Icehouse

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Summary

One day, in late August, the sun sets and does not rise again.

Seff is a wolf in the position of being rather unbothered by this development: she lives alone, she has food to last her some time, she is confident in her ability to defend herself if she must, and, if the end of the world claims her life, she didn't have much to live for beforehand.

But even on a dark, frozen Earth, she cannot stay alone for long. She meets a child, a rabbit by the name of Rohan and, without meaning to, takes her in; together they try to piece together what has happened to the world, and whether there still exists motive and means to stay alive.

* * *

Originally posted at https://icehouse.neocities.org/ around half a year ago, and will probably be mirrored to Ao3 when that comes back.

Inspired by a whole bunch of stuff. A complete-ish list of influences can be found in the end notes.

Notes

This was originally written over the course of about a year, from late 2024 to early 2026, if memory serves. It's my first finished long(ish)-form thing, and though it's only novella-length, that's probably worth something.

I think I grew as a writer a lot in the process of making this. It's better than the terrible fanfiction I wrote as a child, of course. It's probably worse than the terrible fanfiction I'm currently working on. That's sort of the nature of these things.

Take a walk with me by the light of the full moon.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Introduction / Chapter 1

It was a sunny, late August day out by the Pacific coast, a summer day that faded into cricket-calls and gentle clouds, when the world began to end.

Foxes climbed from their backyard pools, fur still soaked through and clinging to their bodies, and basked in the light; bears drank vibrant cocktails stronger than they smelled; deer touched their noses to their fawns as they tucked them into bed with gentle hooves. The fireflies cast on their lights and drifted slowly along, and all watched the sun sink lazily below the horizon and paint the sky with smudges of striking pink and orange, fading as the hour passed and the world grew dark.

It did not rise the next day.

The morning that hadn't come was thoroughly inexplicable, even back when the chances of explaining it were at their highest; when the power grid still mostly functioned, and meteorologists and astrophysicists and pastors and doomsayers all cast their stones into the ring, coming up with little beyond the trivial observation that it was dark and cold and getting colder. Those in later parts of the world had the stranger half of things, considering everything: they had seen the sun vanish from where it stood without warning or trace, and though the posts and alerts began when much of the other half was asleep, they did not cease once they awoke. The star-scattered black sky filled with clouds that masked the round, full moon and rained, rained, rained, until the rain froze and turned to snow, and still there was no explanation, and there was a panic all throughout the world, and the power grids began to fail. Lines collapsed from storms; others fell to predicted anarchy. All signals, eventually, fell silent, save those few lonely voices shouting out over the noise of radio static, fueled by frantic cranking and burning diesel.

Many died trying for power and heat, choked in their own homes by gas fumes and wood smoke. Others, their failures more violently apparent, burned to death in a frozen world, and the lucky few remaining, coming across the charred skeletons of their houses some time later, deemed it some joke by a god that, clearly, had grown tired of them. Some died of disease in hospitals whose backup generators eventually failed, or lost access to the medication keeping them alive. Some scrambled to find a warm place to stay and, when they found they could not, were buried in the snow.

At some point, the world stopped cooling, though it did not return to a comfortable temperature. Those most prepared carried remnants of their ancestry: thick, insulating fur, typically; they lived in cold places where the vanishing changed, in some respects, very little. Those near the equator dreamed of places farther north: places where the grids were built to survive the darkness. Places with power and the ability to communicate. They assumed that all the world was the same temperature now, but only a few remote locations were prepared for it (for, they wondered, why would most anyone most anywhere in the world even think to do so?). A few sent out frenzied radio signals to no response, first asking, then begging, then only howling and braying to nothing but silence. They had long since abandoned call signs.

They prayed for saviors, and perhaps to some they did appear in time, and to others they appeared only once it was too late.

More pressing than the cold, and, as days turned to weeks (or seemed to, given the newfound futility of time), now more pressing than the mystery of what, exactly, had happened to the sun—what kept the moon shining yet the sky pitch-dark, what had cooled the world and cast down the snow—was the matter of food.

The animals they kept—those on four legs and not two, only a few degrees away from their keepers—they would live, at least for a little, and their carcasses would sustain the ranchers for a while as the plants they fed on crumbled. Those who ate only those plants: they were less lucky, at least at the beginning, when survival was considered over the scale of weeks and months. Some could live on meat; later, the horses would find themselves to have become an omnivorous people, their flat teeth belying all that would become of them, despite the sickness that resulted. Some ate that which could be dried and preserved: hay, canned goods, rice and beans. Still, their numbers dwindled. The luckiest few with lights to grow their plants and generators to power them were overrun with requests from the less fortunate, and often, what they had was taken by force. The scavengers shoved their pink noses through fields of white in search of carrion, and usually, despite all the death, found nothing at all.

Eventually, the shadows grew longer and moved with their own sort of life, and the moon still shone bright in the sky when the clouds didn't cover it and never moved from where it perched. Each frantic, frenzied snowfall buried more of the world below under sheets upon sheets of white, before eventually even that calmed and quieted and settled into its own gentle rhythm and then, finally, ceased.

Seff had been alone in a cabin of her own design when the sun had gone away. She had built the thing with her own hands. It was roughly shaped, as her hands were thick and clawed, but skillfully constructed; she had insulated it first against a mundane sort of cold, and next, after checking the faces of all her clocks to be sure they hadn't stopped the previous afternoon, she had taken her boards and her hammers and thickened the walls and checked the locks for something much harder to explain. The power had gone out at some point, so she built a fire, and in the light of the fire she stood.

She was a woman, standing on two strong legs. She was, as well, a wolf, looking out over the fire with eyes sharp and shining, her long, dark mouth contorted into a concerned half-grimace. She hovered, as she always had and alongside everyone else on her Earth, at the abstract point where the two ideas merged. Her hands, as mentioned, were heavy but nimble, gray-furred though threaded with white and black and brown and capped with dark clawlike nails. Her shoulders were broad and strong. Her body was large and well-muscled, under a thin sweater at first and then cloaked by a heavy winter coat. Her legs were similarly sturdy, rigid in her work jeans, and ended in a pair of dull brown boots. She had a head like a sharpened dog, straight vertical ears, and stark yellow eyes burdened with a sinking

heaviness which could not solely be attributed to the weight of time. Her teeth sat in her mouth in hooked ordered rows and dug into her lower lip. Her tail fell loosely behind her.

She did not see a point in going out. Her car, already decades old and cheap and half-wrecked, had apparently frozen completely the one time she considered it. She doubted there would be much need for a carpenter for the time being, with food, it seemed, a greater priority than any other. Those who would simply freeze, she guessed, were already frozen.

And food, she realized, was her priority, too; she kept the fresh meat on emergency bags of ice in an insulated chest freezer out back as soon as the power had gone out, and rigged up a diesel generator. She counted her rations and old cans of food rather carefully, and when the permanence of the change had really set in she turned off the generator and focused on what she could. She had vegetables, too, though she could discard them if space grew thin. She clutched an ax close to her body and split wood for and watched for figures in the woods, though none emerged.

She had not been completely snowed in, despite how much had fallen. The snow did not melt, but it had compressed with time into thinner sheets and overall had not fallen in layers thicker than a few inches. She could still open the door, and she did once in a while, and cleared out a larger space outside and unburied what she could. Largely, though, she stayed inside. She had lived in the cabin for years, and knew the four walls well, and resigned herself to containment within them for the time, despite how foolish it felt. Routine found its way into her heart despite the surreality of it all. The ample trees before her dried in front of the old radiator when she ran the generator, and then she built from them more fires to dry logs, and slowly her stash of firewood grew until the forest around the cabin had thinned considerably and she no longer feared the cold. She brushed her teeth each night with baking soda and boiled ice. She slept for nine hours and stayed awake for fifteen, but rarely kept track.

She wondered how the world had stayed so warm, despite how cold it was. She did not own any working mechanism to measure temperature, but she had not felt it to be too much colder than the coldest winter nights. Sometimes she theorized that it was the same mechanism that kept the moon shining, despite it relying on sunlight to do so (she knew, at least, that rocks did not typically emit light), while other times she vaguely recalled some misapplied knowledge of geothermal dynamics and tried to remember if there were any obscure volcanoes around. Much of the time she was clueless, and fully aware of it, so she instead took to wondering if anyone else had figured it out, but that idea, too, set a deep pit in her stomach.

When she grew tired, she played old requiems for viola and solos meant to be heard with piano and occasionally some gentle harmonizing line with no one else to pick it up. Her thick hands pressed easily into the strings and shook them, and she hummed softly along as she played, now devoid of accompaniment with the absence of electricity. She rarely sang, and her voice was low and raspy and gentle. By hand, she wrote guides on furniture and cabins and hunting, on the acquisition of licenses that no longer mattered, perhaps to restore some sense that this all was temporary and that there would be use for her writings in time.

She cooked over the fire, though she knew she could eat her food raw. Her stomach was strong, but to risk becoming ill terrified her; she treated the water she collected from the snow outside (given the pipes had failed long before) with tablets she stashed in bulk, and organized what she had started to think of, in some recollection of millenia prior, as her territory. She fed on beef and lamb and venison, all charred though she hadn't before been an awful cook, and for the first few days she had eaten wilted vegetables to fill her stomach, too, before those ran out. None of it was quite enough, really; she was large and broad and muscular, a carnivore among carnivores, and to ration went against what her body frequently told her to do. The work kept her strong, but never as strong as she would have been in easier times, she was sure.

Her trust withered with the isolation as time ticked by, and what might have been days eventually turned to weeks and then months. She cut wood and lit fires, hour by hour, but even the canned food grew sparse. Her faith in the light's eventual return dwindled with her rations as she confronted the reality before her. She would have to leave. It would not be a matter of if, but of when. There would be food elsewhere, she was sure, if there were others alive. There would be livestock with stores of feed still left. She was certain of it. There would be, if *nothing* else, what had once been some illicit pot-growing operation now feeding an entire settlement.

The night Seff decided to leave was, by her best judgment and the marks she placed in a little brown logbook every time the mechanical clocks she watched with had struck twelve, about nine weeks past the vanishing. On that night the snow had long ceased and the sky was clear and thick with stars. She had checked her stores of food and found them to have, without her notice, become threateningly bare. The engine was frozen completely, and she did not know enough about cars to fix it, so she set out on foot, tucking herself into a heavy coat despite the thick fur that already covered her body.

She took with her, in a heavy backpack, whatever she thought others would barter for: money, of course, and jewelry, and firewood, and spare coats and blankets, and then a kerosene lantern (as she suspected her flashlight's batteries would drain completely in the cold), a matchbook, and a hunting knife. She set out in the direction of the dirt road leading out of the forest and followed what little of it was visible beneath the snow, all the while searching for footprints but only finding her own. Her best bet, she was sure, was the nearest commerce center. Those in the suburbs and lake houses would have congregated there, looking for food in the congregation of restaurants, or perhaps for functioning power. It wasn't too distant. Her home was not nearly as isolated as she liked to think it was.

When she reached the end of the dirt path, where the rusted fences and street signs appeared marking trail boundaries and private land, she had almost hoped to see cars speeding past on the asphalt before her, headlights gleaming off the snow. She raised her lantern in the hopes it would reveal anything else, but all the snow was free of tire tracks. Perhaps lighter paws than hers had stepped on it, as when she did a thin layer of ice broke free before her boot left a print. She hoped so; she was hardly willing to consider the possibility that she was alone.

A transmission tower by the road had fallen, blocking it off to the left. The power lines leading directly to her cabin were safely buried underground, but further out the older wires

hung in the still air or lay motionless by the asphalt. She worried briefly that they would start a forest fire, but that worry slotted neatly far behind the others, more pressing and personal.

She watched the street ahead, feeling altogether like a stranger, and very young, and lonelier than she had been conscious of in the time preceding. As she walked, something in the emptiness stirred memories from decades prior, and she felt again like she had in winters twenty years prior.

As a child, she was not yet broad but she had been wiry. Her face had not yet set into hard angles and her paws remained thin, yet she moved with a heaviness belied by her form. She had watched the other girls on the schoolyard in her elementary years, doing flips, chasing one another; fox and squirrel and rabbit, lithe and gentle. She had taken herself to be a sort of scientist in this manner. It pleased her to christen herself an observer. Anything else was too frivolous. She should have been a scientist, she now thought, with the resignation of a woman older than twenty-eight, and then maybe she would have more of an idea of the state the world was in. She took it as wishful thinking.

The younger Seff, the observer and sociologist, had always focused on the girls her age. They fascinated her and filled her with some spite and some envy and something else like admiration she wouldn't place until she was far older. Boys held the same disdain, but theirs was often transparent. Girls were inscrutable. They twirled and cartwheeled about and mocked each other in high, sing-song voices. They split into cliques which subdivided and fractalled out as far as they possibly could; rabbits turned their pink noses up at hares and, when that got too boring and the trends changed, mocked those like them in nearly every way but whose coats did not fashionably change with the season. Their altercations were occasionally physical, but often far harder to stop, and occasionally it felt as though Seff was the only witness to notice at all.

The other wolves did not speak to her, either, so she listened in on their talk, too, and decided she was glad of it. She chewed on her lower lip as she did, a nervous tic her parents instructed her to outgrow. It would leave scars, they said. She'd be mocked or interrogated. The other wolves would stare. Children would duck as they passed her on the street. She dutifully licked up the blood that welled around her mouth and carried on.

As she observed, she walked in wide laps around the playground and snapped the heavier sticks she found into sharp pieces. In the mirror, each morning, she pulled back her lips and examined her teeth all laid out in their rows, and every once in a while she checked to make sure her tongue still bled when she pressed it too hard to them.

Her parents had put her in dresses which she had shed like cocoons. In her teen years, they tried in vain to turn her attention to makeup magazines and boys. It was rare that she would be invited to her peers' houses; she saw their walls decorated with actors and idols the few times she was. She played the viola and joined her school's orchestra. She played and quit five different sports; she was strong, but her coordination only seemed to wane with time. She had ambitions that she left behind seasonally, as easily as a lizard doing the same with its skin. Her form broadened. Her clothes grew duller; her jackets grew thicker. She stood alone

at the end of the day and watched her classmates board the buses home as the sun set and the snow fell faster and faster.

Chapter 2

Now an adult, Seff walked along the dark forest road. Her steps rang out through the woods yet alerted no one; they left faint tracks behind her in only the lightest top layer of snow. She hoped to see lights ahead somewhere; she hoped to be able to navigate, but only the moon and her lantern lit the way ahead. She came across a tall, bent street sign, rusted over, and though she knew it had been in this condition for years (she had seen it, after all, countless times) she thought of the world now as having been in this state for just as long. Perhaps she had slept a hundred years; nobody was around to tell her otherwise. Perhaps she was the only one left.

She turned her head and watched the bend in the road shrink away. Her breath formed clouds in front of her; they sparkled in a way that gave her the impression that they instantly froze upon leaving her, though she couldn't be sure. There was little left for her to do but walk forward. She would, with any luck, still have footsteps to follow when she turned back around, though she couldn't be certain. She knew the way well, or had once, but with the area blanketed in snow and dark and devoid of cars the landscape was alien to her.

The lantern swayed gently in her paw as she walked. Her night vision was not terrible, not in the slightest, but she held it out in the hopes that it might be some sort of beacon. She swung between paranoia and loneliness moment-by-moment, afraid first to hold the lantern and then to douse it, though ultimately she decided the thought of malevolent figures lurking out in the forest was less disconcerting than the dawning sense of utter solitude that pressed in on her from all sides. She could confront an enemy; she could bare her teeth at it and tear it to pieces. She was strong and broad. She carried a knife; it had been sharpened shortly before the sun vanished, hadn't it? She had butchered elk before (the kind on four legs, but not all that different, really). She could break a threat like a twig (most threats, at least). She had the sort of excessive confidence one has for entirely hypothetical situations. She could follow a monster to civilization; she could follow it to salvation or at the very least to food.

If she truly was alone, though, if the world was truly over, and if she was merely running out the clock to starvation, she could not confront a thing. She could only sit and languish in an empty cabin and wait to die.

This was a decidedly unhelpful train of thought, and she had no sooner begun to confront it than had shoved it out of her mind. It was pointless, anyways: though she could see a short way in front of her, the shadows seemed to devour the light from the lantern so that it was not much more helpful than moonlight alone, and wouldn't make for a good signal at all.

She came to a bend in the road where it cut sharply uphill, and shuffled off to the grassy shoulder that had now died off almost completely. The roots from the trees lining the road, she hoped, would hold the soil stable as she climbed, even as the trees they were attached to lived out their final days. They smelled of rot. Heavy air gathered around them and drifted off towards the road; she knew it was only the smell of dead plants, though it still cut sharply through her nose.

She leaned over the rusty barricade keeping out the forest, snapped off a heavy branch, and planted it firmly in the earth, then made her way up the hill. She recognized the hill and the curve advisory on it, recalled it to be (or have been) a vehicular graveyard for all but the most cautious drivers, and for the first time felt relief at her car's inoperable state, particularly given the ground conditions, slick with snow and ice.

On foot, she surmounted the hill and tossed the stick away, surprised at how easy it had been despite the frozen ground. She had turned her feet sideways to keep from sliding too far, and planted them in the ice, forming little frozen steps, until she reached the top. The elevation she reached was not really all that beneficial, despite her unfounded hopes to the contrary; there was little but dead forest visible through the trees, even with the light of her lantern.

The commerce center, as she liked to call it, was close by, though like everything else it was closer by car. Really, it was just a congregation of shops and restaurants, loosely connected by large parking lots and slightly but not significantly friendlier than a strip mall. Thinking of it as the "commerce center" lent it some legitimacy in her mind. It was her best link to civilization, particularly at the moment, and her best chance at finding others. She considered this fact multiple times as she walked, and then briefly questioned if she was losing her mind.

It was possible she really was. She had heard and questioned the veracity of stories regarding people dreaming up years of their lives: fake wives and brothers and children all gone with a morning alarm. There had been a surreal quality to things for a long time, she noted. It was most obvious when the world went dark, but nothing had felt real for years. She closed her eyes and pinched herself and furrowed her brow when she opened them to the same familiar darkness. Her lantern flickered, but held steady.

A shadow dashed across the light it cast.

It took Seff a moment to process what she had seen, and a moment longer to notice the rustling of bushes and realize it had not been a trick of the light or of her own mind, and all of a sudden she was real again.

"Wait—" she barked, taken aback by the hoarseness of her voice, rarely used for some time except in quiet song; she had grown unfamiliar with its harsher tones. She ran to the shoulder of the road and leapt over it, and jumped into the bushes. The sharp scent of someone unfamiliar cut through her nose, layered pieces atop each other: fur and blood and terror (she could smell fear; she could not describe it), and so she doused her lantern and tucked it away and trusted that to carry her, a stark trail cutting through the cold. The figure was clumsy, clumsier than her even as she ran on ice and carried two hundred pounds of misaimed muscle, and so they soon stumbled over a dying fern and fell, and the trail became overpowering. Seff grabbed hold of them and spun them around.

A rabbit sat before her, bathed in the moonlight filtering through what was left of the undergrowth, eyes wide, frozen in place. They were young: she guessed maybe eight or nine. There was a small bag slung around their side, crafted from light fabric. Their fur was a rich tawny color. Seff wasn't sure if that was typical: whether the sun vanishing would have spurred the rabbits' fur to turn white. Was it the cold that triggered it, or was it some sort of biological clock? She guessed it would probably be a bit rude to ask right now. She sat back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She paused to catch her breath and spoke too quickly. "It's been months since I've seen anyone else. Where are your parents?"

The rabbit shook their head and tried to stand. Seff could see now that their leg was injured, and more acutely smell it; it reminded her of working the cash register in high school. The gash was small and clean for now but threatened infection. They stumbled over a twig and fell back again.

"Wait. Wait. I'm not going to hurt you. I swear. If you're scared, I'm scared too, okay? Let me just help you find your parents, and maybe they can help me find some other people. You shouldn't be out here alone."

They were shaking, even under their clothes: they were wrapped in a thick winter coat and snow pants. Their hood covered everything but the front of their face. She guessed that was probably wise, with so much for frostbite to take. A coat could only do so much, though. It wasn't unreasonable to assume they were just cold.

Her yellow eyes bore down on the rabbit. She reached out a thick paw and presented it, palm-up.

"Please," she said. She took a breath. Thin clouds drifted out in front of her.

"I can't find them," the rabbit said, hardly above a whisper. Their voice was lower than Seff had expected, and she wondered if she had misjudged their age. She supposed the rabbit was probably a girl, though she also guessed neither party here was particularly concerned with making that clear, and she was fairly sure assuming wouldn't do her any good. It wasn't as though that was anywhere near her largest concern, anyways. "I'm trying to find *civilization*, so piss off."

Seff sat back. Her tone solidified, sterner but not harsh. "Kid, I don't know you, but I'm not leaving you to die out here. Clearly something's happened."

"Fine. If you want to help, then when they come for me, rip them to shreds. Don't let them touch me. Then let me go, and we'll never have to speak again."

She narrowed her eyes. "Who're *they?*"

"About three of them. Foxes, I think. Didn't get a great look. Too tall. Starving, if I had to guess. Goddamn monsters. Separated me from my parents. Chased me in here." The rabbit continued to tremble.

Seff kept her paw outstretched. She considered the rabbit's words, as well as her own form; had their parents survived? More likely, they had been eaten without a second thought, same as any other animal, on four legs or two. The thought alone horrified her; to eat another thinking being, someone who could, if nothing else, plead with you not to do it, was unspeakable. It had always been. Then again, she considered, perhaps the foxes the rabbit talked about had thought that too, when there had still been a sun.

She rarely took it upon herself to question the ethics of her biology, but what were monsters, anyways, if not large and frightening things with sharper teeth than those they chased? Seff looked into the rabbit's eyes and resolved herself. They avoided her gaze.

"If anyone comes for you, I won't let them hurt you. But it's not safe for you to be out here alone. You're hurt and you'll freeze."

"That's the least of my concerns." They narrowed their eyes. "You. What have you been eating?"

Seff hesitated, weighing again the rabbit's words. "I had some meat tucked away from before. Beef and venison, largely. Some elk. I live alone, and I usually don't have the time to shop, so I tend to stockpile. I'm running a bit low, but I'll live, especially since I had a little canned food here for emergencies. I assume there are ranchers somewhere, maintaining enough to survive on. If nothing else, some forsaken grocery store probably has some cans I can take." She took a slow breath and watched the condensation. "That's why I was out here. I wanted to see if I could find anyone."

"You're not going to hurt me," the rabbit said, with more uncertainty than a declaration but not so much to make it a question.

"Of course not." Her breath condensed in the air between them, and glittered in what little light there was.

Slowly, the rabbit extended one paw and placed it on Seff's.

"Then I trust you," they said. "I don't think I have a choice."

"Yeah?"

"If you were going to kill me, you would have by now."

"I'm not going to kill you," Seff said, with some indignity. "You're just some kid. I mean, I wouldn't if you weren't, either."

There was a moment of silence. The rabbit took a few breaths, trying to steady themself. "You suck at reassuring people." Their ears perked up. "But you look strong enough, and you're not with those foxes. I can tell. I don't think they'd bother to trick me like this, if nothing else."

"Will you let me fix your leg, then?"

"Do you have supplies?"

"Not on me, but at my cabin."

They scoffed. "Freakin' swell," they replied. "The wolf is taking me back to her creepy cabin in the woods to get murdered." There was some disingenuous note of humor in their voice.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I said that already. You don't have to come if you don't want to. All I want to do is help."

"No, I'll come."

"May I carry you?"

Another moment passed. "You're serious?"

"Yes."

They blinked, then nodded.

Seff scooped up the rabbit and held them close to her chest. She made her way back down the slope, sliding on her back this time and holding them. They stayed in her arms the entire way back to the cabin, with little protest; the sound of Seff's heavy footfalls and labored breaths rippled through the air, with nothing to interrupt them, and gradually, the shaking slowed.

Chapter 3

"I'll make a fire," Seff said, opening the door and setting the rabbit down on a chair far too large for them. She dropped her bag beside the chair. "Sit." The rabbit dropped their own bag in turn, and Seff saw that it was empty.

She stoked the fireplace, then turned to her cabinets and drawers and found an old first-aid kit for work injuries. As the fire grew, she re-lit the lantern for a better view and rolled up the rabbit's pants leg to see the injury. "What's your name?" she asked, applying a little antiseptic to some bunched-up gauze.

"Rohan," the rabbit said, wincing as Seff applied the antiseptic, then pulled the gauze away, stained with blood. "And I'm a girl. I know it's a boy's name. I don't need to hear it."

"I wasn't going to say that. I think it's a lovely name." Seff pressed another piece of gauze to the wound, then wrapped it a few times over with a thin bandage. "How old are you, Rohan?"

"Twelve," Rohan said. Seff nodded. She had definitely been off the mark. The fire's light crackling had grown into a full roar. Seff gathered in the clearer light how small Rohan was in comparison to all the furniture she owned, and chalked some of her misconception up to relative size. She wasn't sure how long it had been since she had really spoken with a rabbit, after all. Maybe she had just forgotten how small they tended to be. "Who are you, anyways?"

"My name's Seff," she replied. "I'm a woman, even if it's a man's name as far as I recall. I'm twenty-eight. I went to trade school. I built this place. Worked as a carpenter for a while. Inherited a lot of antique clocks. Broke a few." She shrugged. "Not much else to say. I'm afraid I live an exceptionally boring life."

"Yeah."

Seff wasn't sure if she was expecting Rohan to protest. She had gathered by now that dramatic enthusiasm wasn't exactly her modus operandi. She supposed she was okay with that; she guessed, if nothing else, having someone so consistently sardonic with her might keep her from falling into complete solipsism.

"Do you have any food?" Rohan asked.

"Very little for myself. Nothing for you," Seff said. "I'm sorry. What have you been eating?"

"Dried seaweed sheets." She stuck her tongue out. "We had canned vegetables, and hay, and then they both ran out. I'd take anything else at this point. I'm probably going to get some vitamin deficiency or something."

Seff nodded. "Do you have any on you?"

"No. All my stuff fell out when I was running."

"Right." She hesitated. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Rohan shook her head. Seff didn't press the issue.

"When we go back for food, I can see if I can find you something more substantial, too. Preferably with minimal botulism. If nothing else, we can probably steal one of those little bottles of vitamin supplements. They make those for rabbits, right?"

"I don't know. Probably, I guess."

"I wish I knew more about how to help. I really should've been a doctor or something. It would've been useful," Seff said.

"You didn't do too bad a job with my leg," Rohan replied, swinging it once or twice. "It doesn't hurt too much, mostly. Freakin' stung for a minute there, though."

"You know, I don't really care if you swear around me. The sun's disappeared," Seff pointed out. "I don't think anyone's judging."

"Asshole."

"I mean, don't be rude," Seff said. "That wasn't a free pass to be a jerk. I haven't really done anything to you."

"That was to the world," Rohan said.

Seff paused before replying. "The first aid comes from nearly sawing off my own paw. On multiple occasions. It'd be dumb not to know something." She shrugged. "How'd you hurt your leg, anyways?"

"Fell. Turns out there's a lot of ice to slip on. Who would've thought." Rohan took off her hood. The tips of her ears looked like they were starting to develop frostbite, though Seff wasn't certain. "You said you almost sawed off your paw? You have any power tools I can mess with?"

"I mean, theoretically, but I'm trying not to run the generator. I'm also trying not to get you injured. Again." Seff took a seat on her bed, not far from the chair and the fire. "I mostly used hand tools, anyway, except on bigger projects. Hipsters will pay top dollar for something authentic, you know?"

"Hipsters?"

"People who drink IPAs and listen to, like, folk-pop." Seff sighed. "I guess that hasn't been a relevant archetype in a while, huh?" She decided to change the subject, and glanced around the room. The cabin had more rooms, but the others were entirely dedicated to her work. When it came to actually living, the cabin was one central room and a bathroom. "Do you have a place to sleep, Rohan?"

"What do you think?" she asked, and, when Seff didn't reply, she continued. "Of course I don't. I had one, and then I got chased into the goddamn undergrowth. I don't know where my

parents are. Hopefully they're back home, but home's probably ten miles away in god-knows-what direction."

Seff nodded. "If you… want to stay here, I will not object, Rohan." She hesitated. "I'm not kidnapping you, I mean. It's your choice. I just don't think it's safe out there. I can promise you safety here as much as you can trust my word, but it's on you if that means anything."

Rohan paused and sank back into the chair. She looked down at her leg again. "It's safer here than it is out there," she said, and then after a moment added, "Don't make me regret saying that."

"You can rest in the chair, or I can lay some blankets out on the floor," Seff said. "Sleep as long as you need."

Rohan didn't move. Seff stood again and walked across the room. She knelt and turned over one of the logs in the fire with a thin metal rod, sending out a cascade of sparks. "Those seaweed sheets," she said. "Do you have any on you?"

"A few," Rohan said.

"And how long can you last without eating?" Seff continued.

"Not long. We're not meant to live for longer than a few days without any food."

Seff paused. She had considered her kind to have received the shorter end of the stick after the change; they had become monsters out of desperation. They had starved and died. She could not survive without meat; meat was harder to find and higher up the food chain. Yet, there were others like Rohan, weren't there? There were rabbits and rodents; there were others who were small, with fast bodies that required them to eat (not much but constantly) and she wondered how many of them had starved after just a week.

It had been months, hadn't it? How many had died?

"Can you go through them slowly?"

"As slowly as possible."

Seff nodded. "I'll go out looking for food again soon. When your leg is better, you can come with me. It shouldn't be long."

The cabin fell silent. Seff tended to it intermittently for a few minutes, before returning to her seat on the bed. Rohan lay on the chair, curled up with her eyes closed, her injured leg outstretched and draped across one arm. Seff wasn't certain if the faint breathing she heard was Rohan's, her own, or some trick of her mind; regardless, it calmed her somewhat to register the presence of someone else in the cabin. When she was certain Rohan had fallen asleep, Seff draped a spare blanket over her body (one painstakingly knit but that had always been too small for her). She curled up on her bed and, only now realizing how tired she was, did not dream.

Chapter 4

Seff woke up, she guessed, a few hours later, though she couldn't place a number to it; she had not seen a need to check the time before falling asleep, and only now glanced at the grandfather clock across the room.

It had long ago stopped chiming above a whisper, and told her now on its face only that it was a little past nine (whether that was in the morning or evening, she was unsure). Seff wondered if the cold had skewed its mechanisms. The fluctuations in temperature could have caused the gears to contract or expand, and ever so slightly, the clock could be faster or slower than intended.

She had tinkered with the smaller clocks she owned, and broke a few, and though she had never been religious she prayed to someone to forgive all the guilt she felt for it, even though it seemed a bit silly. Now the working ones sat on the wall, and she was too afraid to touch them. Their times were not too far off from each other, but had they always been quite so askew? She tried to remember the day before the vanishing, and, when that failed, she tried to remember the day she had inherited them. They had been synchronized, at least at the time; she had paid attention to that, if nothing else.

The fire had not died down too much, and Seff stood to tend it again. She turned the logs over a few times and pried the back door open to grab another.

It had not snowed in weeks, and for the first time in a while Seff looked up at the sky. It was completely clear; she guessed water had stopped moving through its various forms some time previously, and now it no longer rained or snowed or even, really, looked all that cloudy. She wondered if all the oceans had frozen, and assumed they had. The moon was full. She had faintly recalled it being full when the sun had disappeared, and she wondered if she was keeping accurate enough time that she had landed right on when its phases were bound to repeat, or if she had lost her mind, or if it was simply stuck like that and she hadn't been paying enough attention. She wondered how it shone with no sun and no light to itself, and she thought about the motions of water from lake to cloud to rain and snow, and again she lamented that she had never studied enough to know more.

She took a log and re-entered the cabin, and warmed it in her heavy paws and in front of the fire for a few moments before laying it in the heart of the flames. It caught after a minute, and she turned to the figure curled up in front of the fireplace, nearly entirely covered in the blanket she had laid down. Rohan had barely moved in her sleep, and save the half panicked rise and fall of her chest Seff was unsure if she was alive at all.

Seff was not tired, though that was unusual. Waking at all in her sleep was odd for her, and to do so for no apparent reason was even more so, and on the occasions she did she rarely remained awake. She napped, too, once in a while and usually after strenuous work. She wasn't sure of the rabbit's sleep patterns, if they differed from hers at all; all she knew was that Rohan, at least for now, was out like a light.

Out like the sun, she thought, and rolled her eyes.

She sat back on her bed again and took a book from beside it. It was a novel, and not one she had found particularly engaging years prior; a friend had told her about it once while they were out getting lunch, and recommended it somewhat half-heartedly, and so on a whim before returning to her cabin Seff checked out a copy from the local library. It was a romance, though she found the leads rather joyless: a bear and an okapi, from halfway opposite sides of the globe; both were women, both met online over a shared love of a fictional drama show embedded within the book, and both unsuccessfully attempted to make up for a painful lack of chemistry by reciting various uninspired platitudes in their narration.

She found the whole thing frustratingly lacking in self-awareness, and would have settled much more eagerly for something willing to embrace its own cheesiness; either willing to be properly serious or not quite so self-important. She wondered if that was a sign of her own provinciality; she had never done the sort of serious travelling that was probably necessary to appreciate the sort of global worldview presented by such a modern premise. Wynn had, she recalled; she had talked about it quite frequently, and suggested Seff join her at points. They had even nearly made plans together.

She never ended up returning the book, though occasionally she'd get a notice in the mail regarding her exceptional late fees (she figured that was the library's last resort, after trying in vain to reach her by email and telephone). She had always meant to just return it, she supposed. Parting with it shouldn't have been hard. She wondered if she took it as too much of a gesture of good will, and that was what complicated things, or if it was just too much effort to drive to the library. Primarily, she wondered if the friend who had recommended it did so on the basis of its premise; she wondered how many other lesbians he knew, and if he had given the same suggestion to any of them. She guessed that would remain another unknown. It didn't matter anymore.

In fact, none of that mattered now, she noted, though the thought of dropping a mediocre romance novel in the return box of an almost-certainly abandoned library amused her a bit. She flipped through it in the firelight and noted every mention of sunny weather.

One lead described, in between paragraphs where she wrote of her longing and of the privilege to speak to someone so far away at all, the warmest days in her city. She described how she wondered if most of the things she loved, if the family she cared for and the slums she looked down on with shame, were worth leaving for the ostensibly charming woman she'd fallen for, weighing the danger she faced against the banality of the immigration system. The warmth was something she’d surely miss.

The other lead explained in ennui-thick monologues the constant fog plaguing the part of coastal America she attended graduate school in, and remarked with delight each time the sun came out for what Seff guessed was some piece of clumsy symbolism, the meaning of which she was sure she wasn't quite clever enough to ascertain. She faintly recalled the ending, where both met in person and lived happily ever after, free and safe in each others' arms; she didn't recall much focus placed on the sky.

Seff wondered what it was like in both parts of the world now. She guessed they looked similar, though she couldn't have been sure; among the many things she was not was a

meteorologist. She guessed there were people still alive around the world, and she was more certain of that now that she had seen Rohan asleep in front of the fire and heard her stories of predators, monsters in the dark. She had grown used, over the past nine weeks, to watching the darkness warily, so it surprised her how unafraid she had been when Rohan told her, as though the reality of the thing was strong enough to mollify it.

Seff thought of Rohan, who she found, somehow, rather difficult to read. Was she reacting properly? Was she an anxious child, or one behaving as anyone would? She eventually concluded that Rohan was too old not to be completely terrified and too young to know how to properly manage it. Twelve had been a difficult age at the best of times, she recalled; she herself had spent it half in a short-lived bid for the affections of her peers and half embroiled in unmemorable reality television. It had been rough and strange; boys had occasionally wanted to kiss her and more frequently lied about it as a joke, and once in a while she acquiesced but refused to let anything come of it. She had, at the time, thought herself despite evidence to the contrary to have been extraordinarily intelligent; she registered about three years later that she had probably been insufferable, and stopped blaming herself for it when she was twenty.

She folded down the corner of the page she was on and placed down the book, then turned to check on Rohan. She had not moved, and Seff felt another, separate twinge of fear. She knelt beside her, just to be certain she really was breathing and it was not just a trick of the strobing firelight; but no, there it was, faintly past the crackle of flames. She counted how many times Rohan breathed in a minute (about thirty) and whether her breaths were regular (they were) and wondered with another brief moment's panic whether the chimney was adequate or if the cabin would fill with smoke and choke out the little rabbit. The fear ebbed as soon as she reminded herself of how often she had lit the fire and how it had never once been an issue before, though she resolved herself to clean the chimney at some point.

A moment later, some amount of shame came upon Seff and she stood. She returned to sit on her bed, not anticipating the onset of sleep, and wondered what it must be like for Rohan; what it would be like when she awoke to see Seff lit up in the deeper shadows of the cabin. She thought of the foxes Rohan had mentioned and turned her head away from the fire to dampen the reflections of her eyes. She slumped over onto the pillow and closed them, still very much awake but with little else to do.

She was only pulled back when a quiet voice came through across the room.

"I'm awake," Rohan said. Seff sat up. "In case you were wondering."

"How long have you been up?"

Rohan, half-lit by the fire, had cast the blanket off herself and onto one of the arms of the chair. She was turned away from Seff, staring at the wall. "About a minute."

Seff stood. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah."

"You have food in that bag, right?"

"A bit."

Seff knelt down and pulled one of the seaweed packs from the bag. She pierced the plastic around it, filling the room with the faint smell of the ocean, which she hadn't expected to notice as much as she did, and passed the little container to Rohan. "Is that enough for now?"

"For now," Rohan replied. "We should leave soon."

"We?"

"You're not leaving me alone," she said with her mouth half-full. She turned to Seff and narrowed her eyes. "They'll find me here."

"Nobody's found *me*."

"Nobody wants you dead."

Seff gritted her teeth. "You're injured. I'm not letting you walk for miles with your leg like that."

"It's just a scrape," Rohan replied. "Nothing's broken."

"I can still smell it," Seff said. "What makes you think someone else won't?"

"They'll smell it with me here, too. At least out there you can protect me."

"Then we'll wait until you're better," Seff declared.

"And I'll starve."

The fire spat out one massive spark and licked at the air. Seff turned and pushed over another log, and it calmed a small amount.

"You're awfully stubborn, you know?" Seff replied.

"I'm being logical," Rohan interjected.

"We'll go together," she continued. "I'll carry you if your leg starts to become an issue. If anyone attacks us, I'll resolve the situation. You don't have to worry about that." She turned back to Rohan and looked at the seaweed pack, still half-full. "But finish your food before we do anything. I'll see if I can find any clothes for you. Anything better than that coat."

"I don't think you have anything that'd fit me."

"I don't think so either." She pulled a large plastic bin out from under the bed and sorted through the clothes inside. All of them were smaller than her, but far larger than Rohan, and eventually she gave up and slid the bin back under. "At least keep your ears down. Don't get frostbite."

"I'll try." Rohan placed down the now-empty seaweed container.

"I'm going to change your bandages before we go. It might help disguise the smell of blood, if nothing else." Seff nudged Rohan into a more upright position and pulled out her leg. "Does that hurt?"

"Only a bit, I guess."

"Good." Seff rolled up Rohan's pants and unwrapped the injury. It had tinted the bandages dark brownish-red in the center where they had been in contact with the wound, with a small amount of something clear around the stain, but there were no signs of infection: no yellow or green, no pus, only a little warmth on the leg. The injury itself had largely scabbed over. She again wiped off the wound with antiseptic, taking care not to reopen it, and bandaged it a little more quickly this time. Rohan barely winced as she did so, which Seff considered to be a marked improvement.

"It looks good, all things considered," Seff said. "You're lucky."

"I don't *feel* very lucky," Rohan replied. "I may potentially be the least lucky girl in all of creation."

"You'd be a lot less lucky if your leg was infected." Seff rolled her pants back down. "So, you know. You're welcome."

Rohan stood up. "Can we go now?"

"Yes," Seff replied. "Watch your paws. Keep your ears down and under your hood. Don't slip, and let me know if your leg starts acting up again." She took Rohan's paw in her own and helped her across the room. "Feel okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

Seff bent down, slipped on, and laced up her boots; Rohan had not bothered to take off her own. She grabbed the bag she had been carrying before, still unopened, pulled out the lantern, lit it, then pushed open the door. It had frozen to the frame a bit, but she took little notice. She and Rohan stepped out into the cold. Her breath caught a bit in her throat as the sudden cold hit her, then came out as a gentle cloud in the dark.

"You're not going to put out the fire?" Rohan asked. "Won't this place burn down?"

Seff shook her head. "I want it to be warm when we get back. I'm not as concerned with it spreading."

"It won't be very warm if it burns the place down. Plus, it might be dead once we get back."

Seff sighed and darted back inside. She spread out the embers with a poker and shoveled the ashes over what was left of the flames; the room went completely dark, and the cold from outside crept in as soon as the fire died. She locked the door behind her, returned to Rohan's side, and turned to her. "Can I trust you to hold the lantern?"

"Mhm." Rohan reached for the lamp and took it. Seff flinched as the flame, still safely caged in metal and glass, drew closer to Rohan, but then it settled and she hardly seemed to take

notice. "Like that?"

" Just hold it out in front of you. Maybe a bit above you. I can take it if you can't."

"I can handle myself," Rohan said. She lifted the lantern above her head and walked a bit in front of Seff. "Don't worry."

"I trust you, then. Try not to slip."

"I won't."

Seff turned right at the end of the dirt path and onto the road, avoiding the fallen tower. She regarded, now, the opportunity she was met with to voice all her thoughts. "Watch out for power lines. I don't know how many have fallen around here."

"I'm not going to trip on a power line," Rohan replied, and Seff realized how inane most of her thoughts were, decided she would no longer be voicing them, and silently thanked Rohan for, she noted, keeping her slightly more sane.

They walked for some time in silence, and passed the bent street sign. Rohan reached out a paw and brushed against it, then, softly, asked, "What was your life like?"

"Before the sun disappeared?"

"Yeah."

"I told you, I was a carpenter."

"Right, but what was that like?"

"Well, I was a contractor, I guess," Seff replied. "I had a lot of expertise in a lot of areas, but I mostly worked with the big stuff. Roofs and cabins. You know all the lake houses out here, where people do their camping and waterskiing?"

Rohan nodded. "Rich people, mostly."

"Right. Rich people. I mostly did roofing for those. Sometimes I'd work on cabins."

"Did you get, like, free jet boat rides?"

"I guess occasionally someone would offer me some lakefront perks, but they were never really to my taste," Seff said. "I was pretty content with what I did, honestly. There was a summer camp that rented some property out for some birdwatching thing, and occasionally they'd call me for repairs. I'd get custom furniture orders from some of the eccentric clients, once in a while. That was always fun."

"I take it that clocks aren't part of carpentry."

"No," Seff replied. "They're not my discipline. I told you I inherited those, didn't I?"

"And broke them."

Seff sighed. "I can't be good at everything," she noted. "I was barely good with furniture. Just look at me." She turned her paws over in front of her, acutely aware of their size.

"Did you build your cabin?" Rohan asked.

"Actually, yeah. I did," Seff replied. "It was the biggest project I had ever done. Still is." She hesitated. "I only managed to because of my spouse. who gave me a lot of money to take the time off to get it done, and to get everything sorted out with the permits and the other contractors. So, you know, that's the reason it wasn't just a pipedream."

Rohan cocked her head to the side. "You're married? I thought you lived alone?"

"I do," Seff said, and walked a bit ahead, and Rohan didn't say anything else on the subject.

Eventually they came to the slope again. The tracks Seff had made climbing it were still embedded in the snow. She turned to Rohan.

"Can you climb this on your own? You're pretty light. I can take the lantern for a minute."

Rohan nodded, handed her the lantern, and, on all fours, scampered uphill and out of view. Between muted bursts of panic, Seff marveled at how easy Rohan made it look, then snapped off another stick, feeling only a little bad about taking it, and made the climb herself. At the top, she breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing Rohan, and offered the lantern back; Rohan took it and returned to holding it as she had been before.

"Good job," Seff said.

"It's not like it was hard," Rohan replied.

Seff wasn't really sure what sort of reply she was expecting.

Chapter 5

They continued on past where they had initially met, into uncharted territory; Seff noticed Rohan bristle a bit. She, too, stiffened, and again, walked a bit ahead, hoping to at least shield Rohan a bit. They passed a few more bent and dented street signs, and Seff thought of monsters and wondered whether the signs had always been that way.

As they walked further, Seff swore the scent of pine around them grew a bit weaker, and the scent of asphalt and stone, though still muffled by the snow, grew stronger.

“See anything ahead?” she asked.

“No,” Rohan said, and the two continued on. Seff strained to try and catch the smell of stale gasoline, but came up with nothing. They came to a fork in the road, and the forest thinned out, though it was too dark to see very far, even for a wolf.

“I think it should be to the left,” Seff said. “Left and straight on.” She turned and gestured for Rohan to follow along, perking her ears up and checking to be sure the faint sound of footsteps and the light cast behind her wasn’t leaving.

The road was mostly flat ahead, though it did curve downhill for a time. They arrived at one of the slopes, and Seff looked back at Rohan.

“I’ll take the lantern again,” she offered.

“I can handle it,” Rohan replied. “Here.”

Without waiting, she sat and pushed herself down the slope, sliding easily on the ice. The light disappeared with her. Seff rushed to catch up, crashing through the snow as she ran and stumbled. Rohan sat at the bottom of the slope. She looked up at Seff.

“See?” The lantern swung from side-to-side in her paw.

“Right,” Seff said. “I believe you. Don’t do that again.”

The smell of asphalt was stronger here, while the forest had faded; a few suburban homes dotted the sides of the road and grew greater in number the further Seff strained to look. Unsurprisingly, all of the lights were off. A few in the distance even appeared to have burned down, though she wasn’t certain. Silently, she thanked Rohan.

“Do you think anyone lives in those houses?” Seff asked.

Rohan shrugged. “I’m from another street. I didn’t see anything.”

“Should we see if any have food? If they’re unlocked?”

Rohan nodded and followed Seff up the driveway and to the front door of one of the houses. She found it, surprisingly, unlocked, and after straining for a moment it fell open, casting out

glittering pieces of ice onto the porch.

Seff had, in some exceptionally anxious part of her brain, expected to be met abruptly with the overwhelming smell of death, but though there was a pervasive and subtle smell of rotting plant matter drifting throughout the place and lingering in the back of her throat, Seff gratefully assumed the house was corpse-free.

Of course, she noted, the cold could have also just preserved things; she decided she would continue walking in front of Rohan. She hoped the inhabitants were dead; she assumed they were, and merely somewhere else, having frozen to death someplace far away.

“Let’s just check the pantry for canned things,” she said, making her way through the front hall.

The house was perfectly preserved; she could have called it "lived-in" if she had thought anyone there was still alive. It smelled faintly of cobwebs, a few of which glittered in the corners of the hall, and of new layers of stain on the hardwood floors, and beyond the sound of her footsteps, was completely silent. As she made her way to the kitchen, she glanced at the sofa in the living room; blankets were strewn across it and piled atop each other, seemingly as many as were in the house. Toys littered the floor; plastic soldiers and barricades, mostly, still organized in their battalions. Condensation had gathered on the walls, as if they were encased in diamonds.

Seff looked away.

She opened the pantry and looked in the back, on the top shelf. Rohan held up the lantern, and Seff took it from her and used it to check the very back. All together, she came out with a few cans of spinach and two of chickpeas, though without any meat or tuna; Seff assumed the house belonged to members of those species without the palate for such things.

“This should be good,” Seff said. “Spinach and chickpeas.” She opened the bag and stuffed the cans inside. “That should tide you over for a bit. Do you want to turn back, or keep going?”

“Did you get anything?” Rohan asked.

“Yes, I just said I got spinach and chickpeas. Can you not have those? I’m sorry. I don’t know much about, um, your species.”

“No. No, I should be able to have those. At least from time to time. Don’t want to be picky,” Rohan replied. “I meant for you. Did you get any meat?”

Seff shook her head. “I’ll survive. I have a little bit left.”

“We should keep going, then,” Rohan said. “Until you find something. If you see a barn, go inside and look for hay. I think it keeps well, and I can live off that. Maybe there’ll be something dead you can eat.”

Seff turned around. Rohan looked up and met her gaze.

“Maybe,” she replied.

She zipped the bag shut, passed the lantern back to Rohan, and gestured for her to follow out of the house.

“What do you normally get at the grocery store?” Seff asked, stepping back out into the cold. “Maybe we can find some of that.”

“Fresh vegetables.”

Seff clicked her tongue. “Right. Not an option. Anything dried or canned?”

“They sell hay in the back. That’ll work.”

“Anything but hay? It’s hard to carry a lot of it.”

“You want me to starve?”

Seff sighed and moved the bag over her shoulder.

"I, uh," Rohan said. “The hay is for me. You worry about the canned stuff. I’ll carry it.”

“You’re small. We both will,” Seff replied. “Don’t worry.”

They walked back up the driveway and past more houses; Seff decided any more they visited would be on the way back. She caught the faint smell of rot from the windows of a few, and made a note in her head to avoid them, and strained her ears to try and hear any distant conversation ahead on the road; she came back with nothing, and chose to continue walking, rather than reflect on it. Every so often, she checked back behind her just to make sure the lantern was still shining. She watched it swing once in a while, like it was trying to break free from its holder, and made sure Rohan’s skinny, fragile paws never came too close to the flame, though it was trapped behind glass.

The hills had largely evened out, and as the trees vanished to row after row of houses, Seff watched for the point the road would abruptly cut and take a sharp left; into parking lots that already felt archaic, and when it came she no longer smelled the dying forest and only could detect what might have been meticulous storefront landscaping, several weeks before. She recalled there having been hydrangeas in a few spots before, as she turned into the street and cut across the snow-blanketed lot, but everything was obfuscated by the same smell of cold rot that slashed across her nostrils.

The trees that had speckled the asphalt, in an attempt to make things feel a little less barren, or maybe to blindly flail against everything that had been done to the environment, had all died already; most had fallen, faster than the old trees in the forest, and others, once held stable by stakes as they grew, strained against their chains, desperate to collapse under the weight of their own death.

Seff turned away and towards the old grocery store. Its glass door, though closed, was smashed clean through; she took this as an indicator of life, albeit life that was potentially

strong and prone to violence and had potentially exhausted some or all of the resources inside, and felt a bit conflicted on the matter.

"Be careful," she advised, stepping over a few shards that glittered in the moonlight and mingled hesitantly with the ice, though the majority had fallen inside the store. "Don't cut yourself." In truth, it was more a reminder for herself than for Rohan; she was far larger than the rabbit, and struggled to fit through the opening without lacerating anything, though by tucking her ears back and making herself as small as possible she managed to slip through unscathed. Rohan slipped through after her, taking care only to avoid the places where the jagged edge of the broken glass rose up a bit too high for her to step over.

Inside, the store showed no trace of the destruction of its entryway, barring a few toppled shelves, which appeared remarkably peaceful; so much so that Seff barely noticed them at all. The same pervasive smell of rot remained, though it was minimized by the cold; most things were. Towards the back, the entire butcher's counter had been ransacked; behind it, stacks of hay remained untouched; even without prints and tracks, and even, hopefully, long-gone, the broader shape of the culprit, or culprits, betrayed itself easily. She hoped they had lacked the foresight to go after the preserved food, too; she hoped they hadn't been here in weeks.

She and Rohan made their way to the back edge of the store, navigating over fallen bottles of sauces and vinegar. Seff's boots crunched against broken glass in places, remarkably similar in tone to the ice outside in the few places it had collected. She kept an eye and an ear out with each sound, but noticed nothing too out of place, though the silence was itself bizarre.

Seff was unsure what she had expected: the faint buzzing of refrigerators or fluorescent lights, perhaps. She subconsciously expected, at the very least, flies to accompany the rot. She recognized that all the flies were probably dead. Flakes of some sediment between ash and snow drifted up from the ground with each step.

She thought for a moment she heard faint conversation, but pricked up her ears to nothing at all.

As they walked through the store, Rohan wrinkled her nose.

"Something smells terrible," she said.

"A lot of what's here is rotting," Seff replied. "I've been smelling it for a while. The cold suppresses it a bit, but I assume it was at least warm enough here for a while for things to get going. Even if all the bacteria are dead by now, they left something pretty foul behind."

"Gross."

"It was probably decently insulated, too. If I had to guess, there was a period of time between the power going out, their backup generator failing, and it being as cold as it is now. If you've ever forgotten meat in the fridge for a while, it's sort of the same principle."

Rohan looked up at Seff.

"Why would I have done that?"

"Right," Seff replied. "Never mind. I mean, the produce here is probably all sludge by now, too."

"That's not refrigerated, is it?"

"I actually worked at a grocery store for a bit," Seff replied. "A lot of it gets taken out to be refrigerated overnight. But it doesn't matter. It probably got left on the shelves in all the panic, and either rotted or froze. Like everything else." She made her way to a more open part of the store. "See?"

A collection of baskets sat out in the center of the floor, filled with avocados and apples and various unrecognizable things, all of which had turned sickly shades and broken down. Behind them stood rows of darkened shelves containing stacks upon stacks of frost-blackened, once-moldering, wilted produce.

"I think these were starting to spoil," Seff said. She didn't feel particularly compelled to get any closer. "The cold did the rest."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Well, hay doesn't rot or freeze, does it?"

"It does if you let moisture get in," Rohan said. "We had a few issues with that. We considered buying a dehydrator, but it was too expensive to get one that was big enough."

"Big family?"

Rohan shook her head. "Just me and my parents. We just eat a lot," she replied. "I guess I *had* a twin brother. But he died when I was a kit. Like, a year old."

"That's sad," Seff said. "I'm sorry that happened."

"Doesn't matter." She shrugged.

"I mean, I'd be sad if I had a brother and he died."

"I don't remember him at all. He was Alder, and I was going to be Rowan, but my parents decided they didn't like the sound for whatever reason, so it's a little bit off. I guess they just didn't care for the 'wuh'. They thought it sounded too messy."

"Is that your…" Seff tried to think of a better word than "lore" (perhaps one which didn't evoke mostly fantasy-themed video games with three hundred in-universe books, the details of which had been drunkenly exposited to her one night and now formed an inextricable association with the word) and couldn't really find one. "Is that the story of your name?"

"I guess. It's probably better they changed my name, since it would have been kind of stupid if we were both just trees. And it works better now that I'm on my own."

"Were they going for a matching set?"

"Exactly. No match, though."

"I used to make cabinets out of alder every once in a while. It's a beautiful wood. Never rowan, though," Seff replied, stepping over another fallen shelf and taking some hay from the pile, checking it gingerly for moisture, though the cold made it hard to tell. She didn't see any mold, at least. She sniffed it, but wasn't sure what to compare it to. "Does this smell all right to you?" She held out a bit for Rohan.

"I think so," she said. "It's too cold to be sure."

Seff stuffed a bit in her bag and passed more to Rohan. "Can you carry that?"

Rohan nodded. "It feels dry. Will the lantern set it on fire?"

"It's behind glass. It should be fine. We can douse it, though, if you really want." She hesitated. "I can probably find the way back without."

"I don't trust that," Rohan said. "No offense."

"My night vision's pretty good," Seff replied. "But fair enough."

"The glass will protect it, though? The body won't get too hot?"

"I'm not sure how hot the bottom part gets. I can't say I've ever thought to touch it."

Rohan held the lantern high up and kept the hay under her other arm.

After a moment, Seff asked, "Do you remember where you last saw your parents?"

"What?" Rohan asked. "Where does that come from?"

"Just thinking. You want to get back to them, yes?"

"Of course I do. Jesus. What do you think?"

"I mean, I'll help with that, once you're fed. I just want to know if you have any leads."

Rohan took a bit of hay off the pile and ate it, as if to make a point, and as if she had only just realized how hungry she was. "Great. Glad that's the plan, and you're not going to kidnap me forever."

"I'm not kidnapping you. You can leave whenever you want."

"Voluntary kidnapping," Rohan replied.

Seff sighed.

"I saw them running into the woods," Rohan said. "I tried following them, but I kind of ended up splitting off and just focusing on hiding." She trailed off subtly, and averted Seff's eyes. "Just ran into the other bit of the forest."

"We'll find them eventually," Seff replied. "Promise."

"Don't do that," Rohan said, with the same hesitant quality she had gained a moment before. "You're going to disappoint yourself."

"I'll try, then. No promises?"

"Better."

"Do you have anything of theirs?" Seff asked, taking some more hay from the pile after checking it for moisture.

"Not directly," Rohan replied. "I mean, they gave me everything I have. Does that count?"

"Sort of? It's fine," Seff said. She turned around and made her way to one of the other aisles, and Rohan followed. "I'll make it work. If I had something they had been in a lot of contact with, like a scrap of clothing, I could track them that way. Otherwise, I'll just assume they smell and look like you."

"They don't look like me. Their fur is white," Rohan said.

"Yeah?"

"Our undercoats change in response to the sunlight, but there was always something wrong with mine. It never changed in winter. Or, apparently, now." She paused. "You've been calling me a rabbit for a while, and I thought it'd be awkward to say anything, but technically, I'm an arctic hare."

"Oh." Seff said. "Sorry. I should've known better." Once, a long time ago, she'd been observant enough to see the distinction, at least once it formalized into cliques. She supposed it had been a while since she'd seen either. "But it's good their fur's white, isn't it?"

"What?"

"They'll blend in."

"But we're looking for them," Rohan pointed out. "That'll make it harder."

"I mean if there's danger," Seff said. "It's, you know, a defense mechanism."

"Right," Rohan said. "So I'm the unlucky one."

"I never said that."

"You implied it."

Seff squinted. "You're putting words in my mouth." She walked through the aisle and took a large can of preserved meat from the shelf. "Hey, that's good."

"What is?"

"Whoever ransacked this place clearly thought they were too good for salted preserved meat product," she replied, stuffing as many cans as she could in her bag. "But I'm not."

Rohan narrowed her eyes. "I heard that stuff screws up your blood pressure." She clarified after a moment, in haltingly paced sentences, "I mean, that's what my mom said when it came up. Not like it did very often, 'cause she never ate it. For obvious reasons."

"Starvation does worse," Seff said. "That's kind of my primary concern."

"Okay. True."

"I can think about my blood pressure when I'm sure I'll be alive for the rest of the year."

"Me too."

"You'll live," Seff said. "And you don't have to worry about your blood pressure. You're twelve. And you don't eat this stuff."

"Well, I'll worry about my blood pressure if I end up being your age."

"You will." Seff hesitated. "End up being my age, I mean. You won't have to worry about your blood pressure. *I* shouldn't have to worry about my blood pressure." She paused for a moment to allow her sentences to regain some structure. "You brought it up. How old do you think I am?"

Rohan shrugged.

"C'mon. I literally told you earlier. What year do you think I was born?" Seff asked, looking through more of the items on the shelf.

"Zero."

She turned and raised her brow.

"Like Jesus," Rohan clarified.

Seff sighed, and Rohan stifled a laugh. "I am in my late twenties," she replied.

"I know," Rohan said.

"Whatever," Seff said, but her lip curled up at the back as she sorted through more cans. "*Ooh.*"

"What is it?"

"Corned beef. If I can find some rice, I can dilute all this stuff down so it's not so unbearably salty."

"Corned beef and rice?" Rohan asked.

"Yeah. They eat it somewhere. I forget what region."

"Huh."

"I'd look it up online, but, y'know." Seff shrugged and put the cans in her bag, which was looking quite full already. She walked around the aisle and into another, and returned a moment later with about a pound of uncooked white rice. She tossed it into the bag as well, on top of everything else, and zipped it shut. "We can come back," she said, looking back at Rohan. "Now that we know what's here."

"Should we head back?" Rohan held the hay close to her chest.

"Unless there's anything else you want, we can head back. Or look for more people."

"I think we should drop this stuff off before we look for anyone else. So they don't steal it," Rohan suggested.

Seff nodded. "Then, anything else you want?"

"Candy?" Rohan asked.

Seff darted off to another aisle and found a bag of oversized lemon drops. "Hopefully these kept," she said, walking back to Rohan.

"Do you think *lemon drops* rot?"

Seff shrugged. "Do you think I know anything about candy?"

"You were a kid once."

"Yeah. A boring kid with a dentist for a dad."

"Is that true?" Rohan asked.

"Oral surgeon, really. But yes, I was painfully boring. Still am."

"Damn."

Rohan sighed dramatically. "Of everyone who could have kidnapped me."

"I apologize for my unforgivable ignorance and for the fact that I do not own a PlayStation Vita." Seff tucked the lemon drops in the bag. "At least there's candy. Small concession."

"Small concession," Rohan agreed.

Chapter 6

The walk back to the cabin was less arduous than the walk to the store, even with them both carrying bundles of hay and even with the lengthy uphill climb back to the flat parts of the road. The slope had already felt longer than it had ever been before the darkness, particularly on foot, and now was even worse with the exertion from climbing it.

Rohan, after a time, perched herself on Seff's shoulders, complaining of pain in her leg. Seff wished she could have done the same to some third, larger being, but said nothing.

Past the hill, the road was flat and easy, and though Seff still kept her ears perked for unfamiliar sounds in the dark, she felt significantly more prepared than she had in some weeks.

"I'm cold," Rohan eventually announced.

"Me too," Seff replied. "When we get back, I'll light a fire. Are your ears all right?"

"Yeah. Kinda numb, but it's okay."

"Let me know if it gets any worse or starts to hurt."

Rohan nodded.

"Are you good walking now?" Seff asked.

"Give me a few more minutes." Rohan clung to her shoulders.

"Okay."

Rohan didn't move until they reached the cabin, at which point Seff lowered her gradually to the ground and unlocked the door. She rushed inside, and Seff followed.

"Where should I put the hay?"

Seff shrugged. "It's yours. Wherever you want." She walked over to the fireplace and built another fire, gradually building up the logs until it roared.

Rohan set down most of the hay a good distance away from the fireplace, tucked a bit in the bag, just in case, then sat right in front of the fire. Gradually, its warmth percolated through the cabin, and Seff joined Rohan where she was sitting.

“What’s your plan?” Rohan asked. The amber light danced across her face and cast deep shadows over her eyes.

“My plan?” Seff replied. “What do you mean?”

“For my parents. You said you’d find them.” Rohan shifted a bit. “How are you going to do it?”

The fire crackled. Seff leaned away from it.

“I said, how are you going to find them?” Rohan repeated.

“I was going to take a scrap of their clothes and try and track them by smell,” Seff replied.

“But I don’t have one. I said that already.”

“I know.”

“So how are you going to do it?”

Seff stood up, walked to her bed, and sat down, covered by the shadows all across the room. She took off her coat and laid it atop the blanket, then set the bag beside it. After a long while, she spoke.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t have a plan.”

“So make one.”

Seff opened the bag and pulled out a tin of meat. She returned to the fire and put it down in the heat to defrost.

“I mean, they could be anywhere,” she said. “Where do you want me to look?”

“My old house, maybe.”

“You think they went back there?”

“I don’t know,” Rohan replied. “You think I do?”

Seff shook her head. “No. It’s okay. We’ll try there. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll go someplace else. Back to the shopping center, maybe. Then we can look for more people.”

“Write it down.”

“What?” Seff asked.

“Write it down,” Rohan repeated. “That way it’s a real plan. It’s a thing I do. If I had my notebook, I'd do it, but I left it at my house.”

Seff took one of her handwritten guides from a drawer and flipped it over to the blank back page. She took a nubby quadrangular pencil from beside where it had sat and quickly wrote,

TAKE ROHAN TO HER HOUSE

LOOK FOR HER PARENTS

and crudely sketched a little, faintly nervous-looking wolf's head beneath it.

She placed the booklet down again. “Better?”

“Yes,” Rohan replied. “So long as you actually wrote it down, and not a bunch of swear words or rude notes or something like that.”

“I’m not a child,” Seff replied. “I wouldn’t do that.” She lifted the book and showed Rohan. "See? No rude notes."

“Dinosaur,” Rohan replied. She stuck her tongue out. Seff narrowed her eyes.

“I’m not even thirty."

"So?"

"Isn’t there some intermediary? Don’t you have any cousins my age? An aunt?”

Rohan shrugged. “Miles away, maybe. I haven’t seen my extended family since I was a kit. I'm obviously not going to see them now."

Seff returned to the fire, knelt down, and took the tinned meat, now warm to the touch. She opened the can and, not bothering to even tip it onto a plate, finished it off in a matter of seconds.

“Holy crap,” Rohan said. Seff thought for a moment she saw a flash of panic in her eyes, but just as quickly as she noticed it, it was gone.

“What?” Seff asked, a little sheepishly. “I was hungry.”

Rohan shrugged. “Damn. Cool.”

Seff placed the empty tin on the ground and sat beside Rohan. The silence grew again, taking every opportunity it had to encroach back into the room uninvited.

“What were you doing before you lost your parents?” Seff asked haltingly, attempting to interrupt it.

“God. Don’t say it like that. You make it sound like they’re dead,” Rohan replied. “Anyways, same thing I’m doing here, I guess. Maybe less boring. We were all trying our hardest not to be scared out of our minds." She looked down at her paws. "We were working through our frozen food. Canned stuff, later. Lots of hay. We played a lot of board games, I guess, to pass the time. It was sort of like a long vacation, but it was shit, 'cause obviously it wasn't a vacation. We just didn't know anything. I still don't. They probably don't.”

“And?” Seff asked.

“I don’t know. We ran out of food. I guess the car died, or they didn’t want to drive on the ice, or something. They didn’t want me to stay in the house alone, because they were worried about break-ins. Not like I blame them. The first few nights, the street was super loud. A few houses had their windows broken. I think I heard gunshots. It was weird. I guess you didn’t get any of that.”

“No. It was like everything disappeared. Sort of overnight,” Seff replied. "No gunshots. Perks of living in the middle of nowhere, I guess."

"You don't live in the middle of nowhere. Just in a stupid patch." Rohan hesitated. "I don't know where everyone went after that. After all the noise, it was just quiet. Like no one had been there at all. I guess it was safer that way."

"What about you?"

“Well, we went looking for a grocery store or something. We had to walk, ‘cause, like I said, the car wasn’t an option. And they took me with them,” Rohan said. "We probably would have found our way to that store if it wasn't so dark. The flashlight wasn't working, and we didn't have a fire."

Seff nodded. “And?”

“And then they chased me into the woods. Left them behind. Not out of choice, obviously. I never found a store, and I don't know where they are. That's when you caught me. What else do you want me to say?”

Seff turned a log over with the fireplace poker. Another set of sparks flew off the fire and settled in the pile of ashes.

“Nothing, I guess.”

"Does any of that help at all?"

Seff shrugged. "I mean, it's better than nothing, right?"

"I don't know," Rohan replied. "Does it change the plan?"

"No."

They sat in an unbearable silence, bathed in the warm light from the fire, the cold still biting at their backs.

"What were they like?"

"Is this a eulogy or something? God," Rohan replied. "You can't wait until you're sure of it?"

"I was just curious."

"I don't know. I mean, three months ago, maybe I'd have said they were horribly abusive and sent me to be tortured by hot pitchforks every day, 'cause they made me go to school, like,

even when Sammy—this girl I used to know—even this one day when Sammy was being a huge bitch, *and* I kind of had a cold," she said. "But I think that'd be stupid. So, I don't know. I think they try their best. They don't always listen to me, I guess, which is annoying, but I think they're trying."

Seff nodded and rested her head on one paw. Rohan was staring at the fire, squinting to not be blinded by the few stray bits of smoke that didn't reach the chimney.

"They took me to the doctor a bit before all this happened. They wanted to see what was wrong with my fur, that it doesn't change color in winter," she continued. "They wanted to take me when it was relevant. Obviously that didn't work, since by the time they got me there it was, like, July, but they'd been stuck on so many waitlists that was the first appointment they could get. I told them it wasn't bothering me, but they were so concerned I'd be made fun of. So they dragged me there anyway."

"I'm sorry. That sounds annoying."

"Of course, they said there was nothing they could do. They basically just said if anyone ever made fun of me to just ignore them. They offered to put me in therapy, but I said no. I didn't tell them I *did* get made fun of, not usually for my fur but for other stuff, like the stupid name they gave me. I don't know why I didn't tell them. I guess I was mad. I felt like they wouldn't listen to that, either."

"I don't think your name's stupid," Seff said.

"I got called a lot of different things for it," Rohan replied. "Because it's a boy's name, or just a weird name, maybe. It was dumb. A few people didn't even believe I was a girl. They thought I was faking it. Or they thought I was a lesbian or something."

"Is there something wrong with liking girls?" Seff asked.

"I mean, I guess not," Rohan said. "I know what you mean, and I'm not homophobic, or whatever. It was obvious they just wanted to hurt me, though. Like they didn't even think about it beyond what would maybe make me mad." She sighed. "I don't know. Do I have to like anyone? I think the whole concept's a bit overrated. I mean, some of my classmates have—had—boyfriends, and they were jerks like the rest of them."

"Of course you don't."

"I suppose if I had to pick, I'd choose girls, because at least *sometimes* they want to be friends with me," she continued, "but both genders are full of assholes. I'd rather throw the whole thing away. Or at least be done with middle school."

"Well, the good news is, I don't think anyone is worried about romance right now. Least of all me," Seff noted. "I don't think anyone's been worried for a few months. Or however long it's been." The silence came back, punctuated only by the occasional snap of the fire and more distant, more regular clicks. The cabin smelled of wood and smoke and faintly, the bite of cold air. "The other good news is, I don't think anyone likes middle school. No one peaks there. No one respectable, at least."

"Oh."

"So, whenever this is over, hopefully your classmates will have matured a bit. And they won't be such jerks."

"Right. Hopefully." Rohan sounded unconvinced. At each pause in the conversation, the silence crept back in, heavy and awkward.

"I married a woman, you know," Seff added.

"Oh."

"So, I mean, there's really nothing wrong with it. Whatever you are. I'm not going to judge you."

"Right. Thanks," Rohan replied.

Another moment of silence.

"I'm sort of curious now, I guess. What was her name?"

"Wynn."

"What was she like?" she asked.

Seff hesitated.

After an eternity, she answered, "How do you describe a summer afternoon when the sun has gone away?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, if someone were born just now, never having seen it once, what would you tell them? What would they know about daylight?"

"They wouldn't know anything," Rohan said.

"Exactly. You'd have to describe it like fire. A great, big, brilliant fire that turned the sky blue instead of red."

Silence again.

The grandfather clock against the far wall, the largest in the room, crept closer to some distant twelve. Carved on the front and inlaid below the face was a wolf and a ewe, built upon four legs, not two. The ewe lay her hooves on the back of the wolf. The wolf's eyes were shut; the ewe's were open pools, as deep and black and liquid as stained wood could be. The wolf lay still, though the curve of her tail suggested movement, as if she were pretending to be asleep. Lines around them implied insects or leaves or snow, though no snowflakes fell and no butterflies showed themselves, and ripples in the wood above them evoked clouds.

The second hand made a full circle, and the clock moved another minute, and there were no clouds or insects or leaves, and there was no ewe and no wolf. There was no motion save for a faint and ancient attempt at animacy, no longer capable of making itself particularly heard, softly ticking along to a number that meant nothing.

Chapter 7

Neither Seff nor Rohan strayed from their spot in front of the fire for some time. It was hours until Seff stood and decided to tuck into bed, and Rohan took her spot again curled up on the chair, and in the interim mostly the two spoke about what things had been like before.

“Did you like to read?” Seff would say, or ask, “Did you like video games?” or something of that nature, and Rohan would reply, “No. Not really,” or, “Maybe when I was little,” as if she wasn’t still little. "Did you have friends?" she asked once, and Rohan nodded, and replied disingenuously, and refused to respond to any further pressure. Seff wondered if there was anyone she missed.

The conversation would always peter out from there, and the two would return to watching the fire intently, and Seff’s eyes would once in a while wander back to the clock, but never catch the life in its carvings.

Once, there had nearly been a fruitful moment; Seff asked if Rohan played any instruments, and Rohan nodded, and said she played the violin; Seff's eyes lit up all of a sudden, and she dug out her viola and showed it to Rohan, but it was far too large for Rohan to try and Seff was feeling suddenly insecure about her own skill, so after a few notes to demonstrate nothing came of it in the end.

Eventually, Seff returned to her bed, and Rohan to the chair. When Rohan was asleep, she changed, piece-by-piece and under the covers, into new clothes, cold and stiff where they had been folded in her wardrobe, nearly identical to the old ones to not tire herself with too much choice. She closed her eyes and let the length of the day make itself apparent, with nothing else to show for it but all she had scavenged and her own exhaustion.

She slept a long ten hours or so, and though she had worked all through the past few months mostly to keep the fire burning, she had not once felt as tired as she did now. It was as if she was completely relearning her ability to communicate, and, without noticing, doing so had drained her to the dregs.

She wondered when she woke up, finding Rohan still asleep, and stood to check on her, how long she had been alone.

It was tempting to begin counting from when the sun had vanished, of course, and certainly that was when the isolation had become apparent. She could no longer text her friends, however rarely she did; no longer would she receive calls from clients. She couldn’t even read the responses of others, anonymously lurking on some old forum for a technical question when one of her power saws broke down.

She asked herself how much of a difference it truly made.

She confronted, briefly, as she checked the blanket for the faint rise and fall of Rohan’s chest, the stretch of time before. She was unsure how many days it had been before she stopped taking guests in, or maybe before the guests stopped making the drive to her doorstep; she

was not certain how much time it had been before it was no longer normal for her to ignore every call, and how long it had taken for the calls to stop coming at all.

She turned away from Rohan, satisfied that she was still alive, and looked at the fire. It was running low, and its light was growing hazardously dim. She stoked it and fed it another piece of wood, then left for her stores outside to find even more, which she warmed, one-by-one, in front of it, then added to the blaze until it once again roared.

She then turned to the food she had rationed together. The stores of hay were still mostly intact, for when Rohan awoke, and there were a good few cans of meat remaining. She remembered the few remnants of her older hunts, too, and returned out back to retrieve them from the chest freezer. No longer too hungry to cook, Seff took a large cast-iron pan and set it on the fire, and got to frying the very last of the frozen venison she had into something close to a meal. The smell spread throughout the cabin; a reprieve from everything else, Seff thought, and pleasantly warm against the snap of cold air that needled at her nose.

She placed a pot over the fire, as well, and stepped outside to gather armfuls of snow. She filled it as much as she could with snow and ice, then added a purifying tablet, separating the tiniest bits of sediment from the water and disinfecting it. She carefully poured the separated water out into another pot, then left the pot with the sediment beside the fire to clean later; she boiled the water, just to make sure it was clean, then poured in her rice and placed the lid over the pot.

She would have washed it, before, at the urging of her wife, but now she was hungry, without either patience or running water, and so instead she hoped the texture would be fine and it was not contaminated with arsenic or some other poison, as she thought she might have read about years prior, in a magazine left out on the counter. The instructions on the bag told her to, if cooking it on the stovetop, boil it for twenty minutes, so she continued cooking the meat and silently wished she had done so later. She supposed, now, it was a bit of a pipedream to want hot food.

She had no thermometer, but, intent on cooking her food fully well-done, was willing to settle for "slightly burnt". She turned it regularly, and, eventually, took the pan off the heat once it was firm enough for her to trust it. By that time, the rice was about halfway done, and so she wiped her paws clean, sliced the venison on a thin plank of wood atop her bedside table, let it rest in its own juices, and sat back. The clock crept closer to twenty minutes. She glanced back at Rohan every now and then, making sure she was alive, asleep, and comfortable.

After an eternity, when the rice finished cooking, she took a plate and fork (both were freezing cold) and, without a table or chair to sit at, returned to her spot on the floor. She considered how she would do the dishes: she would boil more water and wash the pots and pans with it, and her plates. Over time, prior to finding Rohan, she had become lazy and started eating straight from her hands. This, she felt, made her significantly more civilized. The plank she would throw in the fire; she had plenty of wood and did not need to bother washing and drying it, particularly because she had no idea how to even go about doing such a thing.

Seff attempted to eat slowly, savoring each bite. Rohan was asleep, and not there to judge her, but nevertheless she felt some shame at how she had lunged at the can of meat earlier and

devoured it so hastily. She thought she had seen fear pass over her expression before, and considered she may have been imagining things, but also wondered how she could possibly be sure.

One evening, a few months after they'd married and a year after Seff had moved into her house, Wynn pulled her aside at dinner. They had both finished eating, their dirty dishes piled in front of them on the kitchen table, salad bowls and spoons and serving forks and still-clean steak knives. Seff had been staring out the window; the pane was collecting raindrops. Wynn stood and tapped her once, then twice on her broad shoulder.

"My parents called. They're worried about you," she declared.

"Why?" Seff replied, and turned her head. "What are they worried about?"

"They're worried you'll hurt me," Wynn said, tearing a napkin up into little shreds.

Wynn looked at her with her liquid brown eyes, set on the sides of her head and wide and vulnerable, a slightly concerned expression set across her face.

"What, do they think I'll eat you?" Seff asked. She barked a sharp laugh.

"Yes," Wynn replied. "Essentially."

"God forbid a girl be butch," Seff said.

"I'm not joking. That's what they think, even if they'd never put it in those words."

"They were fine with it when we started dating," Seff said. "Mostly."

"I know. I don't know what changed. Maybe they thought about it too hard. Worked themselves up into a frenzy. Watched too much cable news or something."

The air grew heavy and humid, even indoors. The August sunlight turned narrow and aurum in the shroud of clouds that swallowed it. The deciduous trees Wynn enjoyed keeping around and Seff trimmed each morning had cast their leaves onto the ground. They hadn't yet begun to rot together or freeze.

"Do you believe them?" Seff tapped on the window a few times. One of the fatter raindrops merged with the small ones beside it and trailed down the glass. "I mean, you know there's a difference between what you are and the animals we have to eat, right? You're not the same. Not even remotely the same. They know that too, right?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Wynn asked. She sat down at the seat across the table from Seff. "I don't know exactly what they think, but I love you. Of course I don't believe them."

"I'd never eat anything sapient. There's a line between them and you, same as how there's a line between me and any wild dog."

"I know. You think I'd be married to you if I didn't?"

"Is it really about species, or are they just mad you're marrying a woman?"

"It might be both. I'm sure they'd find some other reason to fret if it wasn't you." Wynn shrugged. "They think you're a predator, you know. They don't care what variety. It's all just a convenient metaphor for them."

Seff sighed and drummed on the countertop with the tips of her claws. "I don't know how to convince them. I mean, God, you're older than me. Richer. Taller, if I slouch. If anyone's taking advantage of anyone here…"

"I don't know either." Wynn tossed the napkin shreds over her shoulder and into the bin behind her. "I bet they think you made me this way. They had a vision for who I'd end up with. Some genteel ram from the city with a nice, well-paying job."

"That didn't work out too well."

"Obviously not."

Seff sighed. "If it's any consolation, my parents aren't…" She trailed off and dug her teeth into her lower lip. "Well, you know, the only reason they haven't been on my ass about all this is because they're not really in the picture. So count your blessings, I guess."

"Great." Wynn exhaled sharply. "So there's no one on our side, right?"

"I've got friends. You've got friends," Seff said. "Isn't that enough?"

"I wish."

Seff ran her paw across Wynn's head, over the thickly curled, eggshell-tinted wool that covered her scalp. "What did you say to them about it?"

"What can I say? I'm renting this place from them. I can't exactly beat the price."

"Are they going to kick us out?"

Wynn shook her head. "They love me too much. Love in quotes, maybe, but it's good enough." She took Seff's paw from her head and looked her in the eyes. "If they kick anyone out, it'll be you, and I won't let them do that."

"Worst comes to worst, I can find a place to stay. Don't worry about me."

"I won't have to. I'll talk to them, and they'll come around." Wynn shrugged. "I'm trying not to catastrophize, you know? They're not terrible people. They just don't like change, and I think the wedding was too real for them."

"You came out to them five years ago. We started dating four years ago." Seff licked the blood from her lower lip. "How much time do they need?"

"I think they were kind of hoping it was a phase and we wouldn't stick together. They want grandchildren."

"Well, we could adopt, right? There are a lot of interspecies support groups. Queer support groups. Probably queer interspecies support groups, too. Lots of kinds of families out there. Two mommies. No mommies. Probably other atypical quantities of mom, too." Seff cocked her head to the side. "Lots of kids who need parents. Doesn't matter what they look like. It wouldn't be impossible."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Or, you know. Donors. There are lots of options."

"Well, anyways, don't tell them that. It'll confuse and frighten them." Wynn added, in a lower voice, "I'll just wait until they kick the bucket."

After a moment, she chuckled, and Seff stood and kissed the top of her wife's head. Wynn kissed her back, and then lifted her arms and wrapped them firmly around Seff and drew her into a tight embrace—deceptively strong, Seff had called it once—and buried her nose in the thick fur of her neck and breathed out.

"I don't think I'm ready for kids, anyways. Let's try to be newlyweds a little longer," Wynn whispered. She shook her head and leaned back. "Hell, let's stay this way as long as we can."

"I mean, they call it the honeymoon phase for a reason, don't they?"

"I choose to remain slightly delusional. There's no reason anything should have to change. Not until we're ready, at least."

"I can get behind that," Seff said, and held her back, careful not to grip too tightly.

Chapter 8

In the present, in the dark light of the fire, Seff finished her food. The plate had warmed slightly in her paws, and she set it down beside the pots and pans. She licked both it and the cutting board clean.

"I'm awake," Rohan announced, sitting up straight and letting the blanket collect in stacked ribbons at her feet.

"How long?" Seff asked. She was aware of the burgeoning routine in her response, and wasn't sure why she felt so compelled to ask; it wasn't as though she was doing anything dangerous while Rohan was asleep, but Seff felt, regardless, that she'd be more comfortable not seeing her cook.

"I woke up just now," Rohan replied, yawning as if to prove the point. She stood up, leaning against the chair. "My leg feels much better, you know. Though my back is *freaking* killing me." As if for dramatic effect, she bent backwards and inaudibly cracked her back, then her neck, then her shoulders

"That's good. That your leg is better, I mean," Seff said. "I'm going to change your bandages. And maybe we can work on getting you a proper bed."

"Did you only just remember to change them?"

Seff narrowed her eyes. "Sit back down," she said, standing and walking over to where Rohan was. Rohan obliged, and Seff knelt down and rolled up her pants leg. "I should've done this yesterday," she continued absently.

"And you forgot?"

"A lot got in the way. You didn't remind me." She sighed and looked up, meeting Rohan's unwavering gaze. "But, yes, I forgot."

"It wasn't hurting too much. I didn't think to remind you."

"Like I said," Seff replied, "that's good." She unwrapped the bandages and removed the piece of gauze she had placed over the wound. "If it hurts, that means there's probably something wrong."

"Where are you throwing this stuff out?" Rohan asked, wincing, though more at the sight of the dried blood crusted around the wound, Seff figured, than at any sudden pain.

"I have a bin out back," she said. "When it's full, I'll dump it in the woods. Before you ask, pollution is honestly the least of my concerns."

"You'll dump it far away?"

"Yeah," Seff replied. "Of course."

"Good," Rohan replied. "I don't want anyone smelling the blood."

"Me neither." Seff parted the fur around the wound and first inspected it visually, then placed her muzzle close by to check for the sour smell of infection. When she was satisfied with its condition, she took some of the leftover water, mixed it with a little antiseptic on a cloth, and wiped away the dried blood. It had completely scabbed over, so she did not bother with another piece of gauze. Instead, she wrapped it firmly in another bandage and rolled Rohan's pants leg back down.

"Better?"

Rohan shrugged. "I guess."

"Is it itchy or painful?"

"No. Not really."

"Then that's the best we can hope for." Seff took the discarded bandages and gauze around to the door. She pried it open with force that never seemed to diminish, as though the latch froze anew every night, and walked out back in the biting cold. She had forgotten to grab her coat before she left, having shed it sometime in her sleep, and immediately noticed; she forced the dumpster open and threw the bandages away as quickly as she could before rushing back inside, nearly slamming the door behind her. "Are you hungry?" she asked as soon as she returned, the blood rushing in her ears.

"Mhm," Rohan replied. "I can feed myself, though." As if to prove a point, she stood and walked over to where the hay was stored, and took and ate some in tiny bites. "We should go back out."

Seff cocked her head to the side. "Why now?"

"What? Why not?"

"We have food, and I don't want to overexert you while your leg is still healing. Why go out?"

"To look for my parents," Rohan said, with a sudden bite to her voice. "Or have you forgotten about that, too?"

"Right. I'm sorry," Seff replied. "I haven't forgotten."

"Plus," she continued, calmer, "we could always stock up on more food, even if we already have it. And I'm bored."

"You want to do it now?" Seff asked.

"As soon as we can."

"Make sure to bundle up, then. It's cold out there."

"Of course it is," Rohan said. "You think I'm stupid."

"I don't," Seff said. "You're remarkably intelligent."

"Thanks."

She had read once that it wasn't good for a child's work ethic and mental health to call them smart; Wynn had left a magazine lying around on parenting once, because Seff always insisted on print and Wynn found it more fun to leave things around than to directly talk about anything. The child should be complimented on effort, said the header article, not intelligence, to instill the value of studying and focus and avoid the pitfalls of a fixed mindset.

"That doesn't discount what I'm saying, though. Wear a coat."

Seff couldn't recall if she had been complimented on either as a child. Mostly, adults had praised her for being respectfully quiet. She decided she was being a terrible parent, and decided in turn it would be best that she have some hopefully-decent replacements soon.

"Whatever. Of course I'll bundle up. The sun's gone. Do you think I've spent any time here *not* bundled?"

"Your hood is down," Seff noted. "I had a friend who lost the tips of her ears to frostbite."

This was a partial lie; the friend in question had been an acquaintance by the most charitable definition, though Seff had really seen her with her ears cropped and, awkwardly, asked about it. Rohan raised her hood and tucked her ears inside.

"You never put up yours," Rohan replied.

"I don't have one."

"You don't have a hat?"

Seff shook her head. "If I lose my ears, you can tell me you told me so. But yours look worse than mine."

"Rude."

A few months after she had left out the special feature on childcare, Wynn had set out a medical magazine, stolen from her doctor's office. The back side, afterthought that it was, focused on frostbite, explaining which old folk remedies worked. There were accounts of warm water treatments that would make it better and hot water treatments that would make it worse and treatments that fell in a third category and wouldn't change anything.

Most of the magazine was on something else entirely, on diseases inside that burrowed their way through someone and tore them apart. The front pages were hopeful, referring to early methods of detection and cures, so Seff didn't worry, and she didn't read the innermost

articles, since that was where the driest parts were, and she was no scientist. She left the journals and pamphlets to pile up at the house, and absently wedged a claw under her wedding band to fidget with it, and worked on sealing all the cracks in the cabin, and hired an electrician and called out "let there be light" when she finally flipped the breaker.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," Seff told Rohan.

Wynn stacked more magazines on children and babies atop the ones on diseases of the pancreas and liver and quartered stomach, and everything was perfect, and Wynn's parents calmed down, though they rarely called, and Seff and Wynn stayed in the rental house when they weren't visiting the cabin, and when they did go to the cabin Wynn never dressed for the occasion and always complained she was cold, but she always showed up, and those few weeks lasted forever, and every night the moon was full.

"I won't."

Silence.

"You know, I never would have met you," Seff said absently. "Had she lived."

"What?" Rohan asked.

"Wynn died," Seff replied. "A while ago."

"Oh."

"A few years ago. Right after we married. She was young. I was young. We sort of U-Hauled. Did you know that?"

"I mean, I kind of figured. She's not here now. I thought, you know, death or divorce. You sounded pretty sad about it when I asked about her."

"The former," Seff said. "I'm not divorced. If she had lived, I wouldn't be at this cabin."

“Oh."

“We were renting a place from her mom, you know. That's where we lived most of the year. This—" she gestured vaguely around "—was supposed to be for vacations. Summers. That sort of thing. And, we decided, for my work, so I had a place to do it away from home. She didn’t like me as much when I was covered in sawdust. I tracked it inside the house.”

“But she had you build a cabin.”

“And?”

“You would’ve been pretty messy building it. That’s dumb.”

Seff gave a sharp half-laugh. “Guess she was thinking long-term.”

There was a prolonged silence.

“Obviously, that didn’t work out,” she continued. “I didn't have a place to stay besides this. We were renting our main house, like I said, and I didn't inherit any other property. Her parents eventually decided they liked me, after a lot of deliberation on the matter and, like, shitty peace offerings, pardon my French, but not enough to discount their prices as much as they had for their daughter." She scratched at her neck. "And, I don't know if you know this, but freelance carpentry isn't the most consistent source of income."

"Makes sense, I guess."

"So I moved. I don’t know if it happened for a reason. Like, the universe wanted me here, eventually, and decided to kill my wife to get me there. God willed it, maybe.” A bitter note passed through her voice for a moment, then faded.

“I’m not religious,” Rohan replied. “My family’s not. I don’t think anything really happens for a reason.”

“I’m not either,” Seff said. “Parents were, ostensibly, but we really only went to services once in a blue moon. But, you know. Sun’s gone. I don’t know how the world works anymore. The sky could be a painting, for all I know. Big field of stars.” She hesitated. “Sometimes, as a kid, I’d glance up and think it looked remarkably flat. Like a soundstage, kinda.”

“Shakespeare was a wolf,” Rohan replied.

“What?”

“Didn’t he say something about the world being a stage?”

Seff shrugged. “Maybe. Are you trying to imply derealization is an inherent lupine trait?”

"What?" Rohan blinked. “No. What does that mean? Is that a stereotype?”

"Derealization is, like,” Seff paused, thinking of what to say. “It’s when you sort of end up thinking things are all fake. Feeling like you’re watching your own life as a movie. Or, like, you're a ghost following yourself"

"Like a third-person video game?"

"I guess. A little. Not actually *seeing* that way, but feeling like it." After a minute, she said. "So you *do* like video games, then."

“I guess. Anyways, that's freaky.”

“It’s kind of scary,” Seff replied. “Mostly I think it’s just unpleasant. It sort of just makes it hard to enjoy life when you can’t really live in the moment.”

“Is that one of your issues?” Rohan asked.

“I don’t have issues,” Seff replied. “And no. I was joking. And speaking hypothetically.”

“Oh. Well, I was too. I thought it was just a funny coincidence.”

“Anyways, if everything’s just painted on, I guess this is all part of the script. Wynn dies. The sun disappears. Everyone else dies. I die, eventually. Maybe I’m only alive because I’m here.” Seff scratched behind her ear. “Everyone except you, I mean. You’ll live.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll live forever.”

“How long ago did she die?” Rohan asked.

“A few months before everything happened,” Seff replied.

“How?”

“Pancreatic cancer.” She ran one claw along her waterline. “It’s hard to catch until it’s too late, and no one thought she was at risk. She ate healthy. Never smoked. Rarely drank. She was young, too. Just a few years older than me.”

Rohan sat in silence.

“Sorry to make it awkward,” Seff continued.

"And there wasn't a plan?"

"I mean, it was complete random chance. Exceedingly rare. She and I just happened to get the short end of things."

“You can just die like that,” Rohan said, halfway between a question and a statement. “Something comes out and kills you. There's no reason for it, and there's nothing you can do."

“It’s a disease, not a boogeyman.”

“It just happens. To anyone. Was it even in the script? Was it part of the plan? Did you plan for it?”

"I don't know if there is a script, Rohan. I don't know if there's a reason or a plan. I think it's all just us, alone," Seff said. Her voice was strained and weak, and she fought to keep it low and unwavering.

"How's that supposed to make anything better?"

"Because we can make the plans. We're in charge."

"But everything is trying to kill us."

“Not everything's trying to kill you."

"You're wrong."

"I'm not." Seff sighed.

"It's a big freaking world. One person doesn't matter. Not if every disease *and* monster *and* cold snap *and* avalanche is after us. Who cares about one wolf then?" Rohan replied.

"Cancer is rare. When you're young, at least. Don't be scared," Seff said. "Not of that, at least. I'll protect you from what's important right now."

"I'm not worried about myself."

"We'll find your parents," Seff replied.

"And what if they're *dead*?" Rohan's eyes dug twin holes into Seff. Both seemed to focus directly on her, despite their placement on the sides of Rohan's head. "What then?

The fire sputtered. The room smelled faintly of smoke, and ashes drifted through the still, cold, woody air. Tears gathered at the corners of Rohan's eyes. Seff wasn't sure if hares cried or if it was the smoke or if it was her fault or someone else's or if it really was the whole world.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it." She sighed. "But I sincerely doubt they've died of cancer in the past three days."

"You don't get it, do you? It's not *that* that I'm worried about. Anything could've killed them. Anything could still kill them." She stood up and began to pace around in circles. "We should go as soon as possible. Now, even. What's the hesitation, anyways?"

"I just thought I should—"

"Keep me here? Just so you can tell me about your dead wife? About your issues? I don't even know you, Seff, not really. I'm here because I have to be. It's not my problem to solve."

"Rohan, I'm sorry if I wasted your time—"

"How many people are dead?"

Seff hesitated. "I don't know. You've been out more than me."

Rohan huffed.

"Too many, I think," Seff offered.

"How did they die?"

"They weren't made for the cold, I suppose. Or they lost access to medicine. Or food."

Rohan scratched at the ground. The sound reminded Seff of an animal with overgrown claws trying to get out of a locked room. Whether it walked on four paws or on its hind legs, she considered, ceased to have any relevance after long enough. To be trapped was to be trapped. "Or something… hunted them, right?"

Silence again.

“I need to find them before it’s too late,” she continued.

Seff sighed. “We can go, but it’s not your job to protect them.”

“So I'm just supposed to let them die?”

“Those aren’t your options. If they're really hurt, what do you think you could have done if you were with them?”

“Are you calling me a coward?”

“Of course not. I’m trying to be realistic.”

“That’s stupid—”

“Just take a deep breath,” Seff interrupted. “It’s going to be alright.” She stood and placed a paw on Rohan’s back, who froze and winced, but did as she was told. “Sorry. Sorry for not asking to touch you,” she added after a moment, and withdrew her hand.

“It’s okay,” Rohan replied. Her voice shook. “God. Sorry.” She sat back down, and Seff followed suit.

"I know I said you could go earlier," Seff began.

"Nothing's stopping me. You don't think I've considered it?"

"I mean, yeah. I'm not going to lock you in here. But you can't just run off on your own," Seff said. "I worry about you. I worry you'll get hurt. Not because I know you, but because you're twelve. If you go, I'll follow you. I won't drag you back here, but I don't want you out there alone." She sighed. "I know I'm not the best option. Not even close. But I don't know where your parents are, and until we find them, it doesn't feel right leaving you out there alone."

"You said I was smart."

"And you are," Seff said. "Smart and brave. But you're still a kid. Those things aren't mutually exclusive. I'm sorry if anyone told you they were."

The firelight danced across the floor and left little bright reflections flashing across each hardwood plank, even though their shine had been dulled from months of dirt and abuse. Seff ran one claw against them, leaving a thin, deep score across the lines denoting separate pieces. She remembered putting them in. She remembered how the sunlight flooded them through the open window.

"Am I going to grow up?" Rohan asked. "Are things going to go back to normal?"

"I can't predict the future."

"I'm going to die," she continued. "Aren't I?"

"Everyone dies," Seff replied. "I won't let it happen anytime soon. It's your job to live. Prove yourself wrong."

Rohan looked for a moment as though she was going to say something obstinate, but decided against it. "We should go," she said instead. Her voice caught in her throat.

Seff nodded. "We should." She stood, took her jacket from where she had laid it down, and wrapped it tightly around herself. "Are you ready?"

"Mhm," Rohan replied, tucking her ears into her hood.

"So, we'll go to your parents' house," Seff said, grabbing the bag, lighting the lantern, dousing the fire, remembering and then promptly forgetting once more her earlier resolution to clean the chimney, and making her way to the door, "and we'll look for them there. And if they're not there, we can go back to the grocery store and see if anyone else can help, or maybe see if they found their way there, too."

"Okay," Rohan said, coming up to her side. Seff growled softly as she forced the door open. She suppressed the slight desire to bark at the exertion, considering it undignified and potentially frightening, although the former issue wasn't generally much of a concern. She handed the lantern off to Rohan.

"Do you remember where your house is?" Seff asked.

"No," Rohan replied. "Maybe in the light, I could find it, but not when it's this dark. I don't really know where I am. I think it might be on the right side of that fork, where the store was to the left. I remember my address, if that helps?"

"Yeah," Seff said. "Actually, it does."

Rohan told her the address, and Seff thought for a moment. "I think you're right. I remember driving up there a few times and turning onto that street. I usually didn't have much reason to go that way, so I'm not sure about it, but it's the best lead I have without a map."

"You don't have a map?"

"I just used GPS, and my car froze, so that's not really an option."

"It *froze?*"

"It was already kind of temperamental. I think the cold just screwed it up."

"How cold do you think it is?"

Seff shrugged. "Less cold than it should be, in my uneducated opinion."

"You'd like it to be *colder?*"

"No," Seff said. "But it seems like the sun vanishing should have made it that way." She hesitated a moment. "Do you know why the moon shines?"

"It's the sun's light reflected off the surface."

"And yet there's still moonlight"

"Oh," Rohan said. "Yeah. You're right."

"Why do you think that is?" Seff asked.

"I don't know. Is this a trick question?"

"No. I just want to know what you think. I have no idea."

"We were wrong about the moon?"

Seff shook her head. "Maybe. Or maybe the sun's still there somewhere."

"Maybe."

Again, they came to the hill. Rohan passed the lantern and climbed up it, and Seff followed, still slowly but quicker than she had before. Their footsteps had not faded from before, and no others joined them; it had not snowed in some time. Seff wasn't sure if it would again.

"Do you have any idea what happened?" Rohan asked, handing the light back to Seff.

"No. It's strange," she said, then realized how self-evident that probably was. "The moon is still shining, and the stars look the same."

"And?"

"Well, I imagine if Earth was just flung out somewhere in space, the stars would look different, and the moon wouldn't have any light to reflect. Even if the sun just disappeared, the sky wouldn't look the way it does now." She paused, thinking. "It makes me wonder if it's daytime somewhere else, on the other side of the world. Like the planet's just stopped turning. It seems as likely as anything else."

"Do you think they're okay there? Are they burning?"

"Who knows? Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's just as cold there." She looked out into the trees. "That's another thing. It doesn't seem like it's as cold as it should be. It should hurt to be outside, I think, and clearly it does for some people, but even as thick as my fur is, I expected worse. There's nothing keeping us warm. I think all the heat should have just gone out into space."

Coming again to the fork in the road, Seff took the path to the right.

"Can you hold the lantern up?" she asked. "So I can read the street signs."

They walked for a bit down another suburban road before coming to a dead end: a barricade, icicles hanging off it, painted red and white and stopping a wall of trees from encroaching any further.

"Damn," Seff muttered.

"Hold on," Rohan said. "I recognize this place, I think. My street is off to the side." She turned around and disappeared off into another street. Seff ran after her, the lantern swinging and leading her forward into the darkness. What she swore were footprints were scattered across the ground in the middle distance, overlaid on the snow-covered pavement in frantic crosses. Her pace quickened.

The light froze in front of a house like the others. The snow covering it glittered. No fresh footsteps led to its door; Seff wasn't sure if that was a good sign. Rohan walked up the porch steps and came to the front door; she knocked twice, sharply, weak and muffled.

Seff followed, and knocked twice as well. No response came from inside. She tried the handle: locked. Rohan went around to the window and stood on the tips of her feet, trying to look in.

"Do you want me to lift you up?" Seff asked. Rohan nodded, and Seff took hold of her and held her up to the window.

"I can't see anything."

"Let me try." Seff pressed her nose against the window, but could only barely make out a darkened kitchen. She took a step back and wedged her claws below the edge of the window, trying to pry it open; it didn't budge, and she stopped for fear of breaking something. "Do you know where an unlocked window might be?"

Rohan shook her head. "I usually kept mine unlocked, but they locked it before we left, to keep out the cold, and it's second-story, anyways."

"We could break one," Seff offered. "I don't see what other options we have. They might just be too scared to open the door." She didn't dare propose the alternative. Rohan looked again as though she might have wanted to say something, but then just nodded.

Seff drew in a breath and punched cleanly through the edge of the window; she repeated herself twice more, at the other corners, then pushed the window in until the whole thing fell away. A small trickle of blood flowed down her knuckles; she looked down and winced, then wordlessly licked it off her hand. It tasted metallic and familiar.

"I'll go through," she offered, then, without giving Rohan a chance to reply, climbed through the hole she had created. She walked around, unlocked the door, and opened it, letting Rohan inside.

The air indoors was a little warmer than the air outside, though it was rapidly cooling. The house was cast in long, flickering shadows from the lantern, and though Seff could see well in the dark, its colors only became apparent with the fire: the walls were painted somewhere between red and yellow, and the floors were red oak. The stairs were bare and made from the same material as the floor, and the banister appeared to be mahogany. Everything was covered in a thin film of condensation, frozen and sparkling in the light.

"Hello?" Rohan called, to no response. "It's me. Um, Rohan. I'm home."

Her voice echoed through the hall and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Rohan walked upstairs. Seff followed behind, taking the creaking steps two at a time, inspecting the air for the smell of rot and decay and general unpleasantness: she was grateful to find nothing questionable, though she also could not smell anything that indicated life. The whole house felt like a museum; not as meticulously preserved as the one she had ransacked before, but just as static and empty, defined not by the presence of death but by the absence of life.

"I'll let you check the rooms," Seff whispered. "I'll stay close behind, so if there's trouble, I can help." Rohan nodded and opened each door, one-by-one, as Seff followed her slowly behind. She looked into the bathroom, made from white tile and once-dewy mirrors, the laundry room, the home office with machines that felt wrong without their status lights enabled, one large bedroom painted in similar shades to the hall, two smaller rooms, one full and painted pale yellow and one gray and devoid of furniture.

All were empty of people.

"I don't think they're here," Rohan said, more resigned than Seff had expected. She had anticipated tears and anger, thrown objects disturbing the serenity of the house frozen in time. She had expected a louder grief than she received.

"No," Seff conceded.

Rohan darted back into the pale yellow room; Seff assumed it was hers. She nearly followed her in, but stayed back. After some time, Rohan emerged again clutching a small pink notebook and a ballpoint pen. "Does ink freeze?"

Seff shrugged. "Check."

Rohan held the pen in her palm for a moment to warm it, then tried scribbling on the notebook; after a second, the ink flowed smoothly.

"So what's the plan?"

"We look for more people, I guess. We go back to the old plan."

Rohan nodded and flipped to a new page. "Do we try the grocery store?"

"Maybe," Seff said. "I don't know. Do you think there'll be people there?"

Rohan wrote something down. "There were people there before, right?"

"Right. Someone took the meat off the shelves."

"Trustworthy people?"

Seff turned around and made her way back downstairs. "I don't know," she admitted. "Is anyone trustworthy?"

"I sure hope *you* are," Rohan said. Her voice remained level. "Careful. The bottom step always squeaks." She tucked the notebook into her back pocket and clipped the pen to its spine.

Seff pressed on it with one boot. It creaked. She kept going. Her paw left an imprint in the condensation painting the wood. "You're right."

"I'm going to check for food. There might be some left over in the pantry."

Seff waited by the front door until Rohan returned, clutching another bundle of hay and a package of presumably shelf-stable cookies under the opposing arm from where she held the lantern.

"Lot of frozen stuff in there. Unrecognizable."

They left the house together and retraced their footsteps back to the fork in the road.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Seff asked, after they had been walking for a bit.

"No." Rohan took a bite of some of the hay.

"You want to put that in the bag?"

Rohan nodded. Seff knelt down, and Rohan opened the backpack and stuffed the hay inside, bending it in half to fit. Her boot made contact with the snow and sank into it until it hit a firmer layer of ice.

"We can get more food at the store, too," Seff added. "Hopefully."

"I don't want to take any chances."

"Fair enough."

Their footsteps from a few days prior were still embedded in the snow leading towards the commerce center. Seff wondered if gravity would eventually erase them, or if it would ever snow again. She suspected it would do her better to travel through the woods, to avoid being tracked; she feared she'd get lost, and reasoned that the tracks were already there, so there wasn't much point to it anymore.

The wide glass door to the grocery store was still smashed open, and the broken glass glittered in the full moonlight. She had not expected it to be fixed, but as Seff neared it something else took her by surprise. A warm, strong glow poured out through the door and onto the ice.

The building inside, she saw, was painted in vivid colors; she had been to the store before, but now noticed everything; the deep blue of the walls behind the meat counter, the rich yellow of the tiles, and even the grays which felt renewed and bright.

She took the backpack off her shoulders and removed the hunting knife from it, then slipped it into her pocket and took a step closer to the threshold. Rohan hung back.

The door slid open.

Chapter 9

"I guess there are other people here after all, huh?" Seff said under her breath. Rohan nodded. She continued, "I wonder how they got electricity. Generators, probably. Seems stupid to waste it, but maybe they want to advertise their presence." She took the lantern from Rohan and doused it.

Rohan shuffled up to Seff's side and shrunk up against her. "I don't trust it," she said.

Seff shook her head. "Me neither, but maybe it's worth a shot." She walked through the open doorway. Rohan clung to her arm. "If something goes wrong, I'll deal with it. You run or hide."

They walked through the wide aisles together. Freezers flickered aimlessly, full of things that had no doubt spoiled already. Things had been cleaned up to some extent, though most things remained on the shelves. The wilted and blackened produce which had been there once was mostly gone, though some still remained on the ground. Despite the overt appearance that the place had been somewhat cared for in the time since they were last there, the sick smell of rot lingered throughout the store. Whatever central heating had been enabled was futile in its job of keeping out the cold in most respects, and only seemed to make things worse.

The wind made a faint rushing noise as it weaved through the shelves, disrupting the familiar stillness in the air; the motion was a product of the heating, Seff guessed. She sniffed the air for people, but the smell of rot disguised them. Seeing no other choice, she called out, "Is anyone here?"

No response. She and Rohan kept walking.

One of the back doors swung open. Seff felt for the knife silhouetted against her.

"Hello?" came a voice from the back. "Is someone here?"

Seff stepped forward. "I am."

"Oh!" The source of the voice came forward in turn, into the light. It was a lynx, wearing an old military coat and thick, heavy boots that echoed with each step. Their eyes lit up as soon as they saw Seff. "I wasn't expecting a wolf with that voice. We heard some stomping a few ticks ago. Was that you?"

"Who are you?" she asked, her tone guarded.

"I'm Rory," the lynx replied. "You?"

Seff hesitated. She supposed there wasn't really any risk in Rory knowing her name. "Seff."

Rory nodded. "Interesting." He took another step forward and looked Seff up and down as though he were appraising her.

"I haven't…" She glanced around, looking for Rohan; she had disappeared without her noticing. Her heart dropped; her ears pricked up. "I haven't seen anyone else in weeks."

"Come in," he said. "You'll be cold otherwise." He placed a paw on Seff's back and led her away, into the room he'd emerged from.

"Wait—" Seff said, but Rory kept walking, and suddenly she felt weak and awkward trying to pull away. She made a vague gesture into the distance and hoped Rohan saw.

The area Rory led her into was dark; darker than anything outside, Seff felt, however impossible that was, and as soon as he closed the door behind them she could not even see her own paw in front of her.

As she entered, she felt the temperature of the air drop, abruptly, by about twenty degrees, and then continue to fall. She had not noticed before how well the heating had worked inside the store, even with the door smashed open and the generator running in shifts. The passageway felt almost like a shadowed forest, like one of the places off the road outside, though she was sure it was just a storage room. She felt around for a wall to get a sense of space, and found nothing.

"What is this?"

"We're looking for an enclave," Rory replied. "Isn't that vague?"

Pointing out the uselessness of an unhelpful statement, Seff thought, did not make it any less so. "Frustratingly. Is anyone else here? Have you set up any sort of community?"

"Sometimes," Rory said. "There are others. They're not always here, but now they're back a little further."

"How'd you get power here?" Seff heard Rory's footsteps shrink away to someplace distant, ahead and to her right, and ran until she wasn't so far away from them.

"Generators."

"Do they not work in here?" She felt the urge to gesture around vaguely, though she suspected it was slightly pointless.

"It's difficult to explain," Rory replied. "But, effectively, yes. Any attempt to let light in here, past a few feet from the door, seems to fail. It's not much further now."

"Why?"

"Why anything?" Rory asked. "How have you gone this long avoiding it?"

"Avoiding what?"

"You think the sun's just disappeared out of some mundane logic? The world's stopped spinning or something? Earth's been ejected?"

"Yes?"

"How often have you gone out?"

"I've been trying to avoid it," Seff replied.

"Have you seen the moon?"

"Sure," Seff replied. "It's still shining. That throws a wrench in a lot of things, I'm aware. I know that much."

"It hasn't just stopped shining. It's been full for dozens of ticks now."

Seff froze.

"That's not true," she replied. She began to consider whether there was a way out, though she almost got the sense she'd not be able to find the door if she began walking backwards. Instead, she continued following Rory, anxious to not be left behind.

"It is. We've been watching. *I've* been watching."

"The sky?"

"Lots of things."

Seff felt the cold nip at the tips of her ears.

"Haven't you seen them?" Rory continued. "That should have been the first sign something was wrong. The moment you laid eyes on them."

Seff shook her head. "Them?"

"I don't know. You want me to call them monsters? It's probably apt." Rory laughed. "God, even now—" he paused abruptly, "—even in here, we have to watch out, have to listen for them. You don't think the cold alone killed everyone, do you? You don't think everyone was eaten or starved? You don't think that's why you haven't found anyone?"

"I assumed—"

"You assumed wrong. They come out *outside.* Inside is safe. Outside doesn't like light. Outside swallows it up. Inside lets it in. Inside we can run the generators." Rory's voice took on an almost frantic note. "This is outside."

"We're inside a store, Rory. Are you feeling all right?" Seff said.

"Don't use my name like that. You're being obtuse," he replied. "It's not about location. It's just a *property* of space. Affinity for light, for comfort." He sighed. "Outside, there are things… creatures. Sometimes we see them as other things, more like people. Sometimes we see them for what they are. They're just shadows, really. Transparent."

Seff didn't reply.

"You think I'm crazy. You think I'm talking about ghosts."

"I don't think you're talking about ghosts."

Silence. They kept walking.

Seff was not as shocked as she had expected to be, nor did she think Rory was nearly as crazy as she had expected to. This almost seemed as good an explanation as any, though she didn't understand it at all.

"There's something wrong with the world," Rory said after a moment. "There's been a line drawn, all of a sudden, between what's safe and what's not. You're lucky to be alive."

"How far is it until we're back 'inside'?" The word felt unfamiliar in its context.

"I don't know. Outside places seem to take a while to traverse, no matter what."

"It didn't seem too strange outside the store."

Rory hesitated. "It's not a… *stark* line."

"What do you mean by that?"

"'Outside' is just a word," he said. "Some places are outside. The whole world's outside now. But some places, like in here, are more outside than outside. It's a semantic distinction, but it helps. It's good to know the nomenclature if you'll be with us."

Seff was not any less confused, but in that confusion was a dull sort of awareness. She could only liken it to the sense one gets in a particularly vivid dream where, despite the dream following its own, nonsensical logic, and despite nothing in it ever being clearly explained, one understands at once the workings of the world. Seff felt she was on the verge of that sort of understanding: she could very nearly intuit what Rory meant, and was simultaneously the closest and furthest she'd ever been to understanding what had happened to the world.

The two of them came to a point. She felt Rory's paw on her abdomen stopping her as she tried to step forward.

"We're here," he explained, and opened a door. Light poured into the space, swallowed up after only a few feet. Seff hungrily rushed into it.

Inside, the space felt oddly mundane. It was a storage room; Seff was not sure what she had expected during the trek, but it was not what she was met with. The room was heavy with lukewarm air. Stacked, crumpled boxes lined the walls. One or two inspirational posters with houseplants on them were taped behind them. Inside sat a brown bear and a fox; the bear turned to Seff, while the fox looked away. In the corner of the room, a generator sat, humming and sputtering, beside a can of what she assumed was diesel or gasoline.

Rory stood in the light. Even with the lights in the store on, she felt somehow like this was the first good look she could get of him. His fur shone with a bright toasted silver color, while his eyes, gold and bright, looked tired and dead and hungry somehow. She shuddered.

"Aren't you worried about the fumes?" Seff asked, gesturing to the generator.

Rory shook his head. "We leave the door open and shut it off at intervals, every tick or so, to air out the room. We can't leave it outside unsupervised. We don't know what'll happen to it."

"What about the store itself? It's larger."

"It's easier to access the grid from here. Plus," Rory gestured around the room. "It's secure here. I mean, the store is secure, mostly, but the door's still smashed open, and it activates on motion detection, anyways."

"Why wouldn't you cut off the door's power and board it up to keep them from getting in?"

"They don't like light," Rory explained. "*They* being the shadows. Monsters. Creatures. Hunters. Call them what you will. I think epithets are a bit exhausting, personally. I'm not worried about them coming in the door. I'm more worried about thieves. And thieves are smart enough to find another way in." He turned to Seff. "You're not a thief."

Seff shook her head. "No. I have a generator of my own. I haven't been running it because I don't want to run out of fuel."

Rory nodded. "Fair."

"I don't think I could haul yours all the way back to where I live."

"You look strong."

"Not that strong." Seff glanced around again. "What is this place, anyways?"

"Like I said," Rory replied. "An enclave."

Seff narrowed her eyes. "You still haven't told me what that's supposed to mean."

"I thought you'd catch on," Rory said. "This room. It's an enclave. An annex, maybe? I don't have a thesaurus on me. It's a place that's *inside*, in what I can only assume is a whole impossibly large space within and behind this grocery store that is not."

"And by inside, you mean…"

"Having an affinity for light," the bear piped up. "Containing an affinity for light and warmth, or at least a tolerance for retaining those things."

"Exactly," Rory said. "This room is warm. The lights function. We can run the generator here without fear that it'll be destroyed or disappear. Nobody will just vanish."

"And it's the only spot in this whole back area like it?" Seff asked.

"As far as we can tell. We haven't done much exploring. We're content to live on what's here. It's too risky to go far into the dark, anyways. We just walk in a straight line. If we think very hard about *not* reaching this room, it seems to get easier. If we focus too hard on getting here, we get all turned around."

Seff felt once more like she was losing her mind.

There was a break, an abrupt, imposing silence. Rory's eyes darted to hers, then back away; he tapped his paw against a box, let a claw out, and pierced the cardboard.

"We lost someone once," he said. His voice cut through the silence like an icicle cutting through the still air under an awning. "He disappeared when we were trying to get here. He was separated from us."

"Was he trying to get here?"

"As far as we can tell, he thought too hard about what he wanted. He detached from the group and wandered off someplace else out there."

"Someplace else?" Seff asked.

"We found his body," Rory replied. "Eventually. We don't go outside much, but we went on an expedition once and found him. It must have been a w—about seven ticks—later."

"Where?"

She wanted to ask what they had done with it; she held her tongue.

"In the woods."

"In the woods," Seff repeated. "And he was in"—she gestured back to the door—"*there* when he got lost, correct? In the dark? Trying to get here?"

"He was wandering in the dark with us, repeating it to himself," Rory said. "'Stockroom stockroom stockroom'. Wouldn't stop."

"Halfway gone before we lost track of him," the fox added, with a note of bitter sadness.

"We had to shut him up before he vanished, or we'd all be where he ended up. It was listening," Rory continued. "To our thoughts. Our words. It was trying to trick us."

"You're saying it can *tell* where you're trying to go?"

"Seems like it, at least to some extent," Rory said. "Now, I don't claim to understand any of it. It's just what we've observed."

Seff hesitated. "Why are you telling me all this?" she asked haltingly.

"You seem like you'd be good to have on our side. At a glance, at least. We have food, but not forever. We're working on putting together a team for an ex*cur*sion." He said it with the same

degree of friendliness as everything else, but the way he emphasized the word gave it an air of malice that Seff couldn't quite place. "Figuring out if anyone's ranching anymore, if it's even possible." Rory gestured vaguely to himself. "Sustainably getting meat is, you know, the priority, given." He didn't broach any sort of alternative, but Seff understood. She narrowed her eyes.

"Ranching?"

"If anyone's still raising real animals, that's the goal. Four legs is fair game. Birds are fair game. Fish is fair game. That's what we're looking for." He hesitated. "We're not monsters, Seff."

"And you're going out in the dark?"

"Outside, properly. Where there's still a moon. I, at least, get the sense that the dark in here is worse than the dark out there."

Seff felt she had already established her confusion plenty. "When did you get here? Did you just put all this together?"

"We've been here about two dozen ticks. We just got the generator running recently, but we've been operating it in bursts to not wear out the fuel." Rory took a seat beside the bear. "Another reason for the excursions."

"How long is a tick?"

Rory paused. "A day. I thought you'd catch on. It felt a bit silly to call them days, given those aren't really a concern."

"Probably," Seff conceded.

"We have a clock here that's been running for a while. We just make a tick mark every time it hits the twelve twice. That's where the name comes from. I figure, even if time isn't working right, we might as well keep track of what we can, given the clocks still run. Particularly since there's nothing else to go off."

"How often are you planning the excursions?"

"We haven't come up with a regular schedule. We're planning on leaving again in a few ticks. I hope you decide to come with us."

"Right." Seff turned to the door and placed one paw on the handle. "Listen, I should really be going. I have things to attend to."

"Be sure you know what you're doing out there."

She turned the handle. The door made a low creaking sound. She paused.

"Wait. Before I leave," Seff said, "have you seen two white hares?"

"Describe them."

"A man and a woman, I assume. I don't have many other identifying details. Probably fairly small, but I suppose I don't know that for sure."

Rory stopped to think, then shook his head.

"That's all, then," Seff said. "Thanks anyways."

"Are you looking for them? Maybe we could help," Rory said. "Are they friends of yours?"

"Sure. We'll call it that." She hesitated. "I'd appreciate the help, actually."

"Let us know if you need it," he continued. "We're happy to come with."

"Thanks. I will," Seff replied.

“Oh, and please come back once you’re done. We could really use someone like you for the expeditions. One of us will be here, almost certainly,” Rory said. He offered Seff a disarming smile and perked his ears up.

Seff nodded. If nothing else, Rory seemed eager to assist, and she supposed it wouldn't hurt to have more eyes on it. “I’ll be back eventually,” she said. "Maybe in a day—a tick—or two."

She opened the door, stepped out, and was swallowed by the pitch darkness.

Chapter 10

Her footsteps echoed through the empty plane. She tried very hard not to think about the store. Alternative locations flooded her mind: the cabin, Wynn's house, even her childhood home, people she knew flickering between them, darting about like dragonflies.

She thought of Rohan as she walked, and then tried very hard not to, for fear of separating herself from her completely. She hoped Rohan was still in the store. She figured she had to be. She briefly considered the alternatives before deciding she couldn’t.

She thought of the beach. She wondered if the ocean had frozen solid.

She made a plan as she walked. She would find Rohan in the store, take her back to the enclave, the annex—the storage room—and then set out with Rory, with the bear and the fox, whose names she hadn't bothered to ask, and they would search for her parents. They would find them, alive and well, happy to be reunited with their daughter. Things would return to normal. Rory would help her; he had no reason not to.

Seff considered the creatures Rory had warned her about. She would ward them off without trouble, she decided. It was dark, but not too dark. She took out the lantern, along with a box of matches, and struck one. A fragile flame danced on its tip, painting her claws a vivid orange. It flickered and sputtered threats of its own death at her.

She tried to light the lantern.

It went out immediately.

She tossed the match away into the nothing, returned the lantern to her bag, and kept walking in the dark. Her ears stung; wind penetrated the outer layers of her coat and stabbed through her fur. It hurt to breathe; she suspected her nose had frozen. Even outside the store, in the stinging cold and heavy snow, it hadn't been this bad.

She extended one paw in front of her to check for a wall ahead, and though it was met with only empty space, she kept her arm extended just to be sure. Her eyes were beginning to sting, and she saw no use in keeping them open, so she closed them and hoped they would not freeze shut.

Someone shuffled about. Someone whispered. Someone howled. Her footsteps grew louder, and a second set joined them, then faded away, then returned again. A third pair echoed forth from all around her.

Someone screamed. She could not discern the origin of the sound.

She was taken with the urge to open her eyes and see, and another, louder urge, which insisted that she keep them shut at all costs. She reached for her hunting knife. Its handle felt smooth and cold and rubbery, and its blade felt even colder and smoother as she tapped her claw against it. She pulled it out and kept it tightly gripped in her paw.

Her footsteps took on a hundred different qualities; the crunch of snow, the click of tile, the scrape of unpolished wood. She felt one boot sink into sand. She felt another pass through impossibly deep water, and then kicked it up with a faint splash and found her foot had landed on stone, and when she reached back with her other leg towards the same spot there was nothing but solid ground.

She thought of the store again and began to quietly count aloud.

"One."

Her voice was low and hoarse. She felt something cold batter her eyelashes. It would be absurd for there to be snow within the storage room. She was still indoors, after all, regardless of Rory's insistence, regardless of the sand and the water. There were walls somewhere lined with boxes. There was a crate of canned soup somewhere. A whole pallet of processed meat. She hoped she'd live long enough for it to kill her.

"Two."

Every footstep echoed as though it were projected off the edge of a cliff. Her paw, still reaching out in front of her, trembled. Wind sounded off in the distance. She felt a voice in her ear and swore for a moment it was Wynn’s.

"Three."

“Come home,” the voice said. “That cabin is no place to wait out the winter.”

Waves crashed on some distant beach and lapped at the soles of her boots.

“Four.”

“Come home,” it repeated with identical intonation, like a looping audio track or a stuck record. “Come home. Come home."

“Five."

The hot beach sun burnt her ears, which were rapidly going numb from the cold. Her breath lay heavy in her lungs and froze in her throat. The wind chased her from all directions. The polar ice sheets crashed against each other and shattered. The disparate pieces refracted the light of a full moon.

"Please."

She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes tighter shut. It was snowing. Her boots sank into the ground. The tips of her ears cracked and froze. The air smelled like cold blood and saltwater.

"I miss you," the voice continued.

Seff's outstretched paw made contact with something solid, and she felt for a handle or a seam. She felt around until she was sure it really was the edge of a door, and then found the

handle, and pulled it open with one paw while she tore the ice away from her eyes with the other and opened them. Light flooded her vision; she stepped out into the store and it washed over her completely. She slammed the door, or rather, it slammed itself, pulled shut by the difference in pressure. The echo of her footsteps abruptly quieted, no longer as cavernous as it had been before. Her ears stung.

"Rohan?" she called, wiping off her nose. "I'm back. Sorry I took so long."

No response.

She took a step further into the store and looked around; the lights were on and she could smell at least a little past the rot. It wouldn't be impossible to find her; still, she called out again, "Rohan?" as she walked.

Seff tucked her knife away into the bag and took the matchbox back out, then removed a match and struck it. It lit and crackled between her fingers and burned until she sharply blew it out. She pulled out the lantern and another match, lit the lantern, and watched the flame dance inside it, watched it twirl, free to reach out and grab the light, unafraid of being choked out.

She doused that, too, and made her way through the aisles; she tried not to slip on the water pooled by the freezers or trip over cans of things someone had knocked over days before. Her boot knocked against a tin of spinach and sent it rolling across the floor, and she picked it up and stuffed it in her bag.

It seemed futile to call Rohan's name a third time, but she did anyway, her voice taking on a frantic note. The store was silent apart from her calls and her footsteps and the faint hum of the lights, and her voice echoed against the wall and came back to her three or four times and ebbed away. She listened carefully for tiny footsteps but heard none, and weaved through the aisles, in and out and in and out. A memory came to her, silly and trivial and stupid: she was playing a game on an old brick of a cell phone, weaving a little snake along the grid. Her claws dug into her palms. The aisles were full of food, rotting, preserved, fresh, canned, inedible and old and wilted and frozen.

She called out again. Her voice became a bark; it gained a harshness and a roughness. The "-han" was swallowed by the meandering aisles. Her heart pounded in her chest, behind the heaviness of muscle and her thick winter clothes, travelling through layers of bone and flesh and fur and up into her throat. Her breathing was ragged; she tried to steady it. Rohan would be fine; she would live. She had survived this far. Seff had promised things to her she hadn't yet delivered on; she had not found her parents.

Rohan's parents were probably dead, she realized. Rory, even with his gang, even with his plays at knowledge and wisdom, wouldn't be able to fix that. She should have understood that earlier, she thought, even before Rory told her anything. Rohan had warned her of monsters, after all, though she had said they were just foxes. Maybe they were just driven to hatred from hunger; maybe they were supernatural manifestations. It didn't matter; the outcome was the same.

Seff made her way to the entrance and looked out the shattered glass door. Moonlight washed across the dead trees.

"Rohan?" she called out through the hole in the glass. Her breath collected in clouds in the dark and disappeared into the frozen air. She stepped closer, and the door slid open. A flash of light flared along the moving glass and vanished. Her boot crunched against a shard of glass. Her teeth cut into her lower lip. "Are you there?"

Seff pulled away from the door and felt warm blood bead up by her mouth; she licked it away. It tasted like smoke and her table saw and hot food. Her stomach growled. She swallowed down a lump of air and ignored it. "Rohan? Where are you?"

She looked down at the snow outside; no fresh footprints led away from the store. She turned away from the door, took another cursory look around the aisles, and considered where in the store Rohan could have gone; she didn't think it particularly likely she'd be hiding, and so her mind drifted back instead to the storage room. She hoped there weren't too many exits in the store; she hoped she could find her, if she really was outside, in the dark. She hoped she hadn't just gone crazy.

She was, she noted, doing a lot of hoping for very little in the way of results.

The store, at least, was fairly self-contained, with just the door to the storage room. She ducked quickly into the bathroom, first the women's, then the men's, just in case, and called Rohan's name both times, found them empty, then returned to the threshold where there was ostensibly a storage room and hoped she would find Rohan there, wandering in the dark; she hoped, ceaselessly, that she would at least find her at all.

She placed a paw back on the handle and opened the door.

The open passageway was a gaping maw, the metal framing it formed lines of straight omnivorous teeth, and it exhaled bitingly cold air from its living throat. She entered without hesitation and felt the wind slam against her like a brick wall. She resisted the urge to call Rohan's name, and instead listened for small footsteps; she strained her ears to try and hear things desperate to remain unheard, and then finally the silence became unbearable and she called out into the darkness.

"Rohan? Are you here?"

She choked; she felt sand and water pour into her open mouth and then come out in sputtering breaths. Tendrils of fog wrapped around her ankles; she could not see them, but she was sure they were there, pulling her in. There was no light in the room, though she felt the sun on her back, soothing her frostbitten body and drawing her away, cut through by the fog and the water that pooled around her ankles. She knelt and placed a paw on the floor; it felt like dry, cold steel. She pulled away immediately and rested her paw on her knee instead, afraid it would freeze to the ground and trap her there forever.

She had seen classmates touch their tongues to poles on freezing days and tear off layers of flesh trying to get free. Warm water would have helped, she knew, but she said nothing from the corner where she sat. She waited out the minutes until her next viola lesson.

She called out again, all the sand suddenly gone and replaced again with bitter air, "Rohan?"

She heard footsteps, and then a familiar voice. "Seff?"

She stood. "Rohan? Is that you?"

"Yes—yes, where are you?" the voice asked.

"I'm over here," she replied, hunting for the source of the sound and aware of how unhelpful her response was. She inhaled sharply, trying to catch her scent; her nostrils stung like they had been bitten into, like she was breathing water, like she was drowning. Her lungs swelled.

She tried counting again, silently this time.

"Rohan?" she called. *One*.

"I'm here. I'm here." The voice took on a tinny, distant quality. It repeated itself like a stuck record. "I'm here." The vowels felt oddly rearranged. *Two.*

Seff took a step back and listened again for tiny footsteps. They came from behind her, shuffling on sand; the voice came from in front. She took a breath. *Three*.

"Rohan?" She took another step back, but still called in front.

"It's Rohan," the voice repeated. Seff sensed hungry desperation in it. She fretted for the Rohan behind her; she tried not to fret for the voice in front. *Four*.

You're not real, she wanted to say. *Where is she?*

She extended a paw behind her and hoped it would find something. She bit her lip; her teeth were icicles against it. Her blood was warm. It froze in a trail down her chin before it could even really soak into her fur. Salt stung the wound.

"Rohan," she whispered. "Rohan. Listen to me."

"It's me," said the voice in front of her.

"Seff?" said someone behind her, and she turned around and knelt and reached out her arms until they made contact with a body, small and warm and shaking and breathing, and she pulled Rohan in until she was certain it was really her.

"Don't think about getting out," Seff said, her voice quick and frantic. Her lip stung as she spoke. "Don't think about it. Think about someplace else. Think about—think about, I don't know, the beach. The woods. Someplace else."

"What?" Rohan said. She sounded tiny and weak and afraid.

"This place knows if you do, so you can't. It can tell where you're trying to go, and it wants to keep you from getting there." Seff hesitated, then took a step, then another. "I'll make it easy, okay? I'll talk the whole way."

"It… what?" Rohan said, and curled into a ball in Seff's arms. She felt for Rohan's ears and tucked them into her hood; both were ice cold, though she could hardly tell with her own numb paws.

"Think about the beach. We're going to the beach. We'll stay out here and go to the beach. That's where we really want to go. Nowhere else, really," Seff began. The ground felt intermittently like sand and water and snow and dirt and concrete. Her footsteps clicked and shuffled and sloshed and echoed. "There'll be shells to crunch under our feet and waves to wash us all away. And maybe I'll lie down in the water and let the tide carry me someplace else. Someplace cold. The water's full of ice now, all dark and glittering with moonlight. We'll drink the salt until we choke. We'll feel the sand between our toes. Warm sand. Cold sand. We'll swim away. Everyone we love will be there."

Rohan shuddered; Seff began walking faster, then broke into a full sprint, panting, one arm clutching Rohan tight to her chest and the other feeling out in front of her for a door. In between frantic gasps for air, she continued speaking.

"We'll go down to the beach—" she gasped—"and swim around in circles until we drown. We'll go into the forest. We'll get lost and we'll never come back. We'll be happy about it because that's what we really want." Her words barely felt like her own. "We'll be there with everyone. We can't keep going. There's no point to it. There's no use in continuing, so we'll wander around forever. So what? We'll die. We'll live forever here until we die, okay? That's all we'll do. That's all we're looking for."

Her paw trembled and her heart pounded in her center. "I'm reaching out in front of me to touch the air. I'm reaching out to touch the water—to touch a tree. We'll stay here forever. We'll stay here forever, and we won't ask about the moon, because there's nothing wrong with it. It's a normal night. It's a beautiful night, like last night, and like tomorrow will be. There's nothing else we're looking for. We'll sing songs for you. We'll howl with you. We're—" she said, choking and coughing and gasping for air as she ran—"already dead, so there's no use hunting for us. We're already gone and lost, so you can bother someone else. Give up the chase. If we see an exit, we won't take it."

The water around her ankles receded.

"There's no use looking. We're here and we intend on staying. There's no need to keep us trapp—"

She froze in her tracks.

Her paw made contact with impossibly cold metal.

She pushed the door open and stepped out into the light.

Her boots were dry, she noticed, though Rohan's ears were still freezing; there was no water soaked into her ankles. No sand or snow came off their treads as she walked out.

Chapter 11

Wynn died in the city hospital on a cold November morning, three years after the wedding, half an hour away from her house and fifty minutes away from the cabin, the slivered whites of her eyes yellow, her wool matted and loose from the follicle, trembling beside a window she insisted be kept open.

Seff sat beside her and couldn't bear to look. She felt her eyes bore into her, nearly one hundred and eighty degrees of vision, developed for an instinctual fear that Seff hoped wasn't the last thing to slip away. She couldn't tell what emotion was behind the words; she could barely hear them at all.

"Take me to the beach," Wynn said, barely audible above the constant beep of machines and alarms one after another that the doctors, Seff knew, had already stopped paying attention to because no matter what they did Wynn was going to die. "Let me see it before I go."

Seff's ears had always been sharp. "I'll try," she said. Her voice was just as faint. She coughed and cleared her throat. Nothing came of it. "I'll try."

Her liver failed sometime soon after, with another alarm, one that sent doctors rushing into the room despite themselves. Her body gave up the ghost. Quit. Ceased. What had once been a person became in an instant a body to be carried away.

It occurred abruptly to Seff that one person hadn't died, but a thousand, a million, an infinite ocean of potential people, as many as there were possible memories yet to be made. There were three Wynns beside her in the park, looking at birds and gesturing vaguely at clouds and sleeping on her shoulder. There was one at the museum with her, pointing out post-impressionist brush techniques in between sneaky attempts at makeouts. There were so many in her bed that Seff hardly had space to move and pull the covers over them all, without any room in the blanket to tuck herself in at the leftmost edge. Instead, she froze each night, her fur bristling in the empty air.

It oddly diminished the tragedy, in that numbing way an incomprehensible amount of death does; it was easier to focus on the thousands of Future-Wynns Seff didn't yet know, rather than the one she really did, until she remembered all of them were the same woman and always had been, diffracted into a thousand different places, and the lead weight settled back in her stomach.

Wynn's parents had insisted the funeral be held in a church; they had demanded Wynn be buried in the cemetery of her grandparents on a hill by the city, in the shade of a hundred year old oak tree, and Seff had acquiesced because she couldn't stand the pain in their eyes and she had no one else to back her up and no way to tell them the wishes of a dead woman. They had been married, sure, and so Seff's requests should have taken precedent, but all the legal recourse in the world couldn't keep her from feeling very small suddenly in their eyes, warm and brown and lighter than their daughter's had been, and from being struck speechless by the shape of their mouths creased into flat, disapproving lines. Instead, she sat awkwardly

cramped in a pew, next to rows of sheep, all of them smaller than her, all of them staring at her with their side-swivel eyes but who all refused to acknowledge her presence, who read eulogies she wasn't invited to give. She tried to tell herself she was lucky to have been invited at all.

She prayed when the time came to pray, and craned her head awkwardly and strangely. She didn't cry; it was customary for Wynn's family, Seff learned, to bleat, an odd and high and mournful and faintly musical sound that came around in echoes through the church and then, when they lowered the casket in a haze, dropped once more down the hill and into the streets and forests below, reverberating in ancient glens thick and laden with bones.

Seff called her own parents that week.

They didn't pick up.

In the cabin—Wynn's house had really been her parents' property, but the cabin Seff properly owned, and the will decreed it so, had there been any doubt—she took two nights of restless sleep on the half a world that had been left for her. She buried her muzzle in the hollows of her bed. She dug a claw into the headboard and left a little tally mark in the wood. She looked at the dim ticking clocks as they counted her to sleep. She drove to the beach that weekend, took the car and the jewelry Wynn had left her: eighteen-karat gold, heavy with emeralds that looked better on Wynn than on her, sterling silver that sat atop wool but always blended into fur and buried itself in it. Seff didn't like to wear it; she kept it in a balsa wood box with a latched lid. She had carved the box herself; she had felt its light sandy corners dig into her heavy hands as she smoothed it down and screwed in the hinges, and now she put it in the passenger seat of the car and secured it with its own belt. She joked to herself that she could take the carpool lane. She bit her lip and choked down the blood.

The drive to the beach was thick with traffic, though it was lighter, she knew, than it would be in the summer, when the roads would be clogged with cars like grease in an artery, like hair in a drain, nails on flesh tearing out fur and all clawing against each other trying to escape the heat when their lake houses weren't enough. It was a long drive, and she had little to do but look at the road before her and try not to cry and occasionally brake sharply for deer. When she arrived, the sun had nearly finished setting, and the moon, round and stark and white and full, like a pupil in the center of an inverted eye, rested in the middle of a ring of clouds and shone down on her. Her boots met sand; their treads filled with it. She stepped on a sand dollar. It crunched with a sound like breaking fragile bones. The waves sounded like glass shattering as they reached the shore. She clutched the box close to her chest and felt her heart beating through it as she ran. The water glittered blood red in the last sliver of sunlight; most of the people on the beach had packed up for the night and it was far too cold and not yet late enough for the restless teenagers. A stray kite landed on the surface of the water and was dragged under by a breaking wave; it had been tangled in a distant tree and then carried back to the beach when the wind picked up.

The moon glittered white on the ocean as the red of sunset faded to black and left no sign it had been there at all. Seff wished there was more fanfare. The water was painfully loud but distinctly unmusical. It was barely a soundtrack at all, and it felt both far too abrasive and far too mundane. She had hoped for warm strings or contemplative piano, maybe, or more

realistically some nice-sounding distant birds; something to tell her the universe was listening and knew how she felt. Instead the universe was deaf, or perhaps had heard and simply didn't care. The opening bars of Mahler's fifth symphony played in her head, just repeating and never advancing until it became more noise. She heard cracking windows. The wind bit her ears and whipped up grains of sand that slashed at her boots. She fumbled for her phone to play something through its tinny speaker and blot out the sound of the waves and the wind; it clicked against her claws in her pocket, and she stopped and thought better of it.

She knelt down at the edge of the water and set the box down in the break between waves; another came and crashed over it and pulled it back in, and moment-by-moment it was ratcheted back, barely floating. Someone, she understood, would find it eventually, and (probably letting themself be convinced the stones were fake) pawn its contents off to God-knows-where for maybe two hundred dollars or so all together, and she hoped they'd appreciate the easy money and not be too upset at the tarnish. She hoped for another outcome; she hoped it would drift along forever, or be caught by some wide-eyed dreamer looking for a new string of only mildly drenched pearls and finding salvation in a barnacle-encrusted moldering wooden box. She was practical, though, and only hoped until she could find an opportunity to shoot herself down.

She looked at the shuddering ripples of light on the water as the box disappeared, then up at the sky, black clouds weaving through the gaps left by the muted stars in a sea of staticky eigengrau, all framing the moon, white and full like a pearl or a shed tooth.

She howled.

Chapter 12

Seff felt the floor with her paw to check if it had warmed at all, then set Rohan down in the aisle; she was dry but freezing and breathing slowly. She pulled Rohan's hood off her head and unfolded her ears; they felt cold, but not brittle and frostbitten. She pushed her muzzle beside her ear, to the gap made where it folded just before it touched the floor, and spoke softly.

"Rohan," she said, then pulled away and repeated herself, then ran a claw gently by her eye to feel if the lid would twitch at all. She lifted Rohan up and searched around for a source of heat; finding no radiator, she took out the lantern and lit it and left it open, set it beside Rohan, and placed a paw on her chest. "Please wake up."

She stood and looked around for anything at all to help; chemical hand warmers, self-heating meals. There had to be some trick, she thought, some secret tactic she could use to call back the warmth the dark had sapped from Rohan. Physics, she recalled, decreed as such: energy could not be created and could not be destroyed, and so, she thought, all the warmth and heat that had been pulled from the young hare was hiding out in some obscure pocket of reality, some burst of light and fortune and music and life.

She started walking, wandering the aisles stacked high with frozen food and canned goods and meat and fish and poultry and other inconsequential things in search of some source of heat, until eventually she came to rolls of butcher paper and tore at them greedily, clutching bundles of wax paper, stacking them beside Rohan and lighting them in the open lantern.

The fire grew quickly as the wax melted and the paper caught. She hoped it would be close enough to warm Rohan but not too hot to burn her; she hovered one paw over the flames that shot up and danced violently and threatened her with each thrashing twist.

"Please live," she muttered. Her other paw rested over Rohan's heart and felt it beating slowly. "Please."

Seff wondered what she'd tell Rohan's parents, if they were alive. Selfishly, she hoped they weren't; she hoped she'd never have to tell them. She had known their daughter for a few days. She told herself she would trade all the warmth in her body for her. She promised some god somewhere this much. She would give all the life and joy and love in the world and rip it string-by-string from her own heart and give it to Rohan. All the heat ensconced beneath the bulky layers of her body, trapped in the pockets of her fur, held in ripples of rough musculature, she would give away.

Her tongue tasted metal and seawater. She narrowed her eyes. She prayed to no one in particular, and bargained, and screamed without opening her mouth. She hunched over Rohan's body. The lights flickered off; she guessed they were taking a shift letting the generator rest. The wax-paper fire threw a vivid amber glow over them both for just a moment, before it burned quickly away and smoldered to nothing.

She lifted Rohan's body in one arm, closed the lantern and held it with her other hand, and set off back to the cabin.

When they arrived, she set Rohan down on the bed and threw the blankets over her, doused the lantern and the backpack and set them beside her, and then lit the fireplace and scratched impatiently at the bricks while she waited for the flames to grow. Her claws left thin white lines. Blood dripped down her chin. Finally, the fireplace erupted into a shuddering blaze, and she left it and turned back to Rohan. She peeled back the blanket from her injured leg and removed her shoe and got to changing the bandages again, even though the wound had mostly healed. The clocks ticked over the roar of the fire. She checked Rohan's heartbeat again; still quiet, still slow, still there.

"Rohan," she half-whispered.

Rohan didn't respond. Seff slipped her other shoe off and pulled the blankets back over her leg and put the shoes down and settled into the armchair. She thought about Rory again. His offer was tempting, him and his men (and all of them were men, and all of them were carnivores, though that wasn't saying much, given how few there were), the last bastion of society, it seemed. The last group she had met. Certainly the only *others*. The only strangers. More eyes would undoubtedly help the search. They could cover more ground. They would have food. Rory seemed kind enough, she considered.

And yet Rohan had gone missing the moment she left. She had spent an eternity wandering in the dark, and in the pitch-black of the path to the storage room, Seff couldn't shake the feeling that one of the voices muttering through the nothingness was Rory's. He couldn't be a shadow; he had too much of an affinity for light and comfort and the real. Yet Seff felt somehow that, on the way to that storage room, in the dark, freezing cold passageway, with its thin air and crashing waves and rustling trees and metallic ripples, Rory had died a thousand times.

Her train of thought was interrupted by quiet shuffling from across the room; she turned and, without thinking, jolted at the sight of Rohan, seated upright in bed and sleepily glancing around the cabin.

"You're awake," Seff said, immediately collecting herself.

"Yeah," Rohan muttered. "Um. I have to use the bathroom."

"Lucky for you, I don't have an outhouse." She pointed to the door, across the cabin from the main one, which led to the bathroom. "Go do that. Then you can tell me what happened."

Rohan returned after a few minutes.

"You ever seen a frozen toilet?" she asked, looking significantly more awake. She jumped up and sat back down on the bed, which was clearly too big for her.

"Yeah. Obviously," Seff replied.

"I was just curious."

"I, um. I figured. Have you not used the bathroom at any point in the past…" Seff hesitated. "In the past stretch of time?"

"No. I have. I saw it before, at my house," Rohan replied. "Just felt like you should hear about it." She laughed, kind of nervously.

"Well. Thanks for sharing." Seff sat down in the chair.

"No problem."

"So."

"Yeah?"

"What happened? At the store."

"Oh." Rohan shrank back a bit. Her ears tilted back. "Um. I went looking for you. Because you took a long time to come back."

"Do you know how long?"

"There wasn't a clock, and I'm not good with time off the top of my head. It felt like a few hours. Maybe a lot of hours, but I don't know. I was reading the labels off stuff for a while. I ate some of the hay left over, you know. The parts of the bales we hadn't brought back." Her voice quavered. "I promise I didn't mean to run off. Really. I didn't want to cause trouble. I'm sorry that I did. I think after a while I got worried. That the lynx had hurt you or something. Or that you'd given up on me. And left for good."

"I'm not mad at you."

"Oh."

Seff sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, where her muzzle sloped up to meet her furrowed brow. "But."

"Yeah. There's always a but," Rohan said.

"But I'm upset at myself for disappearing like that. I should have known you'd go looking. It was… stupid. It was stupid of me to do that. I shouldn't have left you in the store alone. I should have gone back for you immediately. I *promised*—" Seff swallowed hard. "I told you I wasn't going to leave you. I told you that I would follow you if you left. I shouldn't have lied."

"Well, it was… also stupid of me to look for you."

"It wasn't stupid," Seff replied. "You're a kid. And you couldn't have known what was in there."

Rohan was quiet for a long while. Then, in a tiny voice, she asked, "What *was* in there?"

"You don't remember?"

"No," Rohan replied. "I do. I think. But I don't…"

"You don't understand it?"

"I never said that," she said, a little indignant. "I just want a second opinion."

"Right," Seff said. "You weren't… Rory explained this all, but you weren't there for it." She ran one paw over the crest of her skull, between her ears and down the shaggy, half-matted fur covering the back of her neck.

"Rory's the lynx, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Go on."

Seff took a breath. "God. Have you ever… looked up at the moon? In the past few days."

"No."

"Well. If you look up at it, it's up there right now. Bright and shining and full. Just as full as it's been for… a week. Maybe a month. Maybe longer. I don't know. You… you know how the moon works, right? Like, the phases?"

"Yes," Rohan said. "I think you've asked me this before. We learned about it in, like, elementary school. In Inquiry."

"What's Inquiry?"

"It's just science. But they named it a different thing. I don't know why. It's stupid."

"You think everything is stupid, don't you?"

"Just school."

Seff nodded and got to her feet. "I'm going to make some food," she said, and turned to face a mid-sized can of processed meat product sitting with the rest of the food. "Do you want anything? Spinach, chickpeas, um… hay." Without waiting for a response, Seff hooked a claw into the pull tab of a can of spinach and tore it open, then passed it to Rohan. "You should eat. You've got to be hungry."

"Are you going to finish explaining the thing with the moon?" Rohan eyed the water sloshing around at the surface of the can with some suspicion and took a hesitant sip.

"Right. So, you know it's really weird that it's been the same shape for a while, right? And that it's shining at all?"

"Did Rory explain it?"

"Not exactly," Seff said. "But he told me some interesting things. He's sort of… stratified the world, I guess. You know what that means? He's split it into layers. Categories."

"Like, people?"

"The place itself. The world. The whole shebang."

"*Shebang?*"

"He said some places are 'inside' and some are 'outside'."

"Well, duh. Next he's gonna tell you that there's such a thing as grass."

"Well, I guess the weird part is, like, it's become a law of reality. Not just words we use. Like gravity or something. And it doesn't adhere to what things actually are, so there are some places that are inside that are actually outside. I guess maybe vice versa too, but I don't know for sure." She took a breath. "All I know is apparently, the outside places don't like light. Some of them are weird, and larger than they'd be in the light. And in there you hear and feel things that aren't real. And *that's* the hall. An outside place that ended up inside."

Rohan tilted her head. Seff turned back to the pile of food.

"I sound insane." She sighed. "And I haven't even mentioned the ghosts."

"Are you trying to freak me out?" Rohan asked. "Because I feel like that's kind of an asshole thing to do after all that."

"I'm not. I promise. Rory says there are… shadows. That's what he called them, but really, I think they're ghosts. Most like ghosts, at least. Or they pretend to be ghosts."

"Why do you think that?"

Wynn's voice echoed in Seff's thoughts. "Just a hunch. They're… it's unclear. I guess they look and sound like anything, really, but they don't like the light. That's what they have in common. The light keeps them away."

"Oh."

"So, I was thinking. About those foxes."

"The—"

"The ones who separated you from your parents, right?"

"Mhm."

"What if they weren't really foxes?"

"Maybe," Rohan said. "Does it matter? They killed my parents either way."

"You don't think they're still alive?"

"I don't know."

Seff realized she had been staring at the can of processed meat for an extended period of time. She knelt down and picked it up and peeled open the lid and stared at its gelatinous pink contents, feeling all of a sudden not hungry at all. She glanced back at Rohan, who had eaten about half the can of spinach.

"Do you want a lemon drop?" Seff asked.

Rohan nodded. Seff knelt down and rummaged through the backpack, then pulled out the bag of lemon drops and handed them to Rohan.

"I heard my parents," Rohan said, her mouth half full of lemon drop. "In there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So if they're really ghosts, I guess that… answers some questions." She sounded resigned, like she'd done all her processing while unconscious.

"It's not just dead people you hear," Seff replied. "Don't… give up hope like that."

"How do you know?"

"I heard you in there, too."

Rohan blinked.

"Oh."

The fire crackled. Seff looked down at her claws, chipped and broken, and licked the dried blood from the fur on her chin.

"I think it's just… people you miss," Seff said, finally. "Things you regret. I don't know if it's trying to tell you anything beyond how much it sucks, that they're gone."

"It does suck."

"Yeah. It's kind of like an angler fish, maybe. Luring you into the dark." Seff sighed. "I don't know. I think that's kind of a stupid metaphor." Rohan swallowed and took out another lemon drop.

"These are kinda stale," she observed.

"Does candy go stale?"

"Maybe." Rohan shrugged. "They're cold."

"I'm sorry I can't appeal to your exacting standards. May I remind you that it is literally the end of the world?"

Rohan grumbled a bit and flopped back onto the bed. "Do you really think that?"

"I don't know." Seff looked back at the can of meat product. Her appetite had returned a bit, though it didn't necessarily make the contents of the can any more appealing. Internally, she had already given up on attempting to dress it up like a proper meal and was now quite regretting that decision. "I hope it's temporary, I guess."

"But you've given up?"

"I mean, you're not supposed to tell kids when you've given up. But kind of."

"Okay," Rohan said. "So why won't you let me give up about my parents?"

Seff hesitated for a long while. "I don't know what you're going to do without them."

"Stay here?" she offered. "I mean, you're nice."

"No," Seff said immediately. "You can't. I mean, you have a family. And I couldn't even keep you from wandering off. I'd be a terrible replacement."

"Oh."

"I guess I could go back and ask Rory. He offered to help find your parents earlier. If we meet back up with him and his group, maybe they can help take care of you, even if we don't find them."

Rohan said nothing but shifted in her seat.

"Good plan?" Seff asked.

"There were riots," Rohan said finally. "In the city. After the sun went away."

"Yeah? I guess that makes sense," Seff said. "People tend to do that when bad things happen. They lash out and panic. And steal stuff. Stupid stuff, like jewelry and flatscreen televisions."

"I found out because we could still get TV. For a day or two. Then the signal went away, and then the power went out and we didn't have a generator. And it never came back on."

"Did you see any of the monsters?" Seff asked.

"No," Rohan replied. "Just people."

Seff nodded. "So, are you going to answer my question?"

"I was trying to. I don't know if I trust him."

"Neither do I," Seff said. "But what's the alternative?"

Rohan didn't reply.

"Are you tired?" Seff asked.

"Do I look tired?"

"I don't know. I'm asking because *I'm* tired."

Rohan shifted. "Kind of, I guess."

Seff looked back down at the can of meat she was still holding. She held her breath and quickly finished it; it wasn't too bad, really. She had anticipated worse. "You done eating?"

Rohan nodded. Seff took the empty spinach can and set it down by the fire.

"If you're tired," Seff said, "you can take the bed. I'm okay sleeping in the chair."

"Are you sure?" Rohan asked. "I mean, I'm smaller. I can fit in the chair."

"Yeah," Seff replied. "I'm sure. Go ahead."

Rohan pulled the blankets over her head and disappeared into the bed. Seff slumped back in the chair and closed her eyes.

It was a long, silent moment before she fell asleep.

Chapter 13

Seff had been alone for a long time before things changed. It had never felt strange, not really. For a while she had even thought it would be over, had adjusted to having Wynn by her side, but though the grief never quite subsided, once she was alone again it felt as though she had never *not* been so.

It was comfortable. It was familiar. That was why she had stopped reaching out, had sequestered herself to the cabin, hunting, chopping wood, picking through her savings to pay the utilities on the occasion she felt like it. She had stopped taking jobs. Once in a while a call would come in, so she disconnected the phone. Wynn's friends stopped visiting. Her own friends stopped visiting.

She sat outside most nights and looked up at the stars. On nights the moon was new and gone, there were hundreds visible, like white paint splattered on the underside of the endless black dome of the sky. On nights it was full, they faded into the background and vanished between the trees. Most nights she tasted blood.

Often she asked herself why she was still alive and found she could not come up with a good answer. She thought about trees falling in the woods without an audience. She thought about the proof of her existence: a hundred carved clocks, a cabin that was slowly pissing off more and more utility companies day-by-day, tracks in the forest, a dresser in an eccentric, extravagant house.

The stars had been pushed back by the light of the full moon the night she considered dying.

Chapter 14

A wolf will howl at the full moon to prove to anyone who may be listening, however far away, that she exists.

Chapter 15

For the first time it was Rohan who woke Seff up. She jolted upright in her chair and looked around, weary for only a minute before her ears perked up fully and her eyes opened all the way.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," Rohan replied. "What's up?"

"I was sleeping."

"You were snoring."

"I was?" Seff asked.

"Yeah. You snore loud."

"Sorry. Is that why you woke me up?"

"Nah." Rohan shuffled on her feet. "I got bored."

"You want to play a game?"

"No. I want to ask you a question."

"Oh. Okay," Seff said. "Ask away."

"You said yester- a bit ago that Rory offered to help find my parents. Is that true?"

"Mhm. Do you want to go ask him?"

Rohan fidgeted. "Yes."

"We can do that, then. Let's go now, if you're feeling up to it."

"But," Rohan continued, "if they don't find them, I'm going to give up."

"What?"

"You heard me," she said. "If they're gone, they're gone, and maybe they come back and come looking for me someday, but I was thinking, when I woke up, and I don't think I can spend all the rest of my life looking for them. Especially 'cause they're probably dead." She sounded remarkably flippant about the whole thing; Seff looked her up and down.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"So what does that mean?" Seff asked. "Are you going to go off on your own?"

"Will you stop me?"

Her eyes were wide and brown and steady.

"Do you want to leave?"

Rohan didn't respond.

"It's okay if you do," Seff said. She saw her lip quiver, just for a moment; she wasn't sure if, in the flickering light of the fire, she had imagined it, until Rohan spoke again and she heard her voice nearly break.

"If I wanted to, I'd be gone by now."

"I understand," Seff said. "Does that mean you're staying with me?"

"As long as I can," Rohan said.

"Of course you can. My door is—it's open to you, no matter what happens, okay? And if we find your parents, I'd love to meet with them, too."

Rohan nodded. "Should we go, then?"

"Yeah," Seff replied, and got to her feet. "Do you have the lantern?"

Rohan grabbed the backpack and lantern from where Seff had left them, in bed beside her. She pushed the backpack towards Seff, a bit too weak to fully lift it. Seff took it and put it on, then took the lantern and lit it.

"Do you want to hold it?" she asked. Rohan nodded; she handed the lantern back to her, and they left the cabin together.

The walk to the store was becoming nearly familiar; they followed their own footsteps, climbed the hill with confidence, and no longer slipped. The moon lit a clean path ahead, intermittently marked by the print of Seff's boots. The only sounds were their own shoes on the ice, their labored breathing, and the faint rustle of trees in the distance; the air smelled icy and sharp. Seff tasted, as she often did, blood. She was cold, but that was a given.

When they reached the store, the door did not slide open, and the lights were off. Seff guessed Rory had shut off the generator for a time, and so she grabbed Rohan's hand and carefully led her through the broken glass storefront. A jagged edge grazed her ear; though it barely touched her, she felt warm blood trickle down the side of her head and flinched.

She hoped Rory was still inside. She held Rohan's hand tightly and called out for him; no response.

"Do you think we should go back into the storeroom?" she asked.

Rohan shrugged. "Maybe we wait?"

"Alright," Seff said. "You want to eat?"

Rohan nodded. "Yeah. I'll go get some hay," she said, and darted off; Seff followed close behind.

"Be careful," she reminded her.

"I will," Rohan replied.

Seff crouched by the pallet of hay and watched intently as Rohan picked through the pile, holding the lantern up to each bunch she grabbed to inspect for signs of moisture or rot. She seemed satisfied with the small bundle she'd collected after a few minutes, and ate it all quickly.

"I didn't know you were that hungry," Seff noted.

"Neither did I. You hungry?"

Seff shook her head. "Not really."

Things were silent for a moment. The lantern flickered softly, as did the long shadows it cast across the tile floor. Rohan set it down and stood up straight. With Seff crouched beside her, even at full height she still only came to about three-quarters of her size. She looked, Seff thought, small and fragile and slightly afraid, but with a steadfastness to her expression that was difficult to reconcile. It seemed foolish. She supposed survival required one to be a bit foolish.

"Do you think there are still farms?" Rohan asked.

"There have to be, right?" Seff replied. "Someone out there's got to be doing it."

"Maybe."

"We're not gonna run out of food. There's a lot of food out there."

"Everything's a cycle. That's what killed the dinosaurs, you know? All the dust and smoke blotted out the sun for so long all the plants died, and then all the animals died."

"They didn't have grow lamps," Seff said. "And not everything died. Some life persisted, you know?"

"Yeah, but the sun came back, eventually. The clouds blew away."

"Maybe it'll come back this time, too."

"Is that a promise?"

"If it was, would I have said 'maybe'?" Seff asked.

"I don't know. You're supposed to know this stuff. You're a grown-up."

"You should know by now that grown-ups are completely clueless about most things," Seff said. "Me especially. You should've found a better grown-up if you wanted good answers."

"You were the only one there."

"Fair enough."

Rohan shifted a bit where she stood.

"Bored already?" Seff asked.

"We should probably look for Rory, right?"

"Sure. If you're okay with going in the dark again."

"If there's no other option."

"Doesn't look like there is." Seff stood and took Rohan's paw. The door to the storage room was just across the store, tall and gray and relatively unassuming. "Ready?" she asked, taking long strides towards it.

"I'll close my eyes and hold on this time. And I'll try not to think of anything."

Seff swallowed hard and pushed open the door.

Chapter 16

Cold air rushed from the dark, open doorway. Seff had maybe expected it to become less jarring at some point; evidently, it hadn't, and instinctively she took a step back and shut her eyes tightly before entering. She clung to Rohan's paw as the two of them walked; she focused on going someplace far away.

The storage room was not home, was not the beach, was not the woods or the streets of the suburbs, was not a shop with its windows smashed in or a house in a city several thousand miles away, was not the room of a lover or a friend. A plane could be defined by the vector orthogonal to it, she recalled. She walked in a direction perpendicular to her destination. Sand and grass and snow shifted under her boots. She listened for Rohan's breathing, which came at her from all directions and grew shuddering and ragged; she kept her grip around her paw tight and outstretched the other, and after what felt like an eternity it made contact with something cold and door-shaped, and she opened it.

The storage room was dark, as expected, and only Rory was seated inside. His eyes gleamed sharply in the dim light of the lantern Rohan held; she wondered how he had managed without it. She wondered where everyone else had gone. She started to feel as though this all was a particularly bad idea.

"You came back," Rory said. "For the expeditions?"

"Sort of," Seff said. "This is… her name is Rohan. You remember how I said I needed to find two white hares?"

"Sure."

"They're her parents. She needs them back. We need your help finding them."

"She doesn't look white," Rory noted. Rohan narrowed her eyes.

"She has a condition," Seff replied. "Her fur doesn't turn with the seasons."

Rory looked up at Seff. "She's very small."

"And?" Seff replied.

"She doesn't seem very useful, is all."

"Is that relevant? Does she need to be strong?"

"I wasn't thinking we'd let just anyone in," Rory said. "It's dangerous out here, Seth."

"Seff."

"Seff. Listen. Food is limited, and space is limited, and we're sending people out with the full knowledge they could die at any point. I offered you a place to stay under the assumption

you'd contribute."

"I could contribute. She could contribute, too. In her own way." Seff glanced down at Rohan. "And she'll go with her parents, if you can find them."

"And what if they're dead?" Rory asked.

"She'll stick with me."

"And it'll be our responsibility to feed her? To give her a place to stay?"

"If I'm with you, then yes," Seff replied. "As long as she's with me, we're a package deal. Or I won't stay. Clearly you don't need me, if you're willing to let me go over her." She turned to face the door, as if to make a point.

"Wait. Wait," Rory said. "The others left. They went on an expedition, and they haven't come back. I don't know how long it's been. I don't know if they're going to come back. I need manpower, Seff."

"You offered to help find her parents. If you help, and you find them, I stay with you, she goes with them, and everything's peachy."

"That was when I had other men, Seff," Rory said. "Now I don't know if I can waste time looking for her parents."

"It hasn't been that long. They'll come back."

Rory inhaled sharply. "Fine. Fine. Okay. I trust you, and because I trust you I'll tell you the truth."

Seff cocked her head.

"It wasn't an expedition. I lost them in the hall. I lost track of them in the dark, and when I heard them calling for me things wearing their skins attacked me. And I killed those things until there wasn't anything left. Had to do what I had to do, you know?" His eyes widened, and his voice dropped to a whisper."I think they're gone for good, Seff. I need you. Just you. And you *are* going to stay, right?" Rory asked, and grabbed for Seff's wrist so tightly she felt the blood leave the tip of her paw. "You're going to stay here? I promise it's safer."

"It doesn't seem very safe."

"They didn't know the rules. But you know the rules, Seff. Please just tell me you'll stay." His voice grew more and more panicked.

"I don't know," Seff said.

"Tell me the truth."

Seff hesitated. "I have to take care of Rohan."

"We can't keep her. She's weak. She'll die."

"Then I won't stay."

Rory's grip tightened; she pulled away. "You're *both* going to die out there," he said matter-of-factly. "They'll kill you and leave nothing but a shade."

"That's not true."

"Or worse. You live. They turn you into one of them," Rory continued. "The bunny? Not your responsibility. You'll kill her if you keep her, eventually, if she doesn't die on her own. That's nature."

"It's not," Seff replied.

"I lost all of them. I told you. I *told* you." Rory shook his head. "The first one we lost, way back when? He was like a brother to me. I hear him out there, you know? I hear the things he says to me. Every time I go out. Every time the lights turn off."

"Stop it," Seff said. She took a step back; her ears twitched as her fur brushed up against the wall behind her. "You're not going to convince me."

"Things haven't been the same since," Rory said. His eyes narrowed. "He wants me dead. He's told me. The same'll happen to you."

"That's not him. He's dead. You found his body. You told me that."

"I've tried to kill him a hundred times, you know?"

"He's *already dead*," Seff replied. "Aren't you listening? That's not him. It's something pretending to be him, at best."

"I've felt his teeth in my side."

"Stop it."

"I've felt his neck crack under my paws."

"Stop," Seff said. "I don't want to hear it."

"Do you want that to happen? Do you want that to be what you turn into?"

"I won't *let* it happen."

"Join me and it won't. Stay here. Life is good. I know what I'm doing. We know what we're doing." He took another step closer.

Seff shoved him back. His knees buckled. "I have a responsibility."

"The girl was never going to live," Rory replied. He stumbled back to his feet and gestured towards Seff. "Look at her."

Rohan stood, dwarfed by them both, and stared up at Rory; she had not said a word.

"She's small. Defenseless. Useless," Rory said.

"Stop."

"Look at her fur. She can't even *hide* properly. How is she supposed to survive?"

"You said you weren't monsters," Seff replied.

"So we won't eat her," Rory said. "We'll just kill her. It's mercy."

"*How?*"

"Be-*cause*," he replied, enunciating each syllable like he thought she was stupid, "everything happens for a reason. All this? It all happened so the strong would survive. So we could form our own little groups and leave the rest to die. So we'd pick them off when nature didn't. Everyone else is gone now, but I survived for a reason. It's a message from God."

"Horseshit," Seff said. "There's no reason. You should know that."

"If we let you both go, you'll kill her," Rory continued. "If she leaves alone, *something* will. You'll never stop hearing her voice. You'll never find her body. *But*, if we kill her here, she gets a proper burial someplace. A funeral. The guilt goes away. The *grief* goes away, with someplace to go. She doesn't suffer. It's easier on everyone."

Blood trickled down Seff's chin: her own, she realized.

"It never goes away," she whispered, her teeth in her lip. She glanced down; Rohan, she realized, had stepped back and was clinging to her leg. "The grief. It doesn't go away."

"What?"

"You hear the voices of people who died long ago. People who are still alive."

"It doesn't matter. I need you, Seff. You need *me*. We don't need *her*."

"If you kill her, it'll never stop. No matter what you do. No matter what kind of closure you think you get."

"You don't have a choice."

"You hear the people you miss out there. They stick with you, no matter when they died, no matter where they are. You just have to keep going."

"They can kill you, Seff. They don't care who you are. They will if you go on your own. Either she dies, or you both will."

"Maybe they can. But I won't let them."

She took Rohan's paw in her own, forced open the door, and together they ran, faster than Rory could react, into the freezing dark.

Eyes closed, they ran far and away, above the snow and far above the ground, into the star-speckled sky, kept aloft by the knowledge that they were both alive, and by the hope that they would find, somewhere, someday, a place as bright and warm as morning, that smelled like life and fire and running water.

Until then, Seff promised, they’d live.

End Notes

"Icehouse" was inspired by a bunch of random shit, including, in no particular order:

- Adventure Time
- Over the Garden Wall
- The song "Ursa Minor" by Six Organs of Admittance
- The song "Idioteque" by Radiohead
- The "Everlasting Night" Warriors MAP on YouTube
- The whole "grizzled dude and child in the apocalypse" trope, plus, like, one of those Tumblr posts about how more masculine character archetypes should be portrayed by butch women
- The furry community, like, for roping me in a decade+ ago

Someone, somewhere, loves you; someone, somewhere, is glad you're alive.

Thank you for reading, and good night.

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