then I need a better hideout.”

“And here I was, hoping I could eat the soup you make forever.”

“Then that’s a good enough promise to meet again someday.”

Morgan laughed, before she pulled out her wand again. Albert closed his eyes as he waited for her to cast him to sleep.

“May peaceful dreams be in your future, sir knight.”

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When Albert awoke again, there was soil beneath him and a red-orange sky above. Morning had come. Standing up, Albert turned around to take a look at the tower. But instead of the lofty

structure, what he found was crumbled ruins where its foundation stood. Debris was everywhere, as stones eroding with moss and rotting wood were scattered about. There was no Morgan, no observatory, and no sign of life save for Felix hitched nearby, waiting for Albert.

With nothing else to do, Albert untied his horse and saddled back up. He looked over the remnants of the tower and wondered. He wondered if anything he saw last night was real. He wondered how he would report back or earn his knighthood.

Most of all, he wondered if that even mattered. “Morgan!” he shouted in the vain hope that she could hear him, “I’ll become a stronger person for you! The next time we meet, I’ll be a real knight, someone both of us can be proud of! You’ll see!” Nobody responded back to Albert, but he could only smile as he proclaimed to himself his newfound confidence. He grabbed hold of the reins.

“Let’s go, Felix!” And he rode on.

“The Wings of Tomorrow” Anna Crump

Honeyed sunlight coated her eyelids, prying her out of a slumbered state and into the morning. The room around her was unfamiliar. Drab, gray walls rather than the usual pale yellow. A nondescript painting where the window should be, and a window where her needlepointed tapestry usually hung. Francis sat up in her bed, slowly, fighting against a stiff back and scratchy brace wrapped around her knee. She recognized the beaten oak chest in the corner of the room, as it was the same chest her father left for her after he died. The crocheted blanket at the foot of her bed, pink flowers, and pillowed from years of love, evoked another comfortable memory of cardamom bread and the warm tone of her grandmother's humming as she baked. The pillow next to her was empty and undisturbed, and she tried to remember how the imprint of her husband's head once looked upon it. This was not Francis' room, though pieces from her life accompanied her in this foreign surrounding. Thankful for the walker next to her bed, Francis was able to shuffle in front of the mirror. An old woman stared back. White

disheveled hair begging to be trimmed, sunken eyes, though blue with vibrancy, and a small frame lightly pulled down by time. Leaning closer, Francis examined the wrinkles which adorned her faded, freckled face. The rays of sun explored the crevices, illuminating and shadowing the face of a girl who was once called beautiful, a word that hadn't rung in her ears for years.

The door opened. “Good morning, Francis!” A spry young woman wearing violet scrubs walked into the room. “I see you're already up and ready to start the day. Do you need any help getting dressed?” The nurse's smile was bright, and her whitened teeth crowded next to her flushed cheeks. Francis pondered this question for a moment. She had never seen this woman before.

“I'm alright dear. Could you just tell me where my clothes are?”

“Of course! They're in the dresser next to your bed.” Francis noticed the wardrobe and nodded. “Should I grab that one sweater you like to wear? The one



with the limes on it?”

Francis couldn't fathom how this woman, who was essentially a stranger, knew what sweaters she owned, and which one was her favorite.

“No...no that's quite alright. I think I would like to be alone now.”

“Okay! I'll be back at nine to come grab you for breakfast.” The nurse left the room, and Francis was alone. She opened the dresser and sorted through her clothes until she found the lime sweater. Peppermint and laundry detergent filled her nostrils. She pulled the sweater over her head and wondered how she was going to change her pants with the brace on her knee. Regretting sending the nurse away, Francis accepted her fate within her sweatpants. What was the woman's name? She didn't even know how to call for her. Francis' cheeks grew warm, and she scratched at the neckline on her sweater as she searched for a telephone. Her eyes eventually settled on a landline atop of the desk in front of her.

Taped next to the telephone was a postcard that read, “Jodi's number.” She dialed the digits listed below and prayed the nurse would pick up.

“Mom?” A different voice answered the phone. “Is everything okay?” The woman sounded older than the nurse, but her tone still contained a smooth, youthful quality. “Mom? Can you hear me?” Francis' mouth was agape as recognition flooded her mind.

“Jodi—it's nice to hear your voice.”

“It's nice to hear from you, too. Did something happen since we talked yesterday?” Francis' stomach churned. Yesterday—her memory came up blank. “No...no...nothing happened. I was just a bit...confused dear, that's all.”

“Did Amanda check on you this morning? I asked her to help you get dressed because of your knee.” Francis pieced together her earlier interaction.

“Oh yes...yes Amanda—the nurse. I just sent her back out.”

“The Wings of Tomorrow” Anna Crump

“Okay, that’s good. I’m glad to hear The Waters is taking better care of you after that last nurse...” Jodi trailed off. “How does your knee feel, Mom?” Francis looked down at the brace again.

“It’s fine, I’m fine dear.”

“If the swelling goes down, the doctor will take off the brace for you. You just have to let her know, okay?”

“Jodi,” Francis asked. “When will I get to go back home? You know, to my house.”

“You have to complete your one-month trial at The Waters, remember? Just one month, Mom.”

“This place...” Francis looked at the drab room around her. “It just is not my home.”

“I know, Mom. I know.” Jodi’s voice started to strain, and Francis heard her swallow. “Promise me you’ll give it a chance, okay? Good people are there who care about you and want to help

make your life easier. All I want is for you to be taken care of Mom.” A child screeching in the background of the call interrupted Jodi. “Coming! I’m sorry Mom, I gotta run. John just woke up and you know how the little ones are. Call me tomorrow if you need anything, okay? Love you.”

“Love you too dear.” The line clicked. A month. Only a month. Francis’ eyes wandered over to a picture taped to the corner of the mirror in her room. Her husband’s sturdy hands rested on her shoulders, and a blonde baby swaddled in a pink blanket lay nestled, sleeping, in her arms. The small family, rosy and contented, stood in front of a quaint, green house—their home.

Two sharp raps sounded on the door, and Amanda re-entered the room. “Ready for breakfast, Francis? Come on, I’ll walk with you there.”

Francis sat beside Amanda on a bench outside after finishing her dismal oatmeal and powdery orange juice. She looked around at the mockery of



a garden around her. A lone planter box lay in a small patch of grass, and a smattering of limp weeds lined the concrete path that led from the building. Another resident being wheeled across the footpath muttered something intelligible to his nurse whose plastered smile bobbed in agreeance. A hummingbird darted to a fuchsia plant in a large orange pot, then flew to a sapling behind Francis' bench. The small bird repeated this dance for a few minutes. Fuchsia to tree and back. Mighty wings beating faster than Francis' weary eyes could register. Restless, the hummingbird never stopped to land on Francis' bench, though she wished it could be her companion for the day. Francis noticed Amanda staring at her, but the old woman's eyes stayed trained on the hummingbird floating through the garden.

"Do you know hummingbirds remember every plant they've ever flown to?" the nurse asked. The bird darted toward the two women, hovering directly in front of their bench. "They also know how long the pollen takes to refill." A

smile rippled through the wrinkles on Francis' face.

"I had no idea."

"Smart little guys! With such small heads, I'm not sure where they keep it all!" Amanda beamed and continued to babble in Francis' ear while she watched as the hummingbird resumed its flight path, feathers glittering in the sunlight.

Another nurse opened the glass door adjacent to the garden. "Amanda! There's a phone call for you!"

"Oh darn. Will you be alright out here, Francis? I'll be inside if you need me." The white bottom of Amanda's sneakers flashed in the spring light as she walked away from the bench. Francis continued watching the hummingbird, admiring the streaks of green and pink left in the air as it blurred around her. The garden, along with everything else in this place, had an unsettling familiarity to it. How many times had she seen this bird in the few weeks she had lived there? Was it enough for the bird to remember

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her among the fuchsia? There was no comfort to be found, and Francis longed for the home she built with her husband. Green paint, likely peeling now, and mossy cobblestones wrapping around the house, begging to be followed into the sanctuary beyond it. She would return to her garden soon, for who else would tend to the weeds while she was stuck here?

Her nostalgia was tiring. Francis needed to rest. Wandering back through the suffocating corridors and shuffling toward her room, Francis heard Amanda say her name.

“...Francis has adjusted well to life here at The Waters! I know she gets confused most days, but—” Francis stood just beyond the doorframe and listened to the nurse’s phone call.

“Yes, I hear you, hon. But telling your mother that she’s been at the Waters for two years does nothing but upset her. You saw how distraught she was the last time you visited and reminded her.” Disbelief flooded through the old wom-

an, and she shook her head slowly, attempting to dislodge the words from her mind.

“I agree, you’re in a difficult situation, Jodi. Selling your mother’s house was never going to be easy, but I don’t think it’s necessary to tell her. Tomorrow she’ll wake up again and think it’ll still be there for her to return to one day. There’s nothing wrong with letting your mother have a little hope, even if it’s only real to her.”

Tears welled in Francis’ eyes, blurring the carpet as they dropped down toward her feet. She couldn’t stand in that suffocating hallway for another moment. The walls of the corridor pressed down upon her, and she hastily hobbled the rest of the way to her alleged bedroom. Two years echoed in her head. Francis noticed the calendar hanging on her wall and took it down, flipping back to January. Jodi comes to visit and Francis’ 90th Birthday Party shone back at her in red sharpie. Waters zoo outing in February. Waters choir concert in March. Red lines crossed out the days until May



15th. Her hands shook, and the calendar fluttered to the floor.

Francis wept. She imagined herself walking up to the front door of her house, turning the brass doorknob, and being welcomed by the familiar smell of her belongings. How could she not remember the last time she walked out the door? Her heart longed for one last stroll down the stone pathway, trying to savor a moment out of reach. Another tear dropped. Frustration swelled in her chest as she scoured for memories of arriving at The Waters, but her mind turned up blank once again. Francis grieved. For the loss of her home, the loss of her youth, the loss of her own recollection.

A soft knock at the door interrupted Francis' wallowing. Droplets were sprinkled among the limes on her sweat-shirt, and she used the sleeves to wipe the remaining tears from her face. No more would fall.

"Francis? Are you in here?" Amanda entered the room, but Francis could not

meet her eyes. "I was wondering where you went! Are you alright, hon?" Francis sighed. "Just fine dear. Just fine."

The rest of Francis' day blurred around her. Bland meals, overzealous nurses, weathered faces in wheelchairs that only grunted as Francis walked past. The morning seemed far away, and Francis struggled to remember why she was upset. Only a heavy weight lingered on her chest, and an opaque fog settled over her head as the night crept in. Amanda helped Francis into bed and lingered at the door before turning off the light. She looked at the old woman tenderly, back turned toward her, small beneath layers of blankets.

"Good night, Francis. I'll be back in the morning, alright?" Francis did not reply, consciousness slowly slipping away as darkness enveloped her mind once again.

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