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The Language of Loss

Liam Ainslie Mayo
Bard College

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The Language of Loss

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Liam Ainslie Mayo

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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One writes of scars healed, a loose parallel to the pathology of the skin, but there is no such thing in the life of an individual. There are open wounds, shrunk sometimes to the size of a pin-prick but wounds still. The marks of suffering are more comparable to the loss of a finger, or of the sight of an eye. We may not miss them, either, for one minute in a year, but if we should there is nothing to be done about it.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*

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Chapter 1

The first thing you'd notice about Haskell's Bait and Tackle were the signs that covered every window. One advertised the store's hours: 12-7 Wednesdays to Saturdays, with other hours by appointment. A little placard beside it, too small to be read from the road, boasted of the store's commitment to service. "Providing for the outdoor needs of Door's Creek since 1952," it read. "Best (and only) purveyor of camping, hunting and fishing equipment for fifty miles." A worn poster with graphic design a decade old advertised gun training and licensing, "Handguns, rifles and shotguns." There was an official looking sign towards the side of the building which read "Private Property: Trespassers and Looters Forbidden," and a hand lettered notice beneath it; "We don't call 911." There was a 'Welcome In' sign on the door, hanging just above a two sided sign which indicated whether the store was open or closed. Either way, the store was a fortress, windows barricaded with bristling and with posturing and with sheer volume of paper and metal and wood.

The signs had been a part of the place for as long as Abigail could remember. The store's former owner had placed them, Jeremy Haskell himself, and he had been old, older than she ever knew. When he retired, and left the store to her, she didn't dare take any of them down. They were his presence, his legacy. From a business perspective, they were advertising. They reminded the town that, although Jeremy Haskell was gone, Haskell's Bait and Tackle could still serve all of their outdoor needs, under the newly installed management of Abigail Fermont. She only made two changes when she took over, both of them additions. In the topmost corner of the leftmost window she placed a small rainbow flag, unobtrusive enough that no one but her would see it. Front and center, in the last open

space Haskell had left her, she hung a two foot by three foot rectangle of thin wood with the painted print message “We fix bows, all kinds.”

The store’s interior had changed little since Haskell’s heyday. Abigail had put a stool behind the counter when she first started – Haskell would always wander about the store during the day, even when his joints acted up and he had to use a cane to do it – but everything else stayed more or less the same. The rack of fishing poles towards the front had different makes and models passing through and into customers’ hands, but they never looked much different. The guns and knives changed even less in their displays beneath the counter and in their places mounted on the wall behind it. Haskell had always claimed older models to be more reliable. Abigail tended to agree, and more importantly, so did the store’s customers. The clothing in the racks upon the walls varied little year in and year out. Orange was always in style among woodsmen, as were camouflaged waders and thick, waterproof jackets. The gadgets in the smaller racks showed some variety, but there was only so much distinction possible between different types of flashlights, baits and tackles.

The store felt timeless, ageless, and if you had a long memory, you could easily walk in and feel as though nothing had changed since the 70s, and that you were young again. That was the theory, anyway. Old men with retirement money and dreams of youthful vigor were some of the store’s biggest spenders. Keeping Haskell’s Bait and Tackle the same store they remembered was a small price to pay for solid cashflow.

Even though the store did not change, time continued to happen. It showed in the people, in the customers and in the town around them. Abigail herself was young, just about in her thirties, and

she never knew Haskell's in its prime, but she was fairly certain the internet junkies who came in with smartphones to check specs and blog sites for every piece of equipment they bought were a new breed. New too were the kids who came in for cigarettes, filtering in from the town's resident high school and college; with the gas station up the street starting to enforce age restrictions, Haskell's was the only market left for them. The regulars continued, with every trip, to get older. Carl Coonings, Michael Santorin, Robert DeAngelo, Kyle Manning – all the men she had seen in Haskell's ledgers of forty years ago, the men he'd introduced as old friends when he was showing her the trade, they still came in as often as they had. They lingered and chatted with her and with the others of their set and told stories about when they had been titans, masters of field and forest, before buying a starter package for a nephew or an assisted reel fishing rod, neither of which (she would say, if she had to guess) would ever see more than a moment's use.

Most of the store's customers were regulars, falling into one category or another. Abigail knew most of them on sight, and newcomers usually were accompanied by someone who had been there before. Walk-ins were rare, and always interesting, so when someone walked through the front door of Haskell's at 5:15 on a Thursday evening, unaccompanied and unfamiliar, Abigail took notice, and prepared for something out of the ordinary.

The customer was a man, tallish, with the face of an angel and the curls to match. He looked like a boy, or like a very big baby rabbit, all soft and velvety and innocent. He had a large case on his back. It didn't look like a gun case, but Abigail couldn't think of what else it could be. He was flustered and sheepish, with his shoes stuck to the welcome mat as he looked wide eyed around the store. Abigail

thought he might be a vegan; whether he was or not, from the way he stared at the rows of guns and fishing reels he'd clearly never been to a hunting store before.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked. He looked around, confused. The racks mostly hid the counter from view of the door; he hadn't noticed her until she spoke. "Hi," she said, standing up off the stool. "Looking for anything in particular tonight, sir?"

"Hi," said the man. "I'm not, well, not exactly." His voice was very soft, and it fit him well. "Do you – I saw the sign – do you fix bows here?"

"That's me," she said. "I'm the bowyer. The bowsmith. I fix bows." The case on his back was no bow case; Abigail was sure of that. It was too short by half, unless the bow inside was folded in on itself, and entirely the wrong shape. Neither did the man who carried it look like an archer. He didn't show the strength, or the posture. "What have you got for me?"

He approached the desk as one might the receptionist's station at the dentist's. "Well, uh, I should probably just show you," he said, with a little laugh. The counter was clear of junk, for once; he unslung the case from his back, laid it down and unzipped it, opening it like a chest with the inside directed at her.

The case was a violin case. So it seemed, from the violin that rested neatly inside. Above it, in the hinged top half of the case, a violin bow hung suspended from black plastic pegs, snapped at the tip, with horse hair falling in a tangle over the strings and the velvet of the case.

Abigail looked up. "Sir," she said, as patiently as she could, "This is a hunting store."

"I know," he said.

“We sell hunting equipment,” she said. “I fix hunting bows. Bows for archery. Not for instruments.”

“I know,” he said.

Abigail wanted to leave it at that. He had come to the wrong place, pure and simple; he wasn't going to find what he needed from her. She didn't, though. She was curious, for one thing, curious why he'd come to Haskell's Bait and Tackle, of all places, looking for help. Stronger than curiosity was Haskell's lingering influence, and the sense of customer service that he had drilled into her in the year or so they'd worked in tandem before his retirement. “You are there to help the customer,” he liked to tell her, over drinks at the Blue Dragon or during the long lull hours at the store. “Whatever his need, you can do *something* to help.”

“Sorry if this sounds insensitive,” Abigail said. She took care not to notice his uneasy fidgeting. “It's just, why come here for this?”

“Why? Oh, I, uh, couldn't think of anywhere else.”

“No violin repair shops around here?” She knew the answer before she said it, and didn't wait for confirmation. “What about the city? Aren't there places there?” The town of Door's Creek was close to New York City, relatively speaking, three hours or so by car, a little less by train.

“I could do that,” he said. His lips pressed together; his eyebrows darkened. “If there was more time ... I have a concert on Saturday, so ...”

“So this is a rush job,” she said. “Great.”

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“No, no, no,” Abigail said, brushing a hand through the air as though it would do anything for the moment’s tension. She took a breath, let it out, and refocused. “Do you not have a spare bow?” He shook his head. “Someone you can borrow from?”

“Maybe,” he said. He didn’t sound hopeful. “I just thought, well, I’ve broken this bow before, and it made for a good repair then, and it was a quick job, and I thought ...”

“That this would be a quick fix.” He nodded; it seemed to be a habit of his. “Well, you might be right,” she said. “Let’s have a look, then.” She reached for the bow.

“Be careful,” he said.

“I will.”

Once it would have offended her, his easy assumption that she needed the reminder to take care. She’d developed a thicker skin, working at Haskell’s. People, usually men, were very attached to their weapons, to their tools. They didn’t trust them easily to another’s hands. It stung, but she’d come to understand it. She felt the same, sometimes.

The bow felt light as it came to her hands. She held it by the stick and by the dangling wooden tip at the end of the strings, connected at the other end to the curving handhold. “It’s a clean break,” she said, running her fingers along it. Nothing had splintered or shattered. The tip of the stick had simply become unglued from the tip of the bow, leaving the bowstrings dangling, tensionless and useless. “How’d you manage this?”

“I’m somewhat clumsy.”

She didn’t ask.

The silence unfurled as she examined the bow, all encompassing. Without the man looking on, serious, the bow would have felt like a toy. It weighed nothing, and even were it intact, the tension of the strings would be laughable. If one of her bows snapped, the force of the break could gouge skin, tear clothing, put someone's eye out. This bow would perhaps startle its unlucky owner – if that owner was especially skittish. Its delicacy wasn't anything to boast of, either; the horsehairs of the bow were fine, sure, but the straight, featureless lines of his bow felt amateurish alongside the graceful, powerful arcs of hers. It was a different bow, to be sure, meant for different tasks with weaknesses that couldn't be held against it. In the current situation, such weaknesses could even be strengths. If one of her bows had snapped like that, it would be messy, and she wasn't sure she'd even try and fix it. For this bow, repair wouldn't just be possible, but simple.

“You really want me to do this?”

The man nodded. “Yeah, no, I do. If possible.”

Abigail put the bow back. “Right,” she said. She placed both hands on the desk, leaning across with single-minded focus. “I’ll need you to sign a waiver, saying you acknowledge I’m not experienced in this and I take no responsibility if it goes to shit. Pardon the language. Now, for a job like this, payment’s gonna be twenty per hour of work, plus material costs and a twenty dollar flat fee. It shouldn’t take more than an hour or two, unless I screw something up, and if it’s not fixed and usable at the time I get it back to you, you don’t owe me anything. Alright?”

The man didn’t answer, for a moment. He thought, he processed, he looked at her, he looked at the case, he looked back at her and said, regretfully, “Sorry, can you repeat that?”

She gave him a blunt smile. "I'll get the papers," she said.

Paperwork lived in her office on the second floor. More precisely, it lived in the drawers of a desk she called her office, situated in a small corner of the room that served as her bedroom. None of the normal paperwork for her repairs needed much changing to match the circumstances. Nowhere did the language of the paperwork, drafted in five minutes while Haskell stalled her first customer downstairs, specify the type of bow she meant, a helpful oversight for the present moment. The only change she made now was a scribbled addition to the liability form, waiving the normal assurances of quality that came from her years of experience. She brought them down and had the man read and sign, trying to make sure he got from the papers what he hadn't from her opening spiel. He signed without reading for more than a moment, but then, there was only so much she could do.

His name, she read, was Matthew Calico. "Calico," she said. "Quite an unusual name."

Matthew blushed, and ducked his head in embarrassment, and smiled. "It's English," he said, "Or so my mother says." He hesitated, and said, "And what's your name?"

"Oh." It had been a while since she'd had to introduce herself in the shop. "Abigail Fermont," she said. "Owner and operator of Haskell's."

"Fermont?"

"It's Dutch, I think." She wasn't sure; her family hadn't put much stock in ancestry.

Matthew nodded, no less confused. "Not Haskell?"

She'd have assumed that was the question, without his declaration of English ancestry. She'd been asked often enough. "Haskell was the owner before me," she said. "He died a few months ago."

Matthew nodded. Having the paperwork signed had calmed him down. He stood more still, eyes clearer. “Ok,” he said. “It’s like Dickens, right?”

“Charles?”

“Yeah,” he said. “There’s a bit in the Christmas Carol where Scrooge is in an office where he used to work with Marley, so both their names were on the door, and someone comes in and thinks Scrooge and his current partner are Scrooge and Marley, but he’s actually Cratchit ...” He trailed off.

“Ah,” said Abigail. “Interesting.”

The conversation lulled, the dead space between tracks on a record. She took the broken bow in her hands at the start of the next and said, “You’ll want to keep your violin with you?”

“Yes,” said Matthew. It was the most sure he’d sounded about anything in the course of the encounter. Abigail stepped clear of the case, giving him room to zip it back up. It was closed by the time he thought again, paused, and said, “Should I stay and watch, or – ”

“No.” Abigail matched his surety with her own, having known that the question would be asked, having prepared for it. “Shop rules. I have to be alone during repairs like this.” That was the condition she’d given Haskell, too, when she agreed to work for him. Working on bows was a delicate procedure, same as any kind of precision woodworking. Without the space and the isolation to think and breathe and work, a host of small mistakes would assault her. The cuts she’d make would be a fraction of an inch off, the glue she laid down would smear, and the patience she needed to ensure everything was done well and right simply wouldn’t be there.

She didn’t say any of this to Matthew. He didn’t ask. “So I’ll wait here then?”

“No point in that,” said Abigail. “The bow should dry overnight. You could come pick it up tomorrow morning, say, nine-ish?”

Matthew slung the case over his shoulder. “Alright,” he said. “And thank you.” He left with a measure of relief, and only the one look back at his broken bow.

One of the many signs in the store’s windows said that operating hours for Haskell’s Bait and Tackle were 12-7, Wednesdays to Saturdays. Unwritten but commonly understood was a little addendum, spoken often by Haskell, saying that the store’s effective operating hours were entirely at its owner’s discretion. Abigail had received many a phone call at seven or eight in the morning, asking if she could run down and open the shop, calls which – for the most part – she answered. In return, there were no complaints on the rare occasions when the shop wasn’t open during scheduled hours. Sometimes a customer would mention, offhand, that they’d stopped by the other day and ‘The lights were off,’ but they left it at that (apart from the one out-of-towner who had left a one star Yelp review, one that Abigail paid him a hundred dollars to remove). That was how Haskell had always run the store; that was how he had taught her to run it. “You’re available for the community,” he’d told her. “When and where and *why* is your business.”

Abigail flipped the hanging sign to ‘closed’. Had the cash register contained anything of importance, she’d have brought it upstairs to the lockbox in the office. The day’s few customers had paid with card – another sign of the times – and she could leave the register alone, forlorn. She walked into the her workshop, taking the bow with her. It was time to get to work.

Chapter 2

Repairing Matthew's bow proved as simple as Abigail had expected. A little wood glue and a little patience had the split halves fused back into a whole. It wasn't pretty. Even with several coats of varnish (which she planned to apply the next morning, once the glue had dried), it wouldn't take much looking to see where the break had been. Then again, that was the point of mending, she mused, as she set the bow aside on a bed of velvet. An item unbroken might be more beautiful than one which had never been shattered, but the process of careful repair left its own kind of scar that spoke of love, and of value.

If Abigail had been the meditative sort, she might have pursued that thought, expounded upon it and explored all it might have meant. She was not. She lit a cigarette and started smoking, drinking in the silence of the empty shop.

The shop bell rang a half hour later, when Abigail was on her second cigarette. "I'll be with you in a moment," she called. She looked around for an ashtray. There wasn't one. She put the cigarette out on her jeans instead, and brushed the ash onto the cluttered floor.

"Oh don't trouble yourself," said a familiar voice. "I'll come to you."

There were two Haskell daughters, ten years apart, more or less. The older of the two, Mary Haskell, lived with her child Rys and her mother Elaine in Haskell's old home. They kept mostly to themselves. Besides the occasional family dinner, Abigail had little contact with that branch of the family.

Things were different with Suzanne, the younger of the Haskell daughters. Suzanne was Abigail's age, more or less. She was single, and she lived twenty minutes from Door's Creek, in a small house in Rhinecliff, with a cat that had named itself Mischief. She had gone away to California for college, and had there become an eco-conscious architect, and as such, Door's Creek viewed her with some suspicion. Haskell had introduced them soon after she'd moved to Rhinecliff, two years ago, and they had become friends, of a sort.

Suzanne poked her head into the workshop. "Hi," she said, "How are you doing?"

"I'm alright," said Abigail. "You look nice." On casual days, Suzanne wore jeans, a variety of patterned t-shirts and a singular slouching beanie in an off-putting shade of olive. She still had the beanie, but was wearing a grey striped suit, and a little silver necklace with it.

"Thanks – I had a meeting with the Oracle Group, and they're sticklers."

They hugged, Suzanne clinging somewhat tighter than usual.

"How are you holding up?" asked Abigail.

"Oh, you know, I'm hanging in there." Suzanne broke apart and looked around, as if looking not to be overheard. "Mary's really taking it hard," she said, her voice slightly lower. "I don't think she's left the house in weeks."

"That's ... understandable," said Abigail. It seemed in line with Mary's character, and with how much she had relied upon her father. "What's happening with the diner?"

“Paul’s been understanding,” said Suzanne. “He placed her on indefinite grief leave, with half pay. She might quit, though. Someone will need to take care of Elaine, and Dad left them enough money to last for a while.”

Abigail hadn’t seen any of the Haskell family since his funeral, several weeks ago. In her recollection, Elaine had seemed better able to take care of Mary than the reverse. Mary had been near catatonic, watching from a chair in the funeral parlor lounge as Elaine made herself the life of the funeral party.

“I’ve been getting them groceries,” said Suzanne. “Helping Rys get where they need to go.”

“That’s kind of you. I don’t want to intrude, but if you need any help ...”

“You wouldn’t be,” said Suzanne. “Intruding, that is. You’re basically extended family – at least, that’s how Dad always thought of you.”

Abigail nodded. “I’m about done here – would you want to take a walk, or something?”

Suzanne smiled. “I was about to ask you the same. I have a few errands to run, but if you don’t mind – ”

“Not at all! I’ll just close up here.”

Door’s Creek was a small town. It had one central street, called (to no one’s surprise) “Main Street,” along which lay most of the town’s shops and restaurants. The town’s other street of importance, Elm Street, cut across Main Street and led outwards towards the area’s local highways. The intersection between Elm and Main had the town’s only stoplight, and the highest concentration of

shops. One corner of the intersection had a gas station; two others had bakeries, one with full lunch service, one without. The last corner had a strange place locals referred to as “The Barn.” Depending on who you’d ask, you could hear it called a restaurant masquerading as an art exhibit or an art exhibit masquerading as a restaurant. The town was laid out like a cross around this intersection, boundaried by Sal’s Auto Repair to the north, a supermarket to the south, a baseball field to the west and forests to the east. You could walk one end to another in a half hour or so, or walk around it in less than a day.

Haskell’s Bait and Tackle held a commanding position on the southern end of Main Street, where the street curved east and headed away from town. At its founding, the store stood alone at the outskirts of town. A small huddle of shops and restaurants sprung up around it when Door’s Creek started to expand; Haskell’s might never be called the center of town, but you could sit on the front steps and look around and see nothing but Door’s Creek, where before you might have seen only the darkness of the forest and the field. If you were to step out from Haskell’s front door and turn left along Main Street, you could feel as though you were a part of something, as if Door’s Creek were its own small universe and the ten thousand or so who walked its streets were the only people who lived. To the imagination, the world was all darkness except for the small patch of light that was Door’s Creek, darkness and death.

Abigail did not think that of Door’s Creek. She was not an especially imaginative person.

“What were you working on?” asked Suzanne, as they started up Main Street towards the center of town. She slipped an arm through Abigail’s, linking them.

Abigail smiled. “Just some violinist’s bow,” she said.

Night had well and truly fallen in Door's Creek. The streetlights shed a pale yellow glare over the world, tempering the darkness rather than turning it back. Suzanne listened as Abigail told her the story of Matthew, walking arm and arm beneath the glow, and she laughed. "I'm surprised you helped him."

Abigail shrugged. "A customer's a customer."

"Dad never saw it that way."

"That's true." It was, more or less. Haskell didn't restrict who could come into the shop, but if he thought a customer rude, or weak, or if he couldn't envision them roughing it in the wilderness of the Hudson Valley, he could prove unhelpful. "I came back from lunch, once, and he'd left a woman standing at the knives for a half hour because she was wearing heels."

"*God*," said Suzanne, in good natured exasperation. "You know I asked him to take me hunting, once."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah." Suzanne went briefly serious. "He went off on me. Well, he wasn't angry, not exactly. It was like I'd asked him to change the color of the sky. He wouldn't even look at me. I was fifteen."

"That's awful," said Abigail. She squeezed Suzanne's arm in sympathy.

"Thanks," said Suzanne. Then she withdrew her arm, pointing over at the Natural Grocers.

"Can we stop in there?"

“Of course.” They crossed the street together, narrowly dodging a rusting pick up truck, and ducked out of the darkness into the store.

Like Haskell’s, the Natural Grocers was a small establishment of long standing, with a loyal following in the community and a website that hadn’t been updated since the 90s. Its owner and manager, James Beechum, had been close with Haskell, though not too close; Haskell couldn’t trust anyone who ate vegan or had an earring as a man. Still, James had known Haskell longer than Abigail had been alive, and that counted for a lot in Door’s Creek.

James was behind the counter when they walked in, reading a battered paperback. “Abigail!” he said, when he saw her. “How’s the old man’s shop doing?”

Suzanne gave Abigail’s arm a quick squeeze and slipped away to the freezers.

“Hi James, yeah, business is great.” Abigail went to the counter; James did not put down his book. “How are things with you?”

“I had a couple come in today from Pine Planes,” James said. He had become hard of hearing in his old age; he talked loud enough to deafen the store, small as it was. “Pine Planes! They don’t have organics in Pine Planes? Disgraceful. Disgraceful, I tell you.”

“Yeah,” said Abigail, who had her doubts. “Disgraceful.”

“You know Haskell had the same thing happen to him,” said James. “No one else ‘round here was selling hunting gear, so he got customers from all over.”

“We still get those,” said Abigail. She’d heard this from the horse’s mouth, from Haskell himself, and she’d seen it firsthand. Customers still visited Haskell’s from as far away as Albany, driven

by nostalgia or by personal connection. She looked over her shoulder towards Suzanne, who was browsing the drink selection at the fridge. Suzanne caught her glance; they shared a smile, an affirmation.

James seemed to notice Abigail had stopped paying attention. He lay the book down, shifted back on his stool, looked up at her. “Did he ever tell you about Ringo’s?”

“Ringo was a competitor of his, right?”

“The only competitor. Some big down city slick boy who moved up to Rhinecliff in the 80s.” James was warming to his theme. He rubbed his hands together, squinted his eyes. “Now Haskell didn’t worry about Ringo at first. Why would he? He had the customers, the establishment. But that son of a – pardon my language – son of a bitch started undercutting him, started doing him dirty. So Haskell paid him a visit one night, and he made him a deal. They’d go hunting together, and whoever made the better shot would get to keep the Hudson Valley.”

“Did Haskell win?” Abigail had not heard this story before.

James shook his head. “Ringo chickened out,” he said. “Haskell was fixin’ to try something else, but then Ringo caught pneumonia and died of it, and there wasn’t any problem after that.”

Abigail was saved the necessity of a response by Suzanne, who came up to the checkout counter with a small pile of yogurts, granola bars and kombucha. She continued to think it over as Suzanne checked out, as James expressed his condolences for Suzanne’s father’s death, as Suzanne led the way out of the shop. Once back in the darkness of the street, she asked, “Did you hear what James was saying?”

“Yeah,” said Suzanne.”

“Was he telling true?”

“Who knows?” Suzanne entwined her arm and Abigail’s, redistributing the shopping back into her other hand. “Everyone involved is dead by now. It doesn’t matter, anymore.”

Suzanne and Abigail ran into Rys in the doorway of Carnivalia, an antique store a block west along Elm Street. Abigail rarely saw Rys. When she did, they were usually in the company of their mother or Suzanne or, before his death, of Haskell. Shadowed by familial guardians, they always appeared small. They had long black hair, falling around their ears and over their eyes in loose curls, and they wore lumpy jackets over nondescript t-shirts; the overall effect made it easy for them to slip into another’s shadow. Here, sans guardians, Rys still seemed, somehow, overshadowed; they ducked their head and swept curls across their eyes and slunk into their jacket.

“Shouldn’t you be home?” asked Suzanne.

“Hi Aunt Suzanne,” Rys said. “Hi Abigail.” They spoke softly, self-consciously. “I’m just saying hi to Valerie.”

Valerie Scholl waved, sitting behind a pile of magazines from the 60s. “Hello Suzanne!” she said, all smiles, in a shining French accent. “Your Rys is such a kind child.”

“They’re not mine,” Suzanne said. “But yeah, they turned out pretty good.”

Rys flushed from the praise, ducking out the shop’s front door. “See you, Mrs. Scholl.”

“Have a good night, child,” said Valerie. “Now,” she added, turning to Suzanne. “I have set some choice pieces aside for you. Here, let me show you.”

Suzanne had been a studio arts major in college. Her pivot into architecture had happened afterwards, and she still thought of herself as an artist first and foremost. Abigail had been to her workshop, a shed at the back of her home, and had seen the type of work she did. Her pieces were patchwork, items blended together and fused in unusual ways to form amalgamations. They all had titles like “Butterfly #4” or “Angel Heartstrings,” and Abigail couldn’t see the appeal, though she had tried.

“Oh these will do great, thank you.”

“Anything for you, my dear.”

Abigail wandered the shop, as Valerie and Suzanne picked over each item and talked of providence and prices. Everything in the store had a little paper tag with a price and a brief descriptor hanging from it. A chair backed with cracking leather said it was made in 1812, and had been acquired at an estate sale off in Rhinebeck. A set of silver spoons had “Owned by George Washington’s secretary – unverified” on them, with a price to match. Too many tea cups, a rack dusty with worn out clothes, stained wooden objects of no apparent use – the antique store was a graveyard, littered with the debris of lives gone by.

Abigail appreciated the place. There was something in the finding of new life amongst death that appealed to her. Yet she appreciated from a distance – all her furniture was from IKEA, and she didn’t own an item of clothing that was older than herself.

“And how’s your family?”

“They are ... not well.” Valerie did not lower her voice, did not change her tone. “What happened with Haskell, that shook them.”

“My dad?”

“Oh yes,” said Valerie. “My mother has been getting on my father’s nerves, telling him to eat more healthy. ‘Stop going to the diner,’ she tells him. ‘Go keto,’ she tells him. I don’t even know what that is.”

“Low carbs,” muttered Suzanne. “High fats.”

Valerie talked past the interruption. “My father’s older than Haskell,” she said, working as she talked. She entered each of the items laid aside from Suzanne on an adding machine, running a finger down the totals. “Not by much, but by enough. My mother worries, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

A memory came back to Abigail, then, a memory of Haskell, a month before he retired. They had been smoking together in the workshop, Abigail with a cigarette, Haskell with a hand rolled cigar.

“Elaine would kill me if she heard I was still on these things,” he had said, face darkened with smoke.

“She’d say I need to look after my health.” He’d said nothing afterwards. He hadn’t needed to.

Abigail thought of that moment as Suzanne paid, as Suzanne gathered her things and as she’d handed half of them to Abigail to carry. They walked outside, letting the door of the Carnivalia swing shut behind them. “It’s kind of funny,” she said. “Your dad. Him being used to justify someone looking after their health.”

Suzanne smiled. “Yeah,” she said. “I don’t think he’d have found much humor in it.”

“He’d have liked the attention.”

“Would he have?” Suzanne frowned, thinking. “He never talked about his influence in the town. I never knew for sure that he liked it.”

Abigail did not know what to say to that. She walked on with Suzanne in simple silence, looking at the world around her, watching the lights of the cars streak past in the dusk.

“Do you want a drink?” asked Suzanne. “I have to put this stuff in the car, but after -”

“I’d like that,” said Abigail. “I’d like that a lot.”

The Blue Dragon was the town’s preeminent bar and grill. It didn’t have the pedigree of Haskell’s. It took over the building of a place that did, the Door’s Creek Meathouse, after the Meathouse died in the recession of 2008. By the time Abigail had arrived in Door’s Creek, a few years after the Dragon, it had established itself as a young up-and-comer in the Door’s Creek scene.

The Dragon offered English pub fare as interpreted by an Iowan named Earnest Pendragon, who had never been to England in his life. As an authentic taste of English cuisine, the food was probably lacking, not that many in Door’s Creek would know the difference. It was the culture that sold the place, with the pictures of English celebrities, current and former, plastered over the walls, with cottage pie and burgers with names like the Union Jack and the Empire on the menu, with a dining room of dark wood and a bar with well-made leather stools. Not to say the selection of beer – odd, obscure, and always excellent – didn’t help matters, or that the charm of Earnest Pendragon

couldn't carry any restaurant he chose to create. Those were reasons people chose to return; the culture, the concept, was what brought them through the door.

"Dad really liked this place," said Suzanne, as Abigail led the way into the Dragon. "Before the Brits took over, that is."

People packed the bar, seated on every available stool, standing in every available space. Patricia Locris held court at one end of the bar, the town's pre-eminent socialite in her sparkling element. Two of Haskell's longtime associates, Jerry Bruckner and Todd Newman, drank bourbon in a puddle of silence, detached from the noise around them though they sat in the middle of the bar. They had been there when Haskell was young, Jerry and Todd and Patricia. Now that he was gone, Abigail half expected them to fall away, autumn leaves following one another from the trees. Still, they remained. Besides them, the crowd was fairly young, closer in age to her and Suzanne than to Haskell. They talked and laughed in nice shirts and inexpensive jewelry, and they would all be going to comfortable office jobs in the morning. They were a newer crowd, brought in when the Meathouse became the Dragon, and Haskell had strong opinions on them, most of them negative.

"Gentrification," said Suzanne.

"I suppose," said Abigail. She pushed her way through the crowd around the bar, arm outstretched.

Earnest saw her at once – he was a tall man, a keen man, and his gaze missed nothing that occurred in his domain. "Abigail," he said, voice pitched high to carry above the crowd. "Penny for your thoughts?"

“Two for some whiskey,” said Abigail. “Got any 20 year?”

“I’ve got the Glenfiddich,” said Earnest. “19 years and counting.”

“That’s perfect.” Abigail held up two fingers. “I’ve got a friend.”

“Alright.” Ariel took a bottle from beneath the bar, uncorked it and poured it into two glasses.

“Complements of the house.”

Abigail took the drinks. “That’s kind of you, thank you.” She had learned long ago not to reject generosity, not in Door’s Creek. It was seen as impolite.

She pushed her way back through the crowd towards Suzanne, and handed her her drink.

“Thank you,” Suzanne said. “Want to take the patio?”

“Sure.”

The terrace of the Blue Dragon was done in the same English style as the interior. Abigail and Suzanne found seats at a table plastered over with pictures of Manchester United beneath an umbrella that bore the emblem of the Union Jack.

“Dad hated Earnest,” said Suzanne, resting her arms on the table. “He hated him for taking away the Meathouse, and hated the Dragon for being a tourist trap.”

“What do you think?” asked Abigail.

Suzanne shrugged. “Oh, you know. I’m worried for Door’s Creek, if people keep moving in.”

“So was your dad.” They had argued about it, she and Haskell, during the long two years of her apprenticeship. He cursed the “yuppies” who bought gear for trophy hunts, who had never wanted for food on the table or thought to look towards the forest for supplying that want. Abigail appreciated

their money; while they did not come as frequently as Haskell's usual crowd, they spent more when they did. "He still drank here, though."

"Yeah. So he did." Suzanne laughed. Her hand came up to her neck, then to the silver hoop at her ear. "He really does cast the longest shadow, doesn't he? Everyone on Main has history with him, everyone and their mother."

"That's just everyone in Door's Creek," said Abigail. "The way he tells it – told it – he was this town."

The conversation lulled. Abigail took a sip of whiskey and looked out across the street. The patio was only dimly lit, and she could see beyond it easily, across to Haskell's and the shop's covered windows.

"Has it been hard?"

"Has what?"

"Stepping into his shoes."

Abigail shook her head. "Nobody expects me to be Haskell," she said. She had thought about the question before. The people of Door's Creek saw her in relation to Haskell, surely. They were eager to see her, to tell her stories, to talk with her about the man Haskell had been. None of them talked as if he was gone, or as if she had replaced him. "Every time one of his customers comes into the store, they look for him. Every time. It's like an instinct."

"Oh, I understand that," said Suzanne. "It's hard, finding a place for yourself, here." She reached across the table, covered Abigail's hand with hers.

“Thanks,” said Abigail. “And you’re right, it’s hard.”

The light was dim, and Abigail could not see clearly, but if asked, she would have said Suzanne blushed. “Dad was worried about that, you know,” she said. “He always said, without a son to carry on the business, he’d have to marry a man into the family, to keep the place going.”

Abigail sputtered on her drink. “Your *dad* would have to marry – ”

“No, no,” said Suzanne. “No, he’d arrange for one of us to get married. Mary or I.”

“Oh,” said Abigail. “That makes more sense.”

“Did he ever say anything to you about that?” asked Suzanne.

Abigail shook her head. “He never said anything outright,” she said. “But he was always disappointed in me, I think.” She thought back to long days in the shop, Haskell telling her things she already knew, double checking her inventory lists, standing over her shoulder as she walked a customer through the differences between their brands of fishing reels, trying to correct her and (more often than not) getting it wrong.

Suzanne rubbed Abigail’s hand. “He was disappointed in himself,” she said. “For being mortal. For not having a son. That doesn’t reflect on you.”

“Did it reflect on you?” asked Abigail.

“A little, yeah.” Suzanne shrugged. “Having a daughter was disappointment enough; what with everything Mary and I got up to? Although,” she said, reconsidering. “I almost wonder whether he reconsidered, towards the end. What with you, and with me ...”

The moment froze, the implications of what Suzanne had said crystalline. Abigail packed them away. She'd go back to them later, when time had passed and when Suzanne was no longer holding her hand.

Suzanne coughed, and pulled back. "Oh look," she said, pointing out into the darkness. "There's Rys."

There was a second of delay before Abigail turned to look for Rys, to follow Suzanne's pointing hand. She did not see if Rys saw them, or acknowledged them, or waved. All she saw was them stepping off the sidewalk without looking, careless, and crumpling under the impact of a cream white car.

Chapter 3

Outside the town of Door's Creek, a few miles to the north, there was a forest called Glemwood that had not a single tree. There were the shadows of trees in the forest. On a good night, without stars or moon or low flying planes, you could see the shadows of trees standing tall and dark, with pine needles and broad maple leaves drooping from pitch black limbs. But there were no trees in the forest, and there probably never would be, not while the Door's Creek Planning Board kept up enforcement of their forest ordinances.

Rys had not died in Glemwood Forest. On that much they were clear. It did not surprise them to wind up there anyways. Many things went to the forest after death, and Rys didn't have any grounds on which to claim exception.

They were standing in the darkness on the edge of the forest, on a path which would have led into the trees had there been any. They looked around. Another path, bordering the forest, ran left to right, crossing the path they were on directly where they stood. A lawn sign placed a little to the side read "Door's Creek High School Girls Grades 11-12 Alan Psycher Memorial Run, Mile 1.2." The run had happened in the spring, as Rys recalled. Someone had obviously forgotten to remove the trail marker. Or – more likely – the forest had claimed the sign as the event died down, claimed it to mark the death of a moment in time that would never come again. That was how most things ended up in the forest. They were gravestones, little markers of loss, signifiers of something that had once been.

At this point on Rys' first trip into the forest, they had been very afraid. That was a long time ago – three years or so – and Rys had since grown more comfortable with the place. They put a hand in

their pocket, feeling for the silver half-dollar they knew would be there. It was. Encouraged, they started walking, foot before foot on slightly wilted grass. They entered the forest, looking left and right but never back, following the path.

If there were trees in Glemwood forest, Rys might not have seen the gravestones scattered on either side of the path. They were small, and would have blended neatly in with leaves and foliage, would have been closely concealed by the shrubs and the ferns and the massive trunks of the roaring trees. As it was, they stood out in Glemwood, where the trappings of a forest existed only as possibilities. If Rys paid attention, if they listened, they could almost hear the stories the gravestones told. The polished clean wristwatch draped across an imagined branch had a story to tell. Someone had placed it there, a moment of someone else who had died; or, more likely, the wristwatch had gotten lost in the dying of a moment, and had made its way to Glemwood, and had arranged itself neatly in a place of deliberate honor. The pinwheel stuck in the ground to the right, spinning without wind in a swirl of red, white and blue, had a story to tell. Perhaps it came from a Fourth of July gone disastrously wrong, or perhaps it was stolen by the forest from another graveyard, where it had adorned a soldier's grave. The necklace of wire and of dull grey stone, the discarded bra slung across a bush of pure shadow, the coffee mug with a kitten on the side and a half-missing handle – each and every one had a story to tell, each with its own little heartache. Rys did not have time to listen. They had an appointment to keep. They kept walking, step by step, past the gravestones and further into the forest, and they did not look back.

Rys had a gravestone or two of their own in Glemwood. They had visited one on an earlier expedition into the forest. Somewhere far in front of them, a little to the left, a bottle cap lay crushed into the dirt. It had a Pepsi label on it, and it was slightly chipped. Three years ago Rys had chipped it, had drunk the soda and said, young and impulsive, “Yo, bet I can get on that roof.” They had remembered how the roof had swayed and slipped beneath their hands, how the air had rushed up around them and the ground had rushed up to meet them and the sickening crack –

Rys had only visited their gravestone once, and that had been enough.

What path Rys took through the forest did not matter. The appointment to which they walked was not set for any place in particular. What mattered was the journey, the progression from the world of the living into the world of Glemwood Forest. They took forks in the path at random, forks that seemed in different places from their last visit, leading in different directions. At times the path narrowed, leaving Rys to walk on dirt and to keep a hand above their face to ward off the possibilities of overhanging branches. At times it broadened, to where two cars could comfortably pass without fear of scrapes or dents. At those times, Rys walked in the middle of the road, relishing in the luxury with their arms stretched wide and their stance tall. They had already been hit by one car that evening, after all; the odds of another must be fairly low, statistically speaking. Most often the path was gravel, a slipping, sliding affair, where Rys was half convinced each pebble had its own little death to mark. They did not stop to listen, or to check if they were right. They kept walking, on into the forest.

When Rys was young, a child growing up in the town around Glemwood, they had often gone with their grandfather living in the forests and the fields nearby. Their grandfather had told them in the

walks they took together never to go to Glemwood Forest. Sometimes he said it was sacred ground. Sometimes he said the area was simply unsafe. Both reasons sent Rys straight to Glemwood Forest as soon as they were old enough to hike unattended. There they found a border between Glemwood Forest and the other, lesser, nameless forests around, a border marked by an aging wooden fence and enforced by a fear, fierce and deep, of whatever lurked in the shadows on the other side. Time and again Rys tried to cross it; time and again they fell back, stepping back from the fence and deciding that they'd try another day. The closest they got to crossing was at a wooden pedestrian bridge, spanning a shallow ravine between Glemwood Forest and the world. They'd go often to the bridge, engaging in imaginary conversations with the shades of the other side, but even then, the closest they could come was halfway.

Then they died, and they found themselves in Glemwood Forest, and the place held no more the allure of forbidden fruit.

Rys stopped walking, as the path they were on forked again. To the left, it led steep and jagged down a slope which led to the very same bridge. To the right it narrowed, going up a hill and down the other side and away. Rys took that path, slipping a little as they went, reaching a hand out to the trees to slow their descent. It did not slow them, for there were no trees in the forest, and their hand met nothing but air. They tried anyway, for on the bridge the Grim Reaper was waiting for them, and an appointment with him wasn't something to rush.

The first time Rys had met the Reaper, *this* Reaper, they had met on the same bridge. The Reaper then had looked as a Reaper of Death should look. His face was skeletal, as were his hands. He

wore a black cloak that did not move in the wind, with a hood that came up and covered his bald skull. He had a full-sized scythe in his hands, with a curved silver blade sharp enough to cut moonlight. The Reaper was the stuff of nightmares, clad thus in black.

That was before. Now, Rys and the Reaper were on first name terms. Now, the figure on the bridge looked entirely different. He wore jeans, and a denim jacket, each slightly threadbare around the cuffs. He had curly red hair, and a curly beard, and his face was flesh, not bone. He had brown hiking boots on, and a grey turtleneck sweater beneath the jacket, and little silver studs in his ears. Nothing marked him as the physical incarnation of Death, nothing except the small silver scythe that hung on a chain around his neck, on which a little silver scythe dangled beside rainbows and crowns and puppies.

“Hi Randolph,” said Rys.

Randolph leaned over the side of the bridge, resting his elbows on the railing and his weight on his elbows. “Rys,” he said, in greeting.

Rys joined him on the bridge, and looked with Randolph out over the ravine. Below the bridge lay a rotting pile of gravestones, cluttering up the ravine and the river that ran through it. You would think to look at it that someone had taken the contents of a dumpster, picked out everything remotely useful or usable, and chucked the rest from a great height onto the treeless forest. Splintered chairs and broken bookcases, snapped bows and rusting knives, books and bags, stuffed animals and enough clothes to stock a small boutique lay scattered together, forgotten. They could tell stories, if you had time to listen, could tell of the lives and the moments that had ended and, in their final moments, marked the objects below with the curse of remembrance. It could be enough to make you cry.

“So,” said Randolph. “Hit by a car, then?”

“Yeah,” said Rys.

“Did it hurt?”

Rys shrugged. “The roof was worse.” They tried not to think about their deaths, not when they could help it, but they could not forget the way their bones crunched against the lawn.

“I can imagine,” said Randolph. He changed the subject. “Don’t you look both ways before you cross the street?”

“Sometimes. Do you?”

“Of course.”

“Can a car even hurt you? You’re a Reaper.”

“It’s safety,” said Randolph, disgruntled. “You wear your seatbelt, you don’t swim too far from shore, and you look both ways before crossing the street.”

“I was just asking,” said Rys. There was so much they did not know about the world of Glemwood Forest, about Randolph’s world. They did not know if he was alive. They did not know if he could die. Somehow it always seemed impolite to ask, so they lived with their curiosity, and they tried, most of the time, not to think about it.

“Do you have your coin?” asked Randolph.

“Here,” said Rys. They dug into their pocket for their silver half-dollar. “Flip me.”

The first time Rys and Randolph had met, on the same bridge three years ago, Randolph told them to challenge him in a game for their life. If Randolph won, Rys would go on to the afterlife,

whatever that meant. If Rys won, they got to cross the bridge, leave Glemwood Forest and return to the land of the living. That was all he offered them: one game, a simple set of rules, a single choice. They did not trust themselves to beat the Reaper in a game of skill, and they had read too many fairy tales to try their hand at cheating. They chose to rely on their luck, instead, poor as it often was. They had a silver half-dollar in their pocket, a memento from a fourth place finish at an Easter egg-and-spoon race. They gave the coin to Randolph and told him to flip. If it came up heads, they would pass on. If not ...

“Call it,” said Randolph, taking the coin.

“Tails.”

Randolph pushed the coin around in his palm, hand stretched out beyond the railing, whispering something that Rys could not quite hear. The coin always seemed to weigh him down, heavy as a lullaby. His face was grave and his movements slow, until the moment the coin flicked up and tumbled through the moonlight and came back down into a waiting hand, slapped thereafter onto a waiting arm.

Randolph took the covering hand away, coin balanced on a denim sleeve. It was showing tails.

“Great,” said Rys. “Wonderful.” They picked the coin from Randolph’s arm and pocketed it.

Randolph went back to leaning on the railing, body angled now towards Rys. “That makes four times.” He sounded amused. “Some would call you lucky.”

“Would you?” Rys leant back against the railing, their arms behind them, looking up. The stars visible from Glemwood Forest seemed real, no different from those seen anywhere else. They couldn’t help wondering if that was truly the case.

“This is your fourth time here. That’s not luck, not as I’d call it.”

Rys and Randolph had met before in Glemwood Forest, once when Rys fell off the roof, once when an illness, life threatening, had hospitalized them for months, once again when they’d fallen, again, careless around cliffs at the end of a long hike. Still, it was hard to make small talk with Randolph. What was there to say?

“My grandfather died,” said Rys.

“Jeremy?”

“Yeah,” said Rys. “A few weeks ago.”

Randolph said nothing. He sank a little bit, hunching over the railing of the bridge and staring dull eyed at the nonexistent trees.

The silence of Glemwood Forest was entirely different from the silence of anywhere else. The silence of the real world was made from the ambient noise of the moment, the rustle of leaves in a forest, the humming of lights and of fans in an office, the pushing of wind against waves on the sea. There was ambient noise in Glemwood Forest, but it lacked any mooring in the present moment. The silence there was built from a thousand times and a thousand places, from all the possibilities for what might be said or heard in the darkness. All the animals that might have roamed in Glemwood Forest roamed in the soundscape of that silence, their chirps and the rustle of their path through the undergrowth a muted, staticky backdrop. Other sounds, human sounds, lay layered atop them, voices of lovers and of soldiers and of friends shouting across the woods, echoing from the possibilities of the trees. Flames roared in the silence, great forest fires raging through a space that had never seen a spark;

tornados and hurricanes followed behind them, raging, screaming, railing against everything in the world like they wished to tear the stars from the sky and hurl them into the sea. And yet, all the noise was still silence. All the thousands of sounds that made it up were nothing more than possibilities, and death had ensured they would never come into being.

“Randolph?”

“Yes?”

“Where do people go when they die?”

“After here?”

“Yeah.”

Randolph did not answer. Rys did not quite know what impulse had moved them to ask, except that the silence of the forest had driven them to think of their grandfather, and there was something, something just out of reach of their conscious thought, telling them that there was something to know.

“Remember to leave a gravestone,” said Randolph.

It took Rys a moment and a glance at the pile of junk below them to remember what he was talking about. “Oh,” they said. “Yeah, of course.” They checked their pockets – empty, except for car keys and their lucky silver half-dollar – and said, “I don’t really have much on me.”

“It’s not like anyone prepares to get hit by a car,” said Randolph. Then he reconsidered, eyebrows raised in thought. “Well, mostly.”

“Right.”

Rys bent down and started to unlace their left foot shoe. Randolph made no move to stop or question them, though there was an air of confused skepticism in the way he crossed his arms and tilted his head. Rys slipped the shoe from their foot, straightened up, and let it dangle by a shoelace. They'd been wearing their least favorite pair of shoes when they were hit. It was a petty thing to be thankful for, but then, Randolph had said once it was the petty things that kept one grounded in a place like this. They chuckled the shoe with an awkward overhand; it fell on the pile, no more or less significant than anything else.

"Your shoes fly off when you get hit by a car," they said, looking at the pile. "Right?"

"Sometimes." Randolph raised the cuff of a jacket sleeve to his eyes, brushing harshly at the corner of each in turn. "You'll want to be going, then," he said, continuing as if nothing was happening. "Nothing left to do, here."

"Yeah."

Neither of them moved. Neither of them spoke. In a moment, Rys knew, they would walk out of Glemwood into the land of the living, and everything would be as it was. There was yet a frail uniqueness to the space they were in, together, bridging the worlds of the living and the dying. It wasn't a space one left willingly, or at all. Rys knew that from experience. Glemwood Forest and Door's Creek were separate worlds, connected only by the bridge between them, but that bridge was there, and those who stood upon it found it hard to forget.

"There's no way I could see my grandfather, right?"

Rys didn't know, before they said it, what they were going to ask. Randolph didn't seem surprised. He shook his head: "You don't get to return from that," he said.

"Right." This time Rys took a moment of thought before speaking. "Next time you're passing through, could you give him a message?"

"Perhaps."

"Could you tell him I miss him?"

"I'll try," said Randolph, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Thank you."

Rys started off the bridge, heading away from Glemwood Forest. The edges of their vision got blurry as they did, as the forest began to leave them. They looked back, seeing in the midst of the blurry fog Randolph's face, clear and persistent, looking after them as they went.

Then all was blank and painful.

Chapter 4

There had been only one occasion on which Abigail had seen Haskell afraid. She'd often seen him worried, or tense, or angry. His fear she had seen only once, and only briefly.

They had been in the store. Abigail had been behind the counter, handling some of the accounting that she'd persuaded Haskell to make her responsibility. Haskell had been next to the gun racks, taking down various pistols for a customer, explaining how their pros and cons. The customer seemed normal, if somewhat scattered. Abigail didn't pay the interaction much mind. She only noticed it when Haskell started shouting, out of nowhere, ripping a pistol from the customer's hands and pointing him out of the store. They tried to protest; Haskell shoved him out of the door, slamming it behind him with such force that one of the posters faltered and tried, limply, to fall to the floor.

At first, Abigail had thought he'd swept Haskell with the muzzle of the pistol; none of the guns in the rack were loaded, but Haskell was a stickler for the safe handling of weapons. She'd asked if that was so. "No," Haskell said. "He was buying a gun to kill himself." Haskell had refused to elaborate, only called a friend in the police department and had a conversation on which Abigail tried not to eavesdrop. Through it all, there was fear in Haskell's face, a kind of wide eyed panic focused through a pinprick and channeled into action. It had made an impact on Abigail, all the more so since she never learned what happened to the customer, or why Haskell had known what he had.

Suzanne had the same look on her face as she watched Rys get hit, her eyes wide and staring, her hands stuck in frozen motion at her sides.

Abigail moved, rushing to the fence and past the gate and out into the road, kneeling before the headlights of the idling car. She did not know what she expected to find, whether she expected a body or blood or nothing at all. What she found was Rys, Rys sitting up, one hand propped behind them, the other resting on their forehead.

“Are you alright?” asked Abigail. Her heart was pounding; otherwise, she felt strangely calm.

“Hi,” said Rys. They seemed distracted, squinting into the headlights of the car, shielding their eyes. “I ... yeah, I’m alright.”

There did not seem to be any blood, nor were Rys’ limbs twisted in unnatural, broken contortions. The whole situation had an air of the mundane about it, as if it were perfectly natural for her to be kneeling with Rys in the middle of the road, as if Rys had not nearly died.

Footsteps came from behind Abigail. She turned, thinking she would see Suzanne. She saw, instead, Earnest, coming fast, holding a fluorescent orange first aid kit. “How are you alright?” he asked; he seemed somewhat out of breath.

“I guess someone was watching out for me,” Rys said.

“Yes,” said Earnest. He narrowed his eyes. Rys met his glare, and in that moment, Abigail had the impression of some great secret passing between them, something that she was not allowed to know. “Someone was.”

It took only a few minutes for Suzanne and Rys to be on their way. Most of that time was spent convincing Rys that they should accept a ride – “Nothing’s broken,” said Earnest, who had checked,

“but you driving after an accident like that is simply irresponsible.” They had protested, but in time they had accepted, and they were safely enclosed in the passenger seat of Suzanne’s car.

“Thank you,” said Suzanne, bringing Abigail in for a hug. Then she disengaged, waved, walked around and got in on the driver’s side.

The car pulled away, tail lights bleeding into the night. Earnest watched them go, and when they faded, he turned to Abigail. “Don’t know about you,” he said. “But I could use a smoke.” He sat at the curb, and she joined him, their feet planted on the road and their knees pulled up against their chests.

“Want one?” Earnest had a pack of cigarettes in his hands, open and offering.

“God, yes.”

Earnest thumbed the pack open and slipped a cigarette out. From there he raised it to his mouth, and did something clever with a lighter she could not see so it looked like he was breathing the cigarette to life. He handed it to Abigail, who took it without grace; her hands, normally unmovable, were trying against her will to tremble. He prepared himself a cigarette in similar fashion, as she took a long, deep breath of hers. When she let it out, the smoke left her like the breath of life, drifting out to meet the autumn smelling breeze as it pulled down the street, whispering.

“I’ve seen my share of accidents, biking,” said Earnest. It had clearly been on his mind for a while. He spoke to the darkness, for the sake of saying it more than for the sake of conversation, and his words were as clear as his eyes. “There was one time, I was riding with a man, Cathbert I think he was, Johnathan Cathbert. He didn’t wear a helmet or anything – thought himself real macho, Johnathan

Cathbert did. We were getting off the highway, and he stops at the bottom of an exit ramp, and there was a traffic light. A car comes up from behind him and just slightly misjudges the difference, just by two feet or so. If that had been a car to car collision, at worst it's a fender bender. Johnathan was on a bike, a Yamaha I think, and he wasn't wearing a helmet."

"I'm so sorry," said Abigail. It seemed appropriate.

Earnest wasn't finished. "Johnathan pitched off his bike, and I look over – I was in the other lane, see – and I just look over and see brains, just ..." He made a gesture with his hands, an expansive, scattering kind of motion. "He was DOA. Dead on arrival. Maybe it happened too quickly for him to realize. Maybe it didn't. If he was paying attention, he'd have seen the car coming, and, well ... we all know the risks." He took another drag of his cigarette, and went silent.

"I've never seen anyone die," offered Abigail. The smoke tasted bitter in her mouth. She took another breath, anyway, savoring the feeling. "Plenty of rabbits, of course, and deer, and fish. Never a person."

She was half afraid Earnest would take offense. Instead he took her seriously, nodding in the little light offered by the streetlamp above him. "It's not that different," he said, with some authority. "Only, with a person, you're not a predator, looking through a scope at something happening a hundred feet away, entirely in your power. You're a rabbit who's seen his friend's rabbity little head blown off, and you can't know if you'll be next."

"I don't use a scope." It was stupid, stupid to focus on that, but then death was big, too big to have entirely under control.

“Neither do I,” said Earnest. His teeth shone, and Abigail had the unsettling impression that he wasn’t talking about using a bow.

“You worry me, you know,” said Suzanne.

“Sorry,” said Rys.

They were driving back to Haskell’s house, Rys’ house, the house Suzanne had grown up in and that Rys and their mother had moved to, as their grandfather aged and their grandmother needed care and as the bank came after their home.

“Don’t apologize,” said Suzanne. “I just worry.”

Rys thought that over for a moment. A single streetlamp appeared, forlorn, in the darkness outside their window. “Aunt Suzanne?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever had a near-death experience?” Rys did not know before they asked the question what it would be; they knew only that they had gone somewhere frightening, and they wanted to know they hadn’t gone there alone.

“When you got hit,” said Suzanne. “That nearly took me out.”

Another streetlamp appeared, accompanying a fading stop sign. Suzanne ignored both, not slowing as she drove into the night.

“Actually there was one time,” said Suzanne. “I got really sick when I was young. This was before you were born. It was pneumonia, I think. At least, I remember it as pneumonia. I don’t know where I got that from. No one told me, at the time.”

“Mom thinks everything is pneumonia,” offered Rys.

“Maybe,” said Suzanne.

A corner came up in the road and Suzanne took it fast, too fast for Rys’ comfort.

“I was in the hospital for a while,” Suzanne said. “I was sick when I went there, but I got worse while I was there. It got to the point where I was hooked up to all sorts of machines, and I could barely breathe.”

Rys sympathized. Their time in the hospital had not been pleasant, either, even before their death.

“My dad was there for most of it,” said Suzanne. “My mom was still working, then, doing stuff with her non-profit. Dad had the shop, but he closed it down while I was in the hospital. He didn’t go back, didn’t open it up again until after I got out. Except for one time ...” Suzanne hesitated, looked around, turned the car almost too late down a well hidden side street. “Shit. Sorry.”

Rys straightened a little in their seat, rebalancing from where the momentum of the car had tilted them against the passenger side door.

“There was only one night,” said Suzanne, “where he wasn’t there, and that was the last night. He’d been there for a week at that point, barely sleeping, and a friend of his spelled him out so he could

get some rest. He was really sweet, a good family friend, at that point. He'd play house with me any time he stopped by, or he'd give me a wand and we'd play fairies together.

"Sounds nice."

"He was."

Something flashed in the beam of the car's headlights, off to the side of the road. Rys caught a glimpse of brown fur and slender legs before they had passed it, and the darkness reasserted itself among the trees.

"He played cards with me that night," said Suzanne. "He taught me a game called Deep River Shuffle, said it came from somewhere foreign. I couldn't tell you how to play it now – I was so drugged up, it's a wonder I remember anything. We each had a row of cards, I think, and there was a row between us, and that was the river. We had to swap cards between our river and the river in the middle to try and do something, I don't remember what."

The car turned again, Suzanne passing hand over hand on the wheel; now they were on the street that led to Rys' grandfather's house, and they were almost home. Rys barely noticed. A horrible feeling had begun to come over them, a lingering feeling, a worry that crept into their subconscious and stayed there, teasing and refusing to go further.

"I was better in the morning," said Suzanne. "The doctors didn't know how it happened, but it did. I got to go home that night. Dad bought me a cake, he was so relieved. I think the friend was there, too. He gave me the deck of cards we'd played with. The ace was missing, so I never played with it – I ended up recycling it, using it for a collage."

The worry in Rys' mind froze, crystallized into a question. "What was his name?"

"My dad's friend? Randolph something. Randolph Beauregard, maybe? Why?"

Rys's hand began to tremble. They clenched their fingers into a fist, took a breath to make sure their voice remained calm. "No reason," they said. "Just curious."

According to English folklore, the first creature you'd bury in a new graveyard would become a guardian spirit, protecting that place from evils. Congregations would kill a large black dog and bury it beneath the cornerstone of a newly established church, to keep the humans buried there thereafter from suffering that fate. If you were to visit one of the many churches of in the English countryside and stand in their graveyard, you might imagine you saw a dog watching over you, protecting you from harm or, if you had a suspicious mindset, heralding your death. You might call the dog a Church Grim. You might fear it, or you might thank it. If you thought the tradition false, if you had little trust for folklore, you might convince yourself that what you saw was an illusion, or a normal, mortal dog, who had wandered by chance into a graveyard. Or, possibly, you might see nothing at all, whether or not there was anything to see.

Randolph knew the legend of the Church Grim. He thought it bunk, mostly. There was nothing special about the first burial in a new graveyard, no laws arcane or spiritual that he knew which would bind the first soul buried in a graveyard to that place. And yet, if the legend were to be true anywhere, it would be true in a place like Glemwood Forest.

The Grim of Glemwood Forest found him standing on the bridge, hands on the railing, looking out at the piles of gravestones below him. All the possibilities of sorrow Rys had heard were still in the air around him, unresolved. It was only through force of will that they were not twisting him into knots. He stared past the ravine, mind deliberately blank, and saw a pair of eyes watching him from the ridge beyond. He nodded, and extended a hand in greeting. The eyes blinked, turned, and vanished into the shadows of the nonexistent trees.

A heartbeat later, the Grim reappeared out of the forest, padding up onto the bridge where Randolph stood. Up close, it wasn't the great black dog of nightmare and legend, but a mongrel, skinny and covered in spots. It shook its head, ears flapping, and said, "Well met, Randolph."

"Grim." Randolph knelt on the bridge, and stretched out a hand. Common courtesy demanded that he greet the spirit as he would have in life, with head pats and scratches, but there was something more than formal about how eagerly the Grim came to his arms, and how eagerly he scratched behind the Grim's floppy ears.

When they drew apart, the Grim looked up at him and said, "The forest has something for you."

"Oh?" Randolph stood up, and brushed away a tear. "What is it?"

"I can show you."

The Grim turned and walked off the bridge; Randolph followed. They walked side by side through the forest, up over hills and down into valleys, following a path of dying grass. Gravestones flanked them as they went, appearing in ever increasing numbers on either side of the path. At first

there was the occasional dried bone or shotgun shell. After some time, there were baby carriages and plastic doll houses, model cars and kites and makeup kits, broken shoes and discarded jackets and all the forgotten hopes and dreams that went along with them.

“How have you been?” asked the Grim. “Haven’t seen you around in a while.”

“Death has me on duty in Serbia,” said Randolph. “There was an outbreak of illness around Kraljeve, and she needed extra hands.”

The Grim barked, an acknowledgement and a moment of appreciation. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “I’ve just been here, ever since my death.”

“Oh really?” said Randolph. He’d heard the story before, but the Grim was always ready to tell it again, and it never hurt to be polite.

“Really,” said the Grim. “I was killed in the 1600s. Some village ruffians thought it funny to tie me up and take canes to me. They staked me down and hit me, over and over, and eventually I woke up here.” He talked of his death casually, as if it had happened to someone else. In Randolph’s experience, the long dead often did.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” The Grim could not smile, but his tail started to wag. “I get all the bones I want, here.”

“I see.”

“That was a joke, mind.”

“Right.”

The path opened up before them into a clearing covered with paper. Pages torn from books hung suspended from nothing, their printed text melting together from scattered drops of rain. Blank sheets of paper, lined and unlined, made a crumpled carpet for the clearing. Each sheet contained the possibility of a story never told, of a paper never written, of art that had never been drawn. Randolph stooped, picked up one of the folded sheets of paper and unfolded it. As he did, color seeped from his fingertips onto the sheet, unveiling a human figure, formed entirely of small, colorful flowers. He let it fall. The color faded before it touched the ground.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

The Grim did not reply. Randolph followed his gaze to a small altar, set off to the side of the clearing. It wasn't much of an altar. A plastic storage tub was set upside down, with budget candles and a plastic tablecloth set atop it. Three letters lay upon it, three blank and sealed envelopes.

“Take them,” said the Grim.

The paper flared red and gold beneath Randolph's feet as he walked to the altar, colors that caught and danced like fire around the clearing. A bonfire of blank pages marked his path, flame alighting on his shoulders, curling into the palm of his hand. The candles on the altar lit. The envelopes, too, caught fire. They burned before Randolph could reach them, charring and turning to ashes quicker than any normal fire.

The Grim barked. “Better luck next time,” he said.

Randolph ignored his amusement. Magic took various forms, there in Glemwood Forest and out in the mortal world. Magics of persuasion asked the universe for gifts, telling it how to bend to a

mage's advantage. Magics of prophecy looked ahead at the possibilities of what might come, and behind at the uncertainties of what had already been. Runes held magics of their own, as did laws, as did the trees and the graveyards of nature. In all the entirety of creation, there existed hundreds of magics that could reconstruct a burnt letter. Randolph needed only one.

"Surrender unto me," said Randolph, and he touched the silver scythe that hung at his neck.

The ashes of the letters grew hot, and burst again into flame. Randolph put his hand in the fire, registering no pain or alarm, and withdrew from it three undamaged envelopes. These were no longer blank. Each had a name written upon it in blocky black letters: "To Rys," "To Abigail," and "To Randolph." The handwriting was unmistakably Haskell's.

Randolph had not cried on the bridge. He did so now. Letters in hand, he slumped to the ground, where he stared at the fire on the altar. Tears wet his beard. The strength of his expression crumbled, like an ancient citadel fallen to ruin. He did not move or say a word. His face told of grief, a numb grief, which could no longer be deferred without risking an untimely collapse.

You might think after centuries of reaping souls that Randolph would have hardened himself against grief. The way he saw it, one might as easily harden oneself against the ocean, or against a dagger through the heart.

The Grim, after a moment of watching with respect, padded across the clearing to Randolph. He lay his head in Randolph's lap, let Randolph stroke his head and cry into his fur. Thus anchored, Randolph's grief grew from within him, shaking him with sobs and with bit back curses. They sat like that, together, for a while, the Reaper and the Grim, and the forest watched on in silence.

Chapter 5

There was a pay phone on the outskirts of Door's Creek, not that you'd ever know. It belonged to an old gas station, dusty and rusty, tucked away off one of the area's little back roads. Nature had reclaimed it, almost. Vines of poison ivy and wild grape covered the convenience store, and weeds poked their heads through the cracks of the old asphalt. A tree had fallen some time ago on the air pump; the sign still said a dollar in quarters would get you four full tires, but it was lying. The whole scene was one of decay and ruin. There wasn't even a newly smashed window or a freshly graffitied bit of blank wall to show that adventurous teens had come and gone. If anyone used this place as a party spot, they didn't leave any bottles or joints behind as evidence.

Despite everything, the pay phone still worked. Most people never noticed, or cared, but it did. So occasionally a car would navigate the neglected road up from the town and park carefully in the ruined lot, and there would be a conversation in the old, crumpled gas station.

There was just such a car driving up to the gas station that Saturday afternoon, days after Abigail had finished Matthew's bow. It was not a local car; it had Massachusetts plates, and bumper stickers advertising the number of a Boston area car rental place. It took the road up to the gas station cautiously, feeling its way with the help of its one working headlight. But it drove straight through the gas station, crunching over a shrub or two on the way, and parked beside the pay phone like it knew the phone was there, and there were few other than locals who knew to do that.

Randolph Beauchamp stepped out of the car. It was a small car, and he was a large man, so he stood and he stretched out his back and his arms, wincing from soreness. He wore a blue denim jacket

and blue denim jeans, and hiking boots with the appropriate amount of mud. His hair looked the color of embers in the sunlight. A row of buttons stood out like military medals on the breast of his jacket, each with its own, strange design. He looked around the gas station like he was surveying a battlefield, noting angles of fire and ambush points and advantageous terrain. He looked like a soldier, big and strong, except for the delicate silver scythe dangling around his neck, and the silver studs in his ears, and a certain ease of carriage.

Randolph walked up to the pay phone. There was a sign on it which said, "Insert 4 quarters to complete call." He brushed it with his fingers, then touched the pocket of his jeans. The pocket was empty. He looked around, as if to spot a hidden audience, and muttered, "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses ..." He trailed off, realizing he'd forgotten the rest of the quote, and walked back to the car. The front seat cupholders were empty, as was the little compartment in the driver's side door. He checked both, and finding them empty, walked around to the back of the car and popped open the trunk.

If you spent a month or so traveling to every estate sale within a reasonable radius, arriving at each one just before they closed and buying all the junk that no one else wanted, you'd end up with a collection similar to that which Randolph had in the trunk of his rented car. He rummaged past untouched balls of yarn, opened jam jars, poker chips, books, and boxes of acrylic paints, emerging with a small wooden box. He opened it. Inside was a messy collection of coins. There were quarters there, but there were also Canadian coins, and British pound coins, coins Greek and Italian, ancient

and modern, Chinese coins and Japanese coins and little tokens that looked older than civilization. He picked out four of the quarters, then closed the box and put it back in the trunk.

Randolph walked back to the pay phone and fed it each of the four quarters, one after another. The dial pad was old, and the rubber between the numbers was cracked, but it still functioned. He dialed a sequence from memory, mouthing each number as he did.

A woman's voice answered at the third ring. "Hi, this is Haskell's Bait and Tackle, we sell hunting gear and no one does it better. How can we help you today?"

"Uh, hello," said Randolph. "Am I talking to Abigail Fermont?"

"That's me," said Abigail. "What can I do for you?"

Randolph tilted his neck back and forth, listening to the bones of his spine creak. "I was a friend of his," he said. "Of Jeremy's, I mean."

"Oh."

"We talked, before he died. Shortly before he died, and there was, uh, something he gave me for you."

There was an art in breaking bad news over the phone. Like with any art, there were different schools of thought. You might think it better to leave bad news unsaid over the phone, to say only enough to relate that something has happened and an in person conversation is necessary at the earliest convenience. You might think it possible to relate bad news directly, though only with the most delicate of touches, with time and care and tact. Randolph Beauchamp would disagree with you, either way. He had his own routine built up, old as the telephone itself: break the news bluntly, give the other

person time to process, ease into a discussion of what came after. He followed it with Abigail, staying silent on the line for twenty seconds or so, letting her think. Then he said, “Is there somewhere we could briefly meet, so I could give you the item?”

The line remained silent. Then, “I’m sorry, what did you say your name was?”

“Randolph,” he said. “Randolph Beauchamp. He, uh, may not have mentioned me,” he added. “We had a somewhat complicated relationship.”

“No, no,” said Abigail. “No, I’ve definitely heard of you.”

“Ah.”

“I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

“I’m sure.” Depending on what Haskell had told her, surprise was entirely justified.

“Because I was there when they read the will, see,” said Abigail. “There wasn’t anything like this in there.

“He said,” said Randolph, “that there were a few loose ends he wanted tied off before he died. I don’t imagine he had time to put them in his will.”

“I see.”

“Now, if you don’t want to meet, I could drop it off at the store – ”

“No, no.”

The line went silent, again. Randolph looked up at the sky, letting the silence stretch. A breeze came across the barren field of the gas station, setting the dandelions to waving, setting the leaves in the trees to rustling.

"I'm sorry. This is just ... very unexpected."

"That's alright. I'm used to it."

"Do you know Sharmon's Cafe? I'll be there in about an hour, we could meet then?"

"Of course," said Randolph. "I know Sharmon."

"Alright. Alright. See you then."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The line went dead.

Abigail hung up the phone. She put it face down on the counter behind her, leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. Not looking, she felt around behind her for cigarettes and a lighter; finding both, she put the cigarette in her mouth and went to light it before realizing she had put it the wrong way around. She flipped it, lit it, and put down the lighter, leaving it next to the phone on the counter.

Smoke filled the room as she thought, drifting past the empty and useless fire alarm, hovering around the drying glue on a client's bow. The man on the phone sounded familiar. The name 'Randolph Beauchamp' rang a bell, that much she knew, but it was a small bell, rung faintly and at a distance, and she did not know where to place it. He wasn't local, she was certain of that much. The regulars talked of one another often enough that she knew half the population of Door's Creek by

reputation, and everyone with any tie to Haskell by name. Nor was he a family member, one of Haskell's many estranged relatives. She knew all about them, too.

Sometimes Abigail found it helpful, when puzzled or confused, to think what Haskell would do in her shoes. More often it was just as helpful to think what he wouldn't do, and work from there.

Abigail picked up her phone, opened a browser and typed "Randolph Beauchamp Door's Creek NY" into the search bar. She scrolled through the results. There was only one which seemed at all relevant, among all the Revolutionary War era ancestors and New York City stockbrokers and people with almost the same name but not quite. It came from the archival site of the Door's Creek Chronicle, the less significant of the town's two local papers. A 1996 article, less than a page long, quoted a Randolph Beauchamp on the subject of zoning laws for the area's forests. "The natural environment of the town is significant for more than its beauty. The health of Glemwood forest is crucial for the health of life and death in the region." That was all there was, with no context other than the fight around zoning laws and Randolph's presence as a "participant" in said debate.

Knowing that Randolph was, in some way, tied to the fight around zoning laws in Door's Creek helped define his relationship to Haskell, at least, in theory. Haskell had been for years a leading figure on the town's planning committee, responsible for establishing ordinances and permitting construction. Randolph might have been on the committee, too, at one point. Or he may have been a consultant, someone the town or an interested citizen brought in to leaf through the legislation around what to build and where. But then, that didn't explain why he was here, now, and what he was doing passing on the last gift of a dying man.

When Abigail hung up, Randolph did not drive immediately away. He went around to the back of the car and hopped up to sit on the trunk, feet dangling. He let the wind toy with his hair and let the faint chill of the air make its meandering way into his nostrils. He let time pass, slowly, ever more slowly, in complete peace.

It had been a long time since Randolph had been back in Door's Creek. He wanted a moment to ground himself, to remember what the place was like, to think about the letters which were, even then, in the glove compartment of his rented car.

The laws of the universe had a tendency to bend when they tried to comprehend death. Gravity held less than its regular dominance; walls and ceilings ceased to be entirely solid. Colors faded to greyscale, or became entirely too vibrant. Even time and space weakened. An hour in the afterlife could be a day in reality, or a day an hour. One place did not connect with another with their ordinary logic; people and objects could get lost, slipping through the cracks in the world in one and ending up somewhere else entirely.

Randolph had not been present in body in Glemwood Forest the night Rys had gotten hit. He'd appeared before them as a Reaper, as a spirit, leaving his body safe on a hotel bed in Serbia. But the letters had been present there, physically in the forest. Randolph did not know how they had arrived there. Perhaps Jeremy had burned them, letting them reappear in flames. Perhaps he had written them and left them in a desk drawer somewhere, letting them slip unnoticed into Glemwood Forest in the aftermath of his death. However they'd arrived, they had, and Randolph had taken them

from the forest back to his body, persuaded them to slip with his spirit through the cracks in time and space back into the world of the living.

The pay phone rang as Randolph was about to leave. He regarded it with interest, then with anticipation. There were plenty of people he knew who might be calling him, with the magic to know that he was at that phone at that moment. There were only a few that he would want to talk to, then.

He picked up the phone. A familiar voice met him. “Salve, Randolph.”

“Salve, Reya” said Randolph. “How did you know – ”

“That you’d be in Door’s Creek? Sharmon called this morning, asking if I’d heard from you. I figured I’d keep an eye out, after that.” Randolph sighed, his eyes glazing over into an unfocused glare. Perhaps Reya guessed at his exasperation, for she said, a touch reproachfully, “He was worried about you, Randolph. As am I.”

“I’m alright.”

“The Reapers were saying you’d gone missing.

“I’m taking some personal time,” said Randolph. “And I left a note.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I heard about Jeremy,” said Reya. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” said Randolph. His voice wavered as he said it, wavered and broke and fell silent.

“Why don’t you come over,” said Reya. “We can talk about it.”

“That would be great.” Randolph coughed, and rubbed at a watering eye with the palm of his hand. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

He was still tearing up as Reya hung up the phone. It was a few minutes before he felt ready to drive, minutes he spent standing in the parking lot of the gas station taking deep, measured breaths.

Abigail walked into Sharmon's Cafe at the peak of its lunch rush. Families crowded around the large tables in the center of the room, mothers in expensive shawls and father in fading tee shirts shepherding children who seemed barely old enough to know where they were. A gaggle of older kids gathered on the couches, some with homework, others with dice and with strange figurines. College kids and young professionals took the two-person tables at the edges of the room, tapping on laptops, letting coffee cups and half eaten pastries share space with piles of papers and books. An old couple played chess at a table by the window, rook taking knight for an easy mate. A meeting of sorts was in progress along the long counter at the front of the cafe; Abigail could recognize Patricia Locris talking with Cyrus Young, one of the town's chief busibodies talking with another.

There were few places that brought the town together as well as Sharmon's Cafe. And yet, Haskell had always held a grudge against the place, and against its owner. "I can't trust a man who puts shit in his coffee, he used to say, scowling in the general direction of caramel lattes. "Give me a good black coffee and make it strong, or don't waste my time."

Abigail pushed the thought out of her mind, following the line as it curved around to the cash registers. Her taste in coffee was not Haskell's; it wouldn't do to have his memory looking over her shoulder as she ordered.

Sharmon was behind the register that day, antique blazer layered atop the green tee shirt that was the cafe's uniform. So, too, was the cafe's mascot, a fluffy grey cat named Chevalier.

"Hello Sharmon," said Abigail. "Hello Chevalier."

Chevalier leaned up, tapping her nose against Abigail's outstretched hand.

"Hello," said Sharmon, grinning.

"How's business?"

"One shop owner to another?" He winked. "We're struggling, really struggling."

"Sure," said Abigail. "And I'm turning a roaring profit."

Sharmon laughed. "You'd do better if you took down those signs in your windows – they date you, Abigail. You've got to move into the digital age."

"Sure," she said. "Could I get a Cambridge Fog?" she asked. "Small?"

"Oat milk?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Coming up." Sharmon smiled as they conducted the casual business of payment, passing back and forth a credit card and a pen and a receipt. "Will Suzanne be joining you?"

Abigail laughed, on the borderline of self consciousness. She'd come with Suzanne often enough that it had become a habit, and a source of talk. "No," she said. "There's an old friend of Haskell's in town. He wanted to meet."

"Which one?"

"Randolph Beauchamp. Do you know him?"

Sharmon said nothing. Abigail didn't press; she didn't need to. The look of uncertain unease on his face said it all.

Reya Riddari was the proprietor of the Sunset House, the oldest bed and breakfast in Door's Creek, and had been for as long as most could remember. The place looked simple to the uninitiated. A well maintained farmhouse overlooked a tree strewn plot of land, with a paddock for horses and a small gravel lot for cars. And yet, if you were to sit beneath the oak tree next to the barn, or in the rocking chair on the wrap around porch, Reya might find you and tell you how the place was not simple at all. She might tell you of the child who nearly broke their arm falling from the apple trees by the alpaca pen, or about the kindly fairies who saved him. She might tell you of the time a trio of stray cats made their homes on the sun touched rocks by the river, and raised their children there. She might show you the guest list of the Sunset House, might explain to you the significance of the names therein, and even, if she likes you, explain you her's. But she would only find you if you were willing to listen, and few ever were.

Reya did not talk with Randolph about the wonders of the Sunset House, as they sat in separate rocking chairs on the porch, sipping from simple cups. He already knew of them, had experienced many of them first hand. She told him instead of Door's Creek, of what had happened since he was last there, of what had changed.

“The Meathouse is gone,” Reya was saying, as Randolph dropped two cubes of sugar in his tea. “Earnest Pendragon – you remember him, right, from Iowa – he moved in, started a British themed place called the Blue Dragon.”

Randolph raised an eyebrow in tandem with his teacup. “Isn’t that a little on the nose?” he asked.

“Well, the way he tells it, he’s only half dragon, so it’s only too blatant by half.”

“What about Sharmon?” Randolph asked. He took a sip of tea, found it far too bitter, and reached again for the sugar. “What’s he up to these days?”

“Still running his cafe,” said Reya. “But you’d be proud of him. He took over from where Jeremy left off on the planning committee, keeping the forest and the faith.”

There was much the mention of Jeremy could have made Randolph remember. He tried to avoid remembrance, and in so doing, stepped sideways into another area of conversation altogether.

“Tell me about Abigail,” he said. “She’s also taken over from where Jeremy left off, right?”

“Well there isn’t much to tell,” said Reya. “Jeremy felt himself failing. He needed someone to look after the shop when he was gone. He met Abigail ... three years ago, I think? He had her work under him for two years or so, and then he retired, leaving her in charge.”

Randolph made no reply. He was trying to imagine the kind of person Abigail must have been, for Jeremy to trust her with what had been his life’s work, and his father’s life’s work before him. Jeremy had told him once that he would only retire if he found a man who knew the outdoors almost as well as he did. “Now he can’t know it better than me,” he had said. “No one knows this valley like I

do. And he can't be one of those new fangled types who brings ten thousand dollars of gear in a hundred thousand dollar truck for a turkey hunt. No, he has to be raw, he has to be real. He has to have that fire, that killing spirit." And Jeremy had laughed, and he'd passed Randolph the gun he'd loaded, and said, "5 bucks says you can't make that shot," and pointed to a distant pine.

Randolph couldn't remember if he'd hit the tree or not. It was the little things that got lost, the further one traveled from a memory.

"She must have something special," said Randolph, "for him to trust her like that."

Reya shook her head. "I don't think he had much of a choice, by the end. There was some circumstantial reason why he took her on in the first place – don't ask me what it was, I never knew. Then by the time he really had to retire, his only options were to close the store or leave it to her."

That didn't sound like Jeremy, to be constrained so closely by circumstances. Then again, Randolph had known him before he had recognized his mortality. Perhaps old age had changed him. "How does the verse go," he asked, "that ends, 'and the place shall know no more'?"

"Ah yes," said Reya. "I remember." Her voice was clear and commanding, that of an orator born and bred. " 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.' "

"Psalm 103," Randolph murmured.

A moment of silence fell over them, a silence only broken by the rustling of the leaves in the trees, and the gentle breathing of the horses, and the far off rumble of cars passing by.

“The Grim told me of what happened in Glemwood,” said Reya.

It took Randolph a moment to recognize what she was talking about, to switch his train of thought onto Reya’s new track. Once he did, he smiled. “Of course he did,” he said.

“I assume that’s why you’re here,” said Reya. “To deliver the letters.”

“Yes,” said Randolph. “If that’s alright with you,” he added, half from politeness, half from respect.

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Reya. She set down her tea, regarded Randolph with clarity. “Do you not?”

Randolph shook his head. “I should have left them in Glemwood,” he said. There were plenty of reasons to do so, plenty of stories he’d heard from Reapers he respected about what happened when the lines between life and death were blurred. “There will be consequences.”

“So why did you take them?”

“This is personal,” said Randolph. He had no better answer than that. “I owe it to Jeremy.”

Reya nodded. “Do you have a place to stay?” she asked.

“I was hoping to book a room here,” he said.

“Of course.” Reya stood, leaving her chair to rock itself into stillness. “I’ll have a room ready for you by tonight.”

Randolph stood to match her. “Thank you,” he said.

Reya drew him in for a hug. He was taller than her by a head and a half, so it was an awkward hug, but he appreciated it all the same.

When she let him go and stepped back, she said, “You can stay as long as you’d like. Business has been slow recently.”

“Thank you,” said Randolph. “I’ll stay at least until I’m sure I’ve done no harm.” It was the promise he’d made himself when he’d decided to deliver the letters; he could give them out, as long as he was there to handle whatever aftermath there might be.

“Good,” said Reya. “And good luck.” She turned and walked into the farmhouse, leaving Randolph with a cooling cup of tea.

Abigail was halfway through her coffee when a thought struck her. She got up from her stool and made her way for a small hallway at the back of the cafe, a hallway with two bathrooms and a wall decorated with pictures of the community gathered at karaoke nights.

Suzanne’s number was already in her phone, adorned in her contacts with flowers and a small cat. Abigail pressed it, held the phone up to her ear, waited.

“Hey Abigail.”

“Hey Suzanne,” said Abigail. She rested her head back against the karaoke wall, thinking. “How are you? How is Rys?”

“We’re both fine,” said Suzanne. Abigail could hear her smile through the phone; she smiled, herself. “I took them to the doctor’s yesterday; there’s barely any bruising, and nothing broken. He said it was a miracle.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Abigail. Then, “Hey, can I ask you something? It’s a family history type question.”

“Sure.”

“Did your uncle know a man named Randolph Beauchamp?”

“Yeah, I remember him.” Suzanne had a way of talking when she was amused, an inflection that sounded of sunshine. “Rys actually asked about him after the accident. He was ... an odd person.”

“Sure,” said Abigail. “Did you know him?”

“I met him a few times,” she said. “I called him ‘Randy.’ He didn’t like that.”

“Oh,” said Abigail.

“Yeah,” said Suzanne, vaguely. “I’m trying to remember now. Apparently he was with dad in the army, or something? They knew each other way back, and they were good friends, but something happened when I was twelve or so, and they never talked to each other again.”

“There was a rumor that he died,” said Suzanne. She went silent for a moment; Abigail could picture her chewing on the end of a pencil, or a paintbrush. “See, I think I remember how that started. Dad was talking with someone, and told them Randolph had died, but really it was just that they’d had a fight or something? He came by, after that.”

“Your dad?”

“Randolph.” Suzanne laughed. “He was really nice to me. We watched *The Little Mermaid* together.”

“Really.”

“Yeah,” said Suzanne. Then she said, “Do you know him?” in an entirely different tone of voice.

“Not yet,” said Abigail. “We’re meeting in a bit.”

There was silence, for a moment. “Let me know what you think,” said Suzanne.

“I will.”

“Ok.” The sunshine in her voice was back. “See you!”

“Yeah, see you.” Abigail hung up the phone, slipped it into the pocket of her jacket. She wasn’t sure what to make of the picture Suzanne had given her, wasn’t sure how to handle a Randolph who’d been kind enough to connect with a young Suzanne. But then, she didn’t have to understand him, not fully. She would meet him soon enough, she thought. She could make up her own mind, then.

Chapter 6

Sharmon's Cafe looked just as Randolph remembered it. The tables which dotted the lawn had the same purple umbrellas, though the strings of Christmas light bulbs dangling between them were new. The swinging wooden sign by the road still had "Sharmon's Cafe" written upon it in purple cursive. The porch at the back still had its rickety purple railings and its lounge chairs, and the stairs leading up to it were still there, bedecked with pendants and flags. For a moment, Randolph could believe nothing had changed in Door's Creek, that in coming back, he had gone fifteen, twenty, thirty years back in time. He let himself indulge the feeling, slowing as he drove past Sharmon's Cafe, luxuriating in the past. Then he parked, and turned off the car, and forgot the feeling entirely.

By the clock on the car's dashboard, Randolph was 20 minutes late to his meeting with Abigail. Still, he did not immediately get out. He turned on the overhead light, reached over and into the car's glove compartment, and took from it the stack of Jeremy's letters. He took the envelope which read "To Randolph." Its seal had already been undone, so neatly that it might not have been sealed at all, save for the dried glue clinging to the envelope's flap. He opened it, and extracted a single sheet of paper, tri-folded. He spread it out, and read:

Randolph;

I'm dying. No need to sugar coat it. The doctors won't tell me that, but they know. They all know.

Remember our conversations about settling up accounts? We have an account, and I don't want to die before its closed. There's a word in the book you gave me – Llanios-alfsven Kiore, grief for a friendship

that might have lasted until death. You told me I'd feel that for you. I can't die without proving you wrong. That, to steal a term, would be Karani-alfsven Hresven.

There's a box in the attic with some letters for you. Elaine will set it aside for you. Send her an address, and she'll ship it to you. Or you can come pick it up. I'll be dead by the time you get this – its no skin off my back.

Jeremy

Randolph didn't need to read the letter. He'd read it a hundred times over already, a hundred times on the plane to Boston, another hundred at rest stops and gas stations between there and Door's Creek. Each word burned in his mind, glowing red and painful against his memories. It still helped to read it, helped him ground himself in Jeremy Haskell, to remember what the old man had sounded like, the last time they had talked, to remember the way he held a pen and the curves of his handwriting.

Randolph blinked away a tear. He put the letter away, blindly, and swapped it for the envelope labeled "To Abigail," leaving the rest on the passenger seat of his rented car. He got out, shutting the door behind him without bothering to lock it. He walked up to the road, looking one way then the other, careful. Then he crossed, heading for the front door of Sharmon's Cafe.

"Mrow."

A small voice came from about Randolph's ankles. He knelt, caught sight of Chevalier. She snuggled up against his hand.

"Well met, my friend," said Randolph.

“Well met,” said Chevalier. “Grim told me you’d be coming.”

Randolph smiled. “I didn’t know you two knew each other. Cats and dogs ...”

Chevalier responded only with a yawn, and a full body stretch that bared teeth and claws both.

Randolph stood. “We should catch up sometime,” he said. “You, me, Sharmon.”

Chevalier blinked, flicked her tail, disappeared into the shrubbery at the side of the cafe without another word said. Randolph brushed stray strands of fur from his hands, passed through the door into the cafe beyond.

Thew inside of Sharmon’s Cafe met him with soft lights and even softer jazz. He stood in the doorway for a moment, taking his bearings. He noted the art on the walls, a selection of pieces from local artists which, as he remembered it, changed every month or so. The brilliant, formless kaleidoscopes of the paintings might have looked out of place, fifteen years ago. Then again, they might not have; Randolph knew very little about modern art. He turned, and noted the guitar hanging in its place of pride on a wall near the back of the cafe. It was Sharmon’s guitar, one he’d found in Spain a long time ago and had kept with him ever since. Randolph saw the couches to his right – different couches than the ones he’d known, but arranged in the same formation – and the chess table in the corner, one Randolph had played at time and time before.

Sharmon himself was at the counter, all long fingers and lanky limbs and untidy black hair. Randolph gave him a wave. Sharmon looked up from joking with a woman in a dark business suit, noted him, and nodded towards a table in the corner of the dining room, all without dropping a conversational beat. Randolph followed the nod. A woman sat at a round table, her back against a wall.

She had blonde hair and a dark khaki jacket, and she was watching him. *So this was Abigail Fermont*, he thought.

Randolph made his way through the cafe, sliding past tables and occupied chairs, until he stood next to the woman Sharmon had pointed out. “Hello,” he said. “Are you Abigail?”

“I am,” Abigail said. She extended a hand. “And you must be Mr. Beauchamp.”

“Just Randolph is fine,” he said. He shook – her hand was calloused, startlingly so – and sat across the table from her. “Thank you for agreeing to meet.”

“No trouble at all,” Abigail said. “Any friend of Haskell’s is a friend of mine.”

They sized each other up, then, in the moment between the lightness of the pleasantries and the difficult work that was to follow. Randolph noted, with interest, the self-assuredness of her posture, and how squarely she set her shoulders, and the wrinkled khaki of her jacket. She was a hunter, of that much he was certain. If he had any doubts about Haskell handing the store to anyone but a hunter, through and through, the bow callouses on her fingers would have settled them, and lean muscle of her shoulders. All the same, he found it hard to picture Jeremy Haskell interacting with this woman – at least, the Jeremy Haskell he remembered.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” said Abigail, quicker on the conversational draw. “I’ve heard you and Haskell were ... close.”

Randolph took the emphasis in stride; he’d heard it often enough before. “We were, yes,” he said. “But that was a long time ago.”

“I see,” said Abigail. If she had suspicions, she kept them to herself. “Suzanne told me you used to be a regular around here,” she said, smiling as she said it.

A memory surfaced, of a small child with light up, Velcro shoes, and a fondness for musicals. “Suzy? I’m surprised she remembers me – I only knew her when she was very young.”

“She was twelve,” said Abigail, tilting her head to the side. “That’s plenty old enough.”

“That old,” said Randolph. The memory shifted, light up shoes replaced by blue hair dye and an electric guitar. “So she was.”

Suspicion crept back into Abigail’s voice, giving it a slight hesitation. “And she said you and Haskell had a ... falling out?”

“Yes.” That memory was less pleasant. Randolph looked about the room, trying to avoid it. “Haven’t been back in 15 years,” he mused. “It’s odd being here,” he said. “I know the pasts of everyone here but it all seems new – it’s like the town passed me by.”

“It’s the other way around for me,” said Abigail. “I’m new in town – as of five years ago – and I know people, I just don’t have history with them.”

“Oh,” said Randolph. He hadn’t known that about Abigail. It made her and Jeremy’s connection even odder – the Haskells were old blood in Door’s Creek, and Randolph had thought Jeremy would want someone just as storied to carry on his legacy.

The thought reminded Randolph why he was there. He pulled Jeremy’s envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and put it on the table between them. “This is for you,” he said. “Jeremy gave it to me, wanted me to pass it along.”

Abigail looked at the letter, processed it, and nodded. She made no move to take it. “You and Haskell – Jeremy – you had history?”

“Good and bad,” said Randolph. “Yes.”

Abigail took a moment of silence, as if waiting for an elaboration which would not come. Then she sighed, as if letting out a pent up frustration. “See, I’m having trouble with this,” she said. “No offense to you, of course. It’s just, I was there at the deathbed. I was there the day before he died. He didn’t say anything about a letter, or about you. And you said you hadn’t seen him in, what, 15 years?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s just hard for me to understand,” Abigail said, “why he’d give you that letter, and not, say, his wife, or his daughters, or me.” Her suspicion had moved from the corners of her voice to the center, crystalized into ice at her core.

Randolph took his time before answering. For one thing, he was trying to remember the word for a certain type of grief. Was it Kide-alfsven Kalos? Dieri-alfsven Talahar? There was a word, in the language of his profession, for the grief felt at the untimely passing of a mentor, and he thought it might make sense of Abigail in that moment. The fact of his profession was another reason for hesitation. He couldn’t tell her how he had found the letters, not without telling her about Glemwood and Reapers and a whole heap of matters it would do her no good to know. And yet, he didn’t want to lie, not if he could help it.

“Jeremy didn’t say why he chose me,” Randolph said. I’d wager he thought I was the best person for the job. He knew I do this kind of thing for a living.”

“So you’re a courier?” Abigail did not sound convinced.

“I’m a grief counselor,” said Randolph. “I help the dying move on in peace, and I help the living with their grief after the fact.” It wasn’t the whole truth, though it was accurate to how he approached his duties as a Reaper. It was just as much as he ever said to those who did not already know.

“A grief counselor, huh?” said Abigail. “So a psychiatrist?”

“Not technically.” He risked a little more truth. “Think more of a spiritual counselor.”

“Oh, ok.” Perhaps Abigail understood what he meant. Perhaps she accepted she wouldn’t. Either way, that idea seemed to set her at ease; she put her hands on the table, and her shoulders relaxed. Still, she did not take the letter, or make any move to claim ownership over it. “So this is professional for you.”

“Well,” said Randolph. His conversation with Reya came back to mind; he’d told her it was personal, and had meant it, at the time. “I’m here in two capacities, so to speak. Jeremy asked me to give you this letter, and that’s personal. I’m obligated to pass the letter on because it’s Jeremy’s, and we were friends. With that obligation fulfilled, I have a professional responsibility to tell you not to open it.”

Abigail stared down at the letter. She was thinking something, something extensive, but all she said was “Why?”

Randolph had prepared for that question, too. “Well, for one thing, final letters only make a difference for the dead in the sending. Dead is dead; you reading the letter or not isn’t going to affect him now. Second – ”

“No,” said Abigail. “I mean, you’re giving me this letter, and then telling me not to read it? You could have just trashed it.”

Randolph shrugged. “Like I said,” he said, “Haskell gave me that letter. I’m obliged to deliver it.”

“Like you said,” said Abigail, “Letters don’t matter to the dead except that they’re sent.” There was an edge to her voice, to the weight of her fingertips on the table.

“Touché.”

“What?”

“I see your point,” said Randolph. He thought for a moment. He could say the obligations of his profession required him to observe the dying wishes of the dead, but that, too, would be a half truth; what code of honor bound him to observe the dying wishes of the dead did not take precedence over a Reaper’s sworn duty to preserve the boundaries between the living world and the hereafter. He took a different tack; “How would you feel if Jeremy gave me this letter for you and I didn’t deliver it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Let’s say you found out.”

Abigail grimaced, thinking it over. “Touché,” she said.

Randolph returned to his theme. “I do mean that advice, though,” he said. “People think the last words of the dying are some kind of sacrament, and they’re really not. They never are. Especially when it’s someone like Jeremy.”

A memory came back to him, then, a memory of a much younger Jeremy Haskell riding shotgun in a jeep without doors. He had been drunk out of his mind, and happy as a free bird. “You know, if I was God,” he had said, “I’m not, now, but if I was, great man in the sky, I’d have made an eleventh commandment, that says people should stick where they’re planted. Small town boys should stay small, and city folk should stay in their skyscrapers, and you should try and do your part, where you are, and don’t get dissatisfied with it, because God gives us each a place and a purpose, and it should be a sin to go against that.” He had giggled, and a little while later, vomited. The jeep had smelled of puke and stale beer for days.

Abigail moved her hand so it touched the edge of the letter. “I’ll think about it,” she said. She took the letter, folded it in half lengthwise, and slipped it into a pocket of her jacket. Then she said, somewhat awkwardly, “Thank you, for this.”

“You’re welcome,” Randolph said.

“Can I buy you a coffee?” asked Abigail. “Feels like the right thing to do.”

“Jeremy would approve,” said Randolph. “And yes, I’d like that.”

Abigail winced a little. “Out on the patio? It’s getting stuffy in here.”

“Sure,” said Randolph.

They both stood up from the table, then. Abigail went off to the counter; Randolph took a moment to gather up his jacket. It all felt oddly familiar. Jeremy would have bought him a drink, under the same circumstances. The language of owing and being owed came naturally to him; Randolph had never known him to leave a favor unpaid. It was tempting to take Abigail's offer as Haskell would have meant it, as the repayment of a debt, and to sink into the terms of friendship that he and Haskell had developed together. But he knew what happened to those who saw the living as surrogates for the dead – Dier-alfsven Hoten, a grief unacknowledged and displaced. He'd seen the damage it could cause. So he took a moment to grieve, raised an imaginary glass to an absent friend, then put it out of his mind. He went back to the entrance and walked out onto the patio.

Abigail wasn't sure what to make of Randolph. To start, he was bigger than she'd expected. His voice over the phone had been soft and small, respectful without lacking self confidence. In person, he had over half a head on her – and she was tall, for a woman – and very large shoulders. Despite his size, he reminded her less than she'd expected of Haskell, or of the hunters of Haskell's set. Haskell hadn't been especially large, yet he had been imposing, even in his tiring old age. He had taken broad stances, moved through the world with authority. The hunters surrounding him had done the same. They blustered and postured, stood against one another and pushed until one or the other backed down. Randolph made no such gestures; he moved with care, talked without pretence, listened without importance.

And then, there were the moments when Randolph spoke of Haskell, and his vision went out of focus and his voice softened and Abigail was convinced he'd left the present altogether.

Still, when she joined him on the patio of the cafe, sitting across from him at a small, square table, Abigail had one judgment, at least, that she could be sure of. "Thank you for the letter," she said, passing him his coffee. "I'm grateful."

"It's not a problem," Randolph said. "Jeremy would have haunted me if I didn't hand it over." The idea seemed to amuse him; he pressed the back of a hand against his mouth, hiding a private smile.

"Sure."

Abigail sipped her coffee, once again unsure. Haskell hadn't sent letters, when she knew him. That he'd be grateful to Randolph for delivering this one, for making good on a promise, of that much she could be sure. But she didn't know where that certainty could lead her; it dead ended at a polite offer of thanks to Randolph, and an acceptance of the formalities he exchanged.

For a moment they kept silence, each sipping their respective coffees.

"This is good," Randolph said. "What is it?"

"It's caramel," said Abigail, who wasn't entirely sure.

Randolph nodded, appreciative. "Jeremy would have hated this place," he said. "He was always a black coffee kind of guy."

" 'No creams, no sugars,' " quoted Abigail. "Yeah, he did. He'd come in, every so often, just to complain."

Randolph laughed. "I bet Sharmon liked that," he said.

“I don’t know – I never joined him.”

Randolph looked about the patio of the cafe, taking in the plastic lawn chairs, the umbrellas with their bright purple trim, the ashtray placed prominently on the lawn. The sight lead him down a path of memory she couldn’t quite follow; he looked, and he nodded, and he asked, “Did Jeremy ever tell you how he got elected to the planning committee?”

“The town board?” Abigail shook her head. “No, he didn’t.”

“It’s a good story,” said Randolph. “He didn’t have any interest in it, originally. He had friends in high places; if he needed something, he could ask them, without having to get his own hands dirty. Only, there was a church in town, a Catholic church that had been more or less abandoned by the Vatican.”

“Abandoned?” asked Abigail. “Is that how that works?”

Randolph shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “The point is, the priests were moving out of the church, and leaving it empty.” His eyes lit up as he talked, the corners of his lips twitching beneath his curling beard. He spoke broadly, expansively, as if warming to his theme. “The town was on a bit of a retail kick at a time. They wanted to follow Rhinebeck, to put a restaurant or a liquor store in the church and call it a day. He called it sacrilege,” Randolph added, giving the word a great and ponderous weight.

“Sacrilege.”

“That’s right.”

“I didn’t know he knew the word.” The Haskell Abigail had known hadn’t been much for big words and fancy phrases. At most, she could imagine him saying ‘unholy.’ ‘Sacrilege’ had a poetry to it; Haskell talked solely in prose.

Randolph made no comment. He simply waited, nodded, and moved on. “Jeremy swore he’d keep it from happening. He went to all of his government buddies, and they told him to get stuffed. They wanted the business more than they wanted the church. So Jeremy had to take matters into his own hands.” He took a long sip of coffee.

“He ran for office?” asked Abigail.

Randolph swallowed, nodding. “He won, too. Lots of people in the town were on his side, at the time. They may not have been Catholic, but they were devout.”

“What happened to the church?”

“I’m getting there,” said Randolph.

“Sorry,” said Abigail. In truth, she wasn’t. Haskell had tended to ramble, in telling stories. A single trip to the store could take a half hour to get through, if she did not keep him on track. From what she could tell, Randolph had the same tendency.

Perhaps he guessed what she was thinking; Randolph gave her an apologetic grimace and said, directly, “It became a bookstore, owned by a very religious couple. Jeremy vetted them himself, and made them agree that they’d give up the building if the church ever wanted it back.”

“What was it called?” asked Abigail.

“Something basic,” said Randolph. “Angel Eye Books, I think.”

Abigail gestured off down the street. “They’re next to the Natural Grocers, now,” she said. “I don’t know what church they were in, but all of them are in service today.”

Randolph nodded. “Good on them,” he said. “Is it still Joseph and Margret, the owners?”

“I have no idea,” said Abigail. “Their names sound right – I don’t go there often.”

Randolph nodded. “How did the two of you meet?” he asked; it might have been a non-sequitur, but there was surety in his voice, a certainty that he had been thinking of the question for a long time. “You and Jeremy?”

“It was an accident,” Abigail said. As she said it, her normal version of the story flashed across her mind, quick as a lightbulb switched on in a dark room. *We were out hunting in the same forest. I was shooting rabbits, but my bow broke. He offered to fix it, so we went back to his shop and he got me sorted.* Afterwards she’d deflect further questions, not wanting to tell any more than she had to about that time. Somehow, talking with Randolph had unsettled her, had thrown her off just enough that she felt there was more she needed to say.

“We were out hunting,” she said. “I was out with a bow in the Hudson Bays area. Haskell was out shooting. He had a rifle, I think, something with a scope. We were shooting in the same corner of the woods, and I was going to move on because his shots were scaring away the wildlife, but he caught sight of me. He asked to see my bow.” As she said it, she could feel the weight of his hand on her shoulder, the whiskey roughness of his voice. “He said he’d never seen a bow as fine as mine. He wanted to try and shoot it.” She should have said no. She had known it, even as she had said yes. She

didn't mention that. She wasn't sure she understood it. "I handed it over, and I'm not sure what happened, but in the end ..."

Randolph took a sip of coffee; if he had any thoughts about the story, he kept them to himself.

"He broke it," Abigail said. "He felt responsible for it. He said he wanted to fix it, and he could be very insistent. I let him take us both back to the shop, and might have let him fix it, but it was gone."

"Gone?" asked Randolph. "How so?"

Abigail shrugged. "Just gone."

She still remembered it, vivid as a nightmare. The jeep stopped at the store, twenty minutes from where they'd been hunting. Haskell got out, and opened the back door. The bow had been laid across the back seats, gentle. It had been there when they had set out from the forest. It wasn't there when they arrived at Haskell's store. They tore the truck apart, pulling everything out and dumping it in the parking lot, turning the lot into a living room floor on Christmas morning at a home obsessed with fishing equipment: reels in one pile, rods in another, boxes of tackle and bait scattered here and there, waders by the truck's rear wheel. But there was no bow.

"It's why he hired me," said Abigail. "Well, it wasn't just for that. He wanted someone to manage the shop for him. He'd been looking for a while. And I'd been looking for a place, so, serendipity."

"Serendipity," muttered Randolph. There was a look in his eyes as he said it, a suspicion or a doubt or some knowledge which he had and Abigail did not. She didn't question him at the time, content to let the rest of the conversation play out, content to talk with him about the shop and about

the town and about the way Haskell had impacted them both. Hours later, looking back at the conversation, remembering the way Randolph had reacted when she'd told him about her bow, she wished she had.

Chapter 7

It was hard to tell how many churches there are in Door's Creek. If asked, you could perhaps name most of them — the Catholic and the Episcopal on Main Street, the Masonic temple sharing space with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the blue and white church without a stated affiliation just outside town limits. However thorough you'd be, someone else would always name a church you'd forgotten about, or one you hadn't known existed in the first place.

The number of churches in Door's Creek was, in part, an accident of place. Door's Creek had good soil for churches, wide plots of land with old, stately trees. The people in Door's Creek were faithful, and they were individualistic to the core; no single religion could meet all the spiritual needs of the town's diverse population, nuanced as they were, and enough of the town felt their needs strong enough that dozens of churches could operate without lacking for full congregations. The spiritual community of Door's Creek benefited as well from an accident of history. Door's Creek was the first town incorporated in the area, founded nearly half a century before its closest neighbor. Its churches had time to go up, had time to gather followings and pedigree without competition. By the time other towns existed nearby, with populations of faithful in need of guidance, most preferred to join the pre-existing churches of Door's Creek rather than to try and found their own. That state of affairs persisted as Door's Creek aged, and as the towns around it grew and supported it. Rhinecliff may have had more people, and Tivoli may have had a more prestigious suite of shops and restaurants, but Door's Creek maintained its place as the region's center of faith.

The focus on faith in Door's Creek did not preclude the foundation of other communities. Door's Creek had a thriving ecological society; the library hosted gatherings for bridge, and Sharmon's Cafe had its weekly karaoke nights. But worship was the town's bread and butter, the fabric of the town's composition, and spirituality was hard to avoid. You could live there as an atheist, and proclaim your lack of faith without meeting overt prejudice, but you'd likely be lonely, in all the subtle ways that an outcast by any other name would feel.

Rys' mother had always used such arguments with them, when they asked if they could stay home from the family's Sunday churchgoing. "You need to make friends," she'd say. "What do you think the kids at school would say if you stopped going?" Rys had thought, privately, that their mother was more concerned with what her congregation friends would say if her child stopped attending services, but it wouldn't have done any good to bring it up. It wouldn't have convinced their mother, and even if it had, they would still need to convince their grandfather, who considered faith as important as breathing. So they went, and they looked about the church in boredom, and they remembered only the occasional phrase from the priest's sermon.

Rys was at church the Sunday after their most recent death, counting the colors in the stained glass window, when a flash of red hair caught their eye. They turned, and they looked, and they saw Randolph Beauchamp, Reaper of Death, sitting in a pew across the aisle. His hands were clasped in his lap, and his eyes were fixed on the priest with sedate reverence.

Rys blinked. They couldn't process what they were seeing, couldn't rationalize Randolph being there. They put their hands on their knees and stared down at the tiles of the floor. They did not speak, could not. They simply waited, numb, the bruises from their death aching beneath their skin.

The sermon ended without Rys having found a single word. They stood with their mother in the aftermath, buffeted by the pressure of those around them and by the noise of the mingling crowd, uncertain of whether they wanted to talk to Randolph or to run and to hide.

In the end, the choice was made for them. Randolph caught up with Rys and their mother as they were about to leave the church, sliding past the Wiles family and nearly knocking over a coat stand in the process. "Mary?" he said, a question in the tilt of his head.

"My Lord," said Rys' mother. "Randolph?"

"It's good to see you," he said.

Rys' mother nudged them in the shoulder. "This is my grandchild," she said, placing special emphasis on the word. "Rys, meet Randolph. He's an old friend of your grandfather."

"Hi," said Rys.

Randolph did not wink, but there was a subtle inflection to the nod of his head which spoke to their secret familiarity.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rys' mother.

"I heard about your father," said Randolph. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," she said, her head ever so slightly bowed. "We tried to call you, to let you know. Your number just said out of service."

“Oh,” said Randolph. “Is Elaine here?” he asked. “I’d like to catch up, sometime.”

Rys’ mother shook her head. “She’s not feeling well,” she said. “She hasn’t been out of the house in weeks.”

Rys nodded. It was a half truth, in their view – Rys’ grandmother was housebound more from their mother’s overcaution than from her own declining health – but it was a truth their mother fully believed.

“You should call her some time,” said Rys’ mother. “She’d love to hear from you.”

“I’m sure,” said Randolph, in a voice that spoke of complete uncertainty.

Rys said nothing. They had thoughts about inviting a Reaper to dinner, thoughts of omens and of their own several deaths. But then was not the time to express them, not with their mother there, not in the house of God.

A year or so before he died, Rys’ grandfather had taken them into his study and shown them a book about death. “A friend gave this to me,” he’d said, holding it with reverence. “He told me it would help.” What friend had given it, and with what it was meant to help, their grandfather did not say. He simply held the book in both hands and presented it to Rys and said, “Maybe it will help you, too.” Rys had not asked why they needed help, or how this book would do so. They had taken it, and said thank you, and had retreated with it back to their room.

Rys had expected the book to be religious. Their grandfather had been a man of faith, and he had tried (without success) to inspire Rys towards belief. ‘The Language of Loss’ was written in gold

on the cover; Rys gathered, from that, it would be a self help book, one of the number that lined his grandfather's shelves. They offered advice like "Speak all of your problems in prayer," and "Take a walk when you're feeling down," and "Look on the bright side, even in the valley of shadow." Rys rarely found them helpful, so when his grandfather gave them a book called 'The Language of Loss' they had accepted it and left it to sit in a corner of their room, unread.

Rys went back to the book after their grandfather died. They weren't looking for advice on how to handle grief. They felt comfortable with their grief, a kind of quiet sorrow that draped around their shoulders like a blanket or a favorite sweater. They had known for a while their grandfather wasn't doing well; that knowledge, and the preparation it had allowed, left them without the absent listlessness of their mother, or the constant remembrances of their grandmother. The book was a souvenir, not a source of wisdom. It was one of the last gifts their grandfather had left them, and that, they believed, was their only reason to approach it.

Once they started reading, their opinion changed. The book was not a self help book; it made no reference to the word of God or to the beliefs of a cult-like figure. It was, instead, a dictionary, a dictionary for no language that Rys recognized or expected. Each word had its own half page entry, included within an elegant rectangle. Each word was compound, made of three separate words, the first two connected with a hyphen, the third trailing after a space. The middle word in the compound rarely changed. The dictionary was organized into sections, each section devoted to compounds built around a specific central word. There was a section for words around 'velaia,' 'love,' another for words around 'kalos,' 'anger,' another around 'velos,' 'laughter.' The first word in the compound, best as Rys could

tell, indicated (loosely) the subject of the central emotion, a 'shie' ('self') or a 'kroe' ('father') or a 'serie' ('ghost'). The final word, together with yet separate from the compound, indicated an object for the emotion. Together, each compounded word described a situation in motion, the barest of sentences for the most specific of feelings.

The first section of the book was organized around the word 'alfsven.' Its first entry described 'alfsven' as 'grief, the sorrow that comes when trying to understand a loss.' Rys had found that sentence one of their first times paging through it, and they had latched onto it, wondering, hopeful, what it would have to say about their own grief for their grandfather. There was, indeed, a word for that kind of grief – 'Blein-alfsven Bleros', translated by the book as 'the grief a grandchild feels for their grandparent' – but the description it gave felt wrong. It emphasized the distance between grandchild and grandparent, calling the grandparent 'a presence far and distant, like a star going supernova,' and it said the death of a grandparent might be the first time a child has had to confront death. Rys didn't know how close they'd been with their grandfather, but he had not been a distant presence in their life. He had been close, intimately involved in school plays and softball games and parent-teacher conferences, even before they and their mother had moved to live in his house. And, too, they'd known about death before their grandfather passed. Death was familiar, their own, that of those around them, and it had been for a very long time.

'Blein-alfsven Bleros' seemed a cold way to describe their grief. They found 'flores-alfsven leiron' a more fitting description – 'grief at the final faltering of an unstable foundation.' Their

grandfather had not been perfect, as their mother was all too keen to remind them. But he had been there, and Rys missed him.

Sometimes, on long nights before their most recent death, Rys would lay in their bed and imagine a conversation with their grandfather that would put everything right. There was something in these conversations that he had always meant to say, some bit of wisdom or advice that he had died just too early to pass on. With one more conversation, they could ask him, and he could tell them. Rys imagined him taking them into his arms and telling them they would be alright, and wrapping them in a blanket that was sanctuary for tears.

Rys had a moment of hesitation when Randolph left the church, making his excuses and ducking out one of the building's side doors. They wanted to talk to Randolph, wanted to know what he was doing there, to understand how he fit within the structures of his life. But then, they had come there with their mother, and as little as it was appealing to them to tag along at her heels while she made the social rounds of Door's Creek society, they did not want to simply abandon her.

"Mom?" they asked. "Can I duck out for a bit?"

"Alright," said their mother, distracted. "I might go for bridge with Mrs. Tillerston; you should ask your aunt if she can drive you home."

"Oh," said Rys. "Ok." They gave their mother a hug and followed Randolph, slipping after him out the church's side door.

They found Randolph in the church's small garden, sitting on a bench beside a cluster of large, purple flowers. He had plucked a single stem, and was holding it between his fingers, looking down at it and toying with it.

"Hi," said Rys.

Randolph looked up; if it surprised him to see Rys, it didn't show. "Hello," he said. He gestured at the bench beside him.

Rys walked over, sat where Randolph had pointed. Randolph made no move to talk, playing with the flower in his hands, content, it seemed, to let Rys make the first conversational move.

"Are you real?" asked Rys.

"Of course," said Randolph. "Flesh and blood."

"It's just weird," said Rys. "I thought you were a ghost."

"If you cut me, do I not bleed?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

Randolph shrugged. "Sometimes."

Rys let it go. They had a more pressing question. "Why didn't you tell me?" they asked. "You knew my grandfather. You knew my family. You never told me."

Randolph moved his hands across his lap, clasping and unclasping them, awkward in his movement. "Would it have helped?" he asked. "Knowing?"

"Yes," said Rys, although they were not sure.

“Then I’m sorry,” said Randolph. “I was there as your Reaper; we’re not supposed to let that get personal.”

“Oh.” Now it was their turn to be uncertain, their time to cede conversational ground.

Randolph lay the flower aside, a deliberate gesture. “Here,” he said. From an inside pocket, he drew a cream white envelope, addressed in black Sharpie to Rys. “It’s for you,” he added, unnecessarily. He laid it on the bench between them,

Rys didn’t ask who it was from. They recognized that handwriting, and the bottom dropped out of their chest.

“I found it in Glemwood after we last talked,” said Randolph. He said it so casually, Rys almost forgot that they’d been dead for that conversation.

Rys picked up the envelope, felt it with their fingers. There wasn’t much in it – just a single sheet of paper. “Do I open this now?”

“If you want.”

Rys pocketed it. “You said you weren’t supposed to be personal.”

Randolph shrugged, changed the subject. “Were you and your grandfather close?” he asked.

“Yes.” Even as they said it, Rys reconsidered. “No. I don’t know. He was a big part of my life, but ...”

Randolph picked the flower back up, eyes dead set on Rys.

“This isn’t something I’ve told a lot of people,” Rys said. “But when I was seven, my grandfather tried to take me on a bonding trip. He got about ... two hours away before my mom

tracked him down, 'cause he didn't tell anyone, see? He just took off, out into the blue, went and picked me up from my house and tried to take me to a campsite he knew. His plan was we'd stay there overnight, maybe do some fishing, that he'd have me back by the end of the weekend. And he just straight up didn't tell my parents he was doing this."

"How'd they find him?" asked Randolph.

"I don't know," Rys said. "I was seven. I don't really remember what happened."

Flashes of imagery were coming back to them. Mostly they were familiar. They saw the inside of their grandfather's jeep, seats cracked and bruised with age, back seat packed with an old plastic cooler and boxes of granola bars, fishing rods sticking out from the trunk. They saw the rearview mirror blinking blue and red, sirens scaring them while the light approached, ever closer. They saw themselves in their mother's arms after it was all over, smelling cinnamon on her hands and feeling the immeasurable pressure of her arms around their shoulders. And that was all. They could remember little else about the whole, traumatic experience. Everything they knew beyond that was the story as it had passed into family legend, the version of events that had been told and retold so many times that the sharp edges had been worn away.

"My mom told me they called the cops," Rys said, "and had them track him down. But there was about two hours before they did. I only really remember one bit of it. Grandfather saw a deer or something at the side of the road, some kind of roadkill, and it got him all sad. He started talking about how we were all gonna be like that someday, like roadkill, just, splat by the side of the road." They tried to get their grandfather's voice right, or as close to right as they could; his voice had been oddly nasally,

and gruff, and they couldn't do more than approximate it. " 'Live's a cycle,' he said. 'You get born, you eat, you screw around, you get hit by a truck. Sometimes you're driving the truck for someone else. Sometimes you're standing by the side of the road, watching the truck hit someone else.' "

"I don't know why I remember that," Rys added.

"That's how it works," said Randolph. "You don't get to choose what stands out as important."

The legends of the Reapers spoke of the world as having been more magical, once upon a time. Spirits had roamed free in town windows and in the still pools of the forest. Mages had played at sleight of hand at public festivals and in private houses, brandishing their talents with life and with joy. Everyone had known someone with magic within them, and however few the mages were in any corner of the world, they could always find one another.

The world of a millennium ago had had magic, and beauty, but it had also had a great and terrible fragility. When the Plague came, when the skies darkened and the winds rose, it had no way to stand. At least, that was how Randolph had heard it told.

The Plague had targeted magic, and it had targeted mages. One by one, the mages of the world had succumbed to illness and death and had lain in shallow graves, leaving no one to replace them. Sentence by sentence, the words had vanished from the texts that made chronicle of their traditions. The bonds which had held their world together began to fail, and the fabric of magic itself had begun to unravel. By the time the Plague had passed perhaps a tenth remained from what had once been.

Those who survived the Plague faced a host of problems, a many headed host with spears sharp as windchill. Each problem required a choice; each choice, once made, proved a brick in the foundation of a new world. Those who had survived went quiet, kept close their knowledge and their sorcery. They did not know if the Plague would strike again, they had reasoned, and when it did, the circle of mages should be small and hand picked to meet it. They had chosen areas in which to congregate, well apart from one another, and they had settled into new traditions. They had chosen to embrace the possibility of rebirth, abandoning any ideas of reclaiming a world that was already lost.

And yet, as there ever were following times of crisis and rebirth, there had been some who had looked to the old ways, who had tried to keep alive the traditions of the world which had been. Some had gone into politics, aiming to recapture the spirit of unity which had guided the world of magic before the Plague. Others had gone traveling, delving into old monasteries and new libraries to uncover lost teachings and dead magics. Their efforts had foundered and had fallen short, had beached on the lack of shared words to describe the concepts they sought.

Mages had shared languages aplenty before the Plague. A million words had been shared before the Plague, words lost to the magical ravages of sickness and to the forgettances of a beleaguered people. In time, the concepts described by these words had begun to be, as well, forgotten. There were heights and depths to magic too far beyond to be described in any mundane language. Only in the language of mages could such things be spoken of, be shared.

The construction of a new world of shared magic could not begin without a shared language; so the legends said, the legends through which Randolph had learned of the world as it had been. Many

had ignored this reality and found their efforts failing in their ignorance. But some had held language dear, and their efforts had continued, slow yet unabated, throughout the long period of recovery from Plague. Their work had come to a head in Paris, in 1920, when the mages of the world had assembled in the aftermath of the Great War to formalize their unity. Politics had been discussed, as was magic. Mages had talked of how to engage with a mundane world which seemed insistent on tearing itself apart, and they reached conclusions. Much had come of the conference, but the linguists had been responsible for its crown jewel, a dictionary that had collected all of what remained of the shared languages of magic and had folded them into one, simplified base. Those who had constructed it had meant to bring mages together, to establish the foundations of a shared response to the future and a shared remembrance of the past.

They had called it the language of loss.

It only took a moment for Rys to find themselves in Randolph's rented car. They had mentioned, off hand, that their mother had left them at the church, that they would have to call Suzanne for a ride. Randolph had offered to drive them, instead; "I know how to get to your grandfather's house," he said. "At least, I did." Rys had accepted without thinking it through, without thinking of possible consequences or probable outcomes, and the next moment they were riding shotgun next to Randolph, heading towards their grandfather's house.

Conversation had stalled when they'd gotten in the car. Randolph had made an offhand comment or two before falling silent, focused on the road. Rys had laid their head against the window,

watching the forest blur outside. But Rys was still wondering about Randolph and about how he connected to their family, and the silence had its own awkwardness about it, and they asked, after a while, “What was my grandfather like?”

Randolph had clearly been thinking along similar lines; his answer came quick, pre-thought. “Your grandfather had a hard time changing,” he said, slowing to approach an intersection. He flicked on a turn signal, turned right onto an empty street. “This place is fairly insular. He was born here, and he was fine living here until it started collapsing around him. Then he got lost. He couldn’t adapt.”

“I don’t remember him like that,” said Rys. Their grandfather hadn’t exactly been with the times, but he’d adapted well enough to live. They couldn’t imagine him ever being lost.

Randolph shrugged. “I last saw him fifteen years ago. Maybe he learned.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

A billboard, half rotted away, loomed up beside them. Rys caught a glimpse of a pristine house, an advertisement for some living complex, printed on the less weathered half of the sign. Then the car passed it, and there was nothing but forest around them.

“Why did you fall out?” asked Rys. A memory came back to them, their mother whispering on another Sunday car ride her own suspicions about their grandfather and the men that he knew. “Was he having an affair with you?”

“What gave you that idea?” asked Randolph, in a tone that answered neither yes nor no but warned against pursuing the matter further.

Rys let their head fall against the glass of the passenger side window. It chilled them; Autumn was no longer in its infancy, and the nights were getting cold.

“Sometimes it just happens that way,” said Randolph. His voice had gone low and careful. His hands rested lightly on the wheel. He looked out at the road, but Rys could believe he wasn’t seeing anything. “Sometimes something happens, and maybe it’s no one’s fault, but you can’t move past it.” I spent a life with your grandfather, and people change. I changed, and that got between us.”

“You said he didn’t change.”

“Yeah. That was the problem. I grew out of some stuff, and he didn’t.”

The song on the radio died in a screech of electric guitar and a final, flaring drum lick. The host came on, naming the song and the band and the first time he’d seen them live in concert. Randolph reached over and turned it off. In the sudden quiet, he seemed older, his eyes sunken in his head, his hair and beard a rusty red, his breaths slow and deliberate. “There was a time when we were heroes, Jeremy and I. Each in our own way, but still. It brought us together. We could understand each other, support each other. But eventually we weren’t heroes anymore. I let it go. He couldn’t.”

“I didn’t see him as a hero,” said Rys.

“Maybe you changed him,” said Randolph. “Maybe he never let you see that side of him. Hard to tell, now that he’s dead.”

The car turned left off the highway; they were almost home, almost back to the house that had been their grandfather’s. In the darkness, Rys could remember their grandfather, could remember him driving them around, driving them to and from his house to watch over them while their mother was

at work. Had he seemed a hero? He'd told Rys about hunting, and swore he'd take them someday, when they were old enough, when their mother let them. He'd listened to Rys' babbling interests with patience, if not with enthusiasm. He'd shared music with them, shown them old movies and talked with them of politics. Hardly the behavior of any hero Rys could imagine.

"I was close with your grandfather," said Randolph. "Really close. Sometimes you get too close to someone and it's like you're circling a black hole. You're trapped. Sometimes all you can do is leave."

Their grandfather, a black hole? Rys said nothing, but they looked at Randolph, confused.

"Maybe he wasn't to you," said Randolph. "You know how a black hole forms? It's a sun, at first. You can orbit it alright, and it'll give you life, and it'll give you light, and it'll make you happy. But that sun gets colder and colder, and one day it implodes in on itself, and suddenly it's not giving anymore, it's taking, and you're trapped."

"Are you ok?"

Randolph did not reply. He simply turned into the driveway of Haskell's house, and put the car in park.

Rys stayed in the passenger seat, staring at Randolph.

"Get some rest," Randolph said. He reached across Rys and opened the passenger side door.

"And stay away from Glemwood Forest – that place will trap you, too."

"Ok." They stepped out of Randolph's car, and stood in the driveway, and watched him close the passenger door and back out of the driveway and head away from the house. Then they turned, and went to go inside, too tired and confused to understand.

Chapter 8

The day Abigail received Haskell's letter, she put it in the glove compartment of his jeep and proceeded to forget about it for several days. She only remembered it the following Tuesday, and all she did with it then was move it from the glove compartment to her kitchen counter, putting it in place of pride on top of all her other unopened pieces of mail. Wednesday morning she saw it and she told herself she would open it. She said the same Thursday morning, and again in the evening. By Friday she had gotten no closer to opening it than a brief search for her letter opener, a search which ignored all the perfectly functioning knives in her apartment and in the shop downstairs.

In the meantime, it had gotten unexpectedly warm in Door's Creek. No one had gone out without an overcoat (and perhaps a scarf) two weeks prior; now anyone wearing more than a t shirt could have been called overdressed. Cheery, pale yellow leaves patched the ground, and the sun shone warm in a cloudless sky. It was good weather for being out of doors, for relaxing in the sunlight and letting worries seep from the skin. The parks were full, as was outdoor seating at most of Door Creek's restaurants. The world was taking one last opportunity to live before the winter.

Abigail tried to make the most of it. On days the store was closed she turned off her phone and went outdoors, driving over to the mountains across the river and spending hours hiking up to their peaks, heading out to favorite hunting spots along the river. When she had to spend time at the shop, and when there weren't customers browsing or coming in for repairs, she took to the bench outside her windows, directly below the poster on gun training. It was nice, sitting there, watching the world go by. It fit her approach to managing the store. Haskell had kept the Bait and Tackle a kingdom unto

itself; if the public wanted to deal, they had to do so on his turf, on his terms. Abigail tried much more to open the gates, to go out and mingle with the town. She thought it made the place more welcoming. But then, revenue had not gone up since Haskell's day, and the regular customers were still mostly his legacies, so perhaps (she often thought) he'd had the right idea after all.

Abigail had been sitting outside for a while on Friday morning, waiting for the first customer of the day, when Charles Oakley came up to her walking a thin looking golden retriever.

"Hello there," he said.

"Good morning!" She reached out a hand. The dog strained at its leash to reach her. "Who is this, then?" she asked, scratching the dog behind the ears.

"That's Bandigold," said Charles. "I wanted to name him Marigold and Grace wanted to name him Bandit, so we compromised. We found him in Kingston three, maybe four weeks ago? He was thin as a rake, and his backside ..."

"He's beautiful," said Abigail. She had no desire to hear about the initial condition of Bandigold's backside.

Charles Oakley ran the only veterinary clinic and animal shelter in Door's Creek, a small establishment called For Paws' Sake. There were other vets and other shelters, larger and better established, all within an hour's drive of Door's Creek. Charles won customers for his charm, and for his uncanny ability to talk with the animals under his care and to listen to them like he was able to understand. More importantly, he was local. The Oakleys had lived and worked in Door's Creek for four generations; Charles' daughter Grace would be the fifth.

“I’m glad to see you,” said Charles, as Bandigold bounded up to lick at Abigail’s face. “Could I steal you away for a bit? There’s something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Sure,” said Abigail. This was a common happening between them; their businesses were related, however tangentially, and they faced similar problems in their summary. “It’s a slow morning anyway.”

“I see that.”

For Paws’ Sake was only a five minute walk from Haskell’s. There was an old warehouse tucked away in the trees several blocks over from Main Street, which Charles had bought and renovated after he’d come back from veterinary school at Cornell. The warehouse floor held sixty kennels of various sizes, with plenty of open space left over for the dogs and the more adventurous cats to exercise and interact. An auxiliary room held food for the whole, vast flock, while an open loft housed offices and medical supplies. There were fundraisers every few months at the warehouse, where donors could come and meet the animals their funds helped keep alive. Aside from those occasional evenings, the warehouse was empty of all except the animals, the occasional volunteer, Charles’ daughter, and Charles himself.

The isolation showed, in Abigail’s opinion. “I was saying to Brett the other day – Brett’s the new greyhound that we just got in – that we couldn’t afford to get the little sparkly collars at the next donor party,” he confided to Abigail, as they turned together off the Main Street. “It’s just been a really

bad year for business. Nothing we could do. But he looked so sad, his big, droopy nose drooping down, so I took a glitter pen ...”

“A glitter pen?” asked Abigail, amused. “You just have one of those lying around?”

“Well, it’s my daughter’s, but she grew out of them a while ago – I didn’t think she’d mind”

Bandigold pulled at his leash, barking. Answering barks came from just around the corner; they were almost there.

“How is Grace?” asked Abigail. She’d met Charles’ daughter a few times, mostly at his donor parties – she had very little to donate, but Charles said it was good to have a representative from Haskell’s there, so she went.

“Oh she’s great,” said Charles. “She’s actually part of what I wanted to show you.”

The front door of the warehouse was a large, roll up affair, opening out onto a concrete ramp. The ramp had once led to a parking lot; Charles had torn up the concrete and replaced it with dirt and grass, creating a fenced in open air extension to the exercise area inside. More dogs than Abigail could easily count were crowding at the fence, bounding up to look over it at the returning Bandigold. He barked, and the dogs on the grass barked back, and Abigail smiled, for it was impossible to be sad or troubled when it was a sunny day and there was a pack of dogs.

“Still getting noise complaints?” she asked.

“No, not really. All the old crankers moved out a while ago. There’s old Dorner, but he enjoys it, I think. Yelling at me is his daily exercise.”

Haskell had been, in his life, one of the people who complained about the presence of For Paws' Sake in the neighborhood. It wasn't that he could hear the dogs from the Bait and Tackle (you couldn't, not usually) or that he didn't like Charles (he didn't, but that was merely personal). The idea of a "PETA-loving stray-coddling hippie joint" existing in the same town as his precious hunting store didn't sit right with him, and he fought a one man battle against Charles and against the rest of the town Planning Board in an attempt to deny him permits. Not only did he fail, he spent the rest of his working life in constant reminder of his failure. The Bait and Tackle was a somewhat related institution in the casual shopper's eye – both dealt in animals, to some degree – and Haskell would often face questions about how to get to For Paws' Sake, or inquiries into the degree of collaboration between the stores, or customers saying they'd been referred from Charles. It was a ridiculous enmity, in Abigail's unspoken opinion, all the more so because it was so one sided. Charles was too good natured to hold grudges, or even to perceive them when others held them for him. To Haskell's dying day, Charles thought they were on excellent terms, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

"Welcome in," said Charles. He unlatched the gate, holding back a tidal surge of dogs as he did so, and led Bandigold into the enclosure. He left just enough room for Abigail to squeeze in behind him. She took it, wading into a sea of legs, tails and fur, then re-latched the gate behind her. She recognized a few individual dogs in the pack.

"Is Cassandra still around?" Abigail asked. Cassandra had been one of the few dogs Abigail had bonded with, a deaf spaniel with oddly colored ears.

Charles shook his head. “She went to an old lady up on Pine Street. She’s very sweet, and a little deaf herself – they’ll do well together.”

The dogs fell away as Charles led Abigail inside, peeling off back into the warmth and the open air.

“So what did you want to show me?” asked Abigail.

“It’s, uh, Grace has it,” said Charles. He turned to the back of the shop, called, “Grace!”

There came no immediate answer.

“She’s in the back,” Charles muttered. “There’s a dog brought in a few days ago, Parsley we called him, and he’s not doing well – sickness, or something – and Grace is taking it hard.”

“I ...”

As Abigail floundered, unsure of what to say, Grace came out from behind the row of kennels, frizzled hair making a halo around her headband. “Hi,” she said.” She was holding a bow.

“Oh, wow,” said Abigail. She wasn’t sure quite what to think. “Can I see it?”

“Sure,” said Grace. She handed Abigail the bow, then stepped back in meek anticipation.

Abigail took the bow in both hands, brought it up to eye level to inspect the metal, ran her fingers along the string. It was a compound bow, a modern, tricked out bow with pullies and a bow string that doubled back on itself. She pulled back very lightly on the string. It yielded with very little resistance; the draw weight felt about right, for a young beginner. The bow felt expensive enough to do well, not too expensive to be a waste.

“Whoever got this knows their stuff,” said Abigail. She extended her arm, offering the bow back to Grace. “It’s a fine bow.”

Charles had been quiet at the back of the room while Abigail made her inspection. He broke his silence then, saying, “Her mother got it for her. Bit of a 17th birthday present, I think. Well belated,”

“Ah,” said Abigail. Charles didn’t talk much about his ex-wife. They had been divorced when Abigail had met him, and for all the stories he told, few of them were about her. They kept in touch for Grace’s sake and for no reason besides. That much she knew, but nothing else, not even her name.

Grace stepped forward and took the bow back from Abigail. “It’s kind of tech-y,” she said. “I thought it would be like the movies, you know, like, wooden?” She tugged at one of the pulleys, unamused.

Abigail nodded. “It’s easier to start with a compound bow like this,” said Abigail. “I didn’t get my first longbow until I was in college.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a fine beginner bow,” Abigail added. “I’d be happy to give you some lessons if that’s what you’re looking for, but you won’t hurt yourself just messing around with it.”

“I’d appreciate it,” said Charles. “Don’t want anyone getting hurt around here.” He laughed, still clearly uneasy.

“As long as you’ve got an arm guard,” said Abigail. “And don’t dry fire it, you should be good.”

Abigail kept talking from there discussing target practice and maintenance and proper safety instructions. Charles and Grace were listening with intent. Abigail’s own attention was elsewhere. The

mention of dry firing had brought a memory back to the surface, taken it and rotated it, tilted it to be seen from an entirely new angle.

One of the first warnings Abigail's father had given her, presenting her Christmas morning with her first bow, was not to dry fire it. Dry firing, drawing the bow back without an arrow on the string and releasing it as if there were one present, could break an especially powerful or fragile bow. It would damage bows of any make or condition. Something about the sudden release of tension from the bow's limbs and from the string was too much for the bow to bear, if that energy wasn't channeled into the flight of an arrow.

Abigail had expected Haskell to have this knowledge, when she'd handed him hers on that day when they'd met. She couldn't quite remember how he'd broken it – the moment was a blur of watery sunlight and splintered wood – but she hadn't considered the possibility he'd dry fired it, confident that he wouldn't have made such a rookie mistake. With the story fresh in her mind from her conversation with Randolph, she considered it again.

A head popped out from behind the kennels, from where Grace had been. It was Rys' head, and it spoke with Rys' voice. "Mr. Oakley?" they said. "Parsley's started coughing again."

"Hey Rys," said Abigail.

Rys saw her and started. They seemed as confused to see her as she was to see them.

Charles came around behind Rys, squeezing their shoulder. "Rys here had been helping me out a lot," he said. "They're my best volunteer."

"Dad," said Grace, mock reproachful.

“Second best.”

Rys smiled, squirming gently away from Charles’ grip.

The path from For Paws Sake to the Bait and Tackle passed by the smaller of the town’s two graveyards. A sign on its gate said it was a Methodist cemetery, and that it had been established in 1810. It was small, roughly the size of an average front yard, and enclosed entirely by trees. It was in a state of some disrepair. Most of the headstones were weathered, or broken in half, or leaning in the loosened earth. Still, there would occasionally be flowers on one of the graves, or a small American flag. There were still those who visited the dead.

Randolph Beauchamp was standing in the graveyard as Abigail passed it, heading back to Haskell’s with a promise from Charles that he would bring Grace by for a lesson on the weekend. He’d traded in the denim jacket for a long sleeve button down, covered in little red and yellow flowers. Everything else was the same, the dark boots, the blue jeans, the weathered hat. There was a small bundle of flowers in his hand. He was looking down at one grave in particular, unmoving, oblivious to his surroundings.

An olive colored beanie appeared in the air beside Randolph’s head, Suzanne’s beanie, and Abigail realized at once that he was not alone.

Someone else in Abigail’s shoes might have felt uncomfortable breaking the privacy of such a moment. Abigail herself did not. She pushed her way through the gate in the chain link fence, walked

lightly across the grave-ground and the tree roots and came up beside Randolph and Suzanne, looking down at the same grave.

“Visiting a friend?”

Randolph accepted her question, and her presence, without comment. “Not exactly,” he said. He laid the flowers on the grave, making sure the headstone remained uncovered.

“Hi Abigail.” Suzanne came around from Randolph’s other side, stood between him and Abigail, took her hand.

The headstone before them was clearer than most in the cemetery, newer and better preserved. “Michael Jeremy Haskell,” read the inscription. “1986.” Below the name and the date, where there might have been a bible verse or a poem, there was a single phrase; “We shall meet again beyond the waters.”

Abigail did not know who Michael Haskell had been. She did not ask. There was something dimly present at the edges of her memory, an interaction or a mention of a Michael that she could vaguely remember. But the day was warm and lazy, and she couldn’t quite place her knowledge.

Randolph coughed. “I should be going,” he said. “Thank you.”

“It was nice,” said Suzanne. “Catching up.”

Randolph smiled. He walked away from the graveyard, feet crunching against the dirt of the path.

Suzanne linked her arm with Abigail’s. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

“Alright.”

Once they were past the graveyard, heading for Haskell's and the center of town, Suzanne relaxed. She gave Abigail a hug. "Hi," she said. "Sorry, I just ... needed to get away."

"I understand," said Abigail.

A smattering of rain fell as they crossed Main Street, drifting through the sunlight of the day from a stray cloud or the leaves of a damp tree. Someone waved at them from a passing car, moving too fast for Abigail to see who they were. The town basked in the sunlight: the post office sat with stoic grace, while the candy store beside it tried with some success to liven its quiet stonework.

"If you had one last conversation with my dad," asked Suzanne, "What would you say?"

It took Abigail a moment to register the question, lost as she was in the sunlight of the day. It took her another to find an answer. "I don't know," she said. "I haven't thought about it."

Suzanne nodded. "I have," she said. "I just can't come up with anything."

Randolph's car was parked by the graveyard. He went to it when he left, opening the trunk and extracting from it a small ceremonial scythe. Then he closed the door and locked the car.

The duties of a Reaper were simple, in principle. There was a line between life and death, a line that kept things dead from coming back and having an impact upon a world which needed them no longer. The Reapers kept the line clear, nudging the living away from the edge, making sure that the ghosts and spirits of the dead did not linger. It was a simple mandate, one which did not cover such things as ensuring the dying went painless to the grave, or as delivering letters from the dead. But Randolph had served Death with distinction, and he had earned the freedom to expand it.

For Paws' Sake went quiet as he approached it. The yapping of the dogs in the yard quieted down, and the glare of the sunlight felt the slightest bit faded, as if the entire world had passed under a cloud. He unlatched the gate without issue, closed it behind him and walked up the ramp into the building. None of the dogs followed him, or yapped at his heels. They left him well alone.

Charles was inside, waiting. "Randolph," he said. He didn't extend a hand, though he smiled bright and cheerful all the same. "Don't suppose this is a social call?"

Randolph shook his head.

"Right."

Charles led the way through a corridor, back to a door labeled 'recovery room'. He talked the whole way. "You know when I brought the poor dear in he seemed to react pretty well to the treatment. I had him on Theanine, and Arnica for the paw. But sometimes there's just nothing you can do, eh?" He slapped Randolph on the shoulder; Randolph didn't react. "Try not to hurt him," he said.

Randolph nodded. That was why he was there, after all – to be the bearer of a quiet and peaceful end.

"Right," said Charles. "I'll let you get to it."

Charles walked off, back towards the main room of the shelter. Randolph took a moment to prepare, adjusting his grip on the ceremonial scythe in his hand, whispering a prayer. Then he went into the room, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 9

There was a phone in Randolph's room at the Sunset, an old rotary that looked to predate the existence of phones as a concept. Strange dials cluttered every side, pointing at letters, at numbers, and at strange symbols that might have belonged to an ancient language, now long lost. Parts were covered in a cracking layer of rust; others were polished so they shone. Liquids of bright blue and neon green chased each other through pipes that led in and out of the phone's beating heart, giving the room a strange glow. Randolph covered it with a pillow when he slept. It was eerie, too eerie, the kind of machine that could invade one's dream and lodge itself there, unpleasantly.

For all that, it was still a phone. One night, Randolph used it to make a call.

"Hello," said Elaine Haskell, after an indeterminable length of time. "Who is this?"

"It's Randolph," he said.

There was dead silence from the other end of the line. That was, perhaps, to be expected.

"I'm so very sorry for your loss," he said. "Truly."

"Randolph." Elaine said his name like a blasphemy. "Well I never expected to hear from you again."

"I know," said Randolph. "I never ..." He trailed off. What was there to say, after all?

There was nothing but silence from the other end of the line. It unnerved him. Elaine had never been the quiet type, when he'd known her. But then, he had only once seen her grieve, and then from afar. Perhaps this was what she was like.

"Can I come and see you?" he asked. "I'm in town for the next while, and I – "

“That would be lovely,” said Elaine. A flash of her old sparkle shone through, undiminished.

“There’s family dinner on Sunday, there always is. You’re welcome anytime.”

“Sunday it is, then.”

“Randolph?”

He had been about to hang up. “Yes?” he said.

“It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Likewise,” said Randolph.

“Goodbye.” Elaine hung up without waiting for a response, leaving Randolph to put the phone back on its receiver and to cover it with a pillow and to try to sleep.

There were few Reapers who believed in God. There had been more, in older times. Randolph had visited archives holding journals from the Middle Ages, written by the Reapers of that era, and had read what they had written of their faith and of their service to the Lord in protecting the living from the dead. But Randolph had become a Reaper in a world shaped by the Enlightenment, and those who walked the boundaries between life and death looking for the existence of God came up, all too often, empty handed.

And yet, Randolph had faith. It was part of what had drawn him and Jeremy together. They had prayed together, huddled together before patrol in the Vietnam war, their hands grasping one another, their foreheads touching, their breath intertwined. Jeremy had prayed for their safety; Randolph, knowing himself to be safe, had prayed for Jeremy. The Holy Spirit came over them in those

moments. They broke it together like bread shared mouth to mouth, hand to hand. The love of God sheltered them, and when Randolph turned bullets from Jeremy's head, when he pulled shrapnel back into a grenade and broke tripwires before Jeremy's foot could fall, he knew he did the Lord's work.

"God was with us," Jeremy would say, and he would touch the crucifix around his neck with reverence.

"So He was," Randolph would reply, and he believed it.

Once Jeremy had said more, after an especially close call that Randolph had only barely prevented. He had taken Randolph by the shoulders, had swung their foreheads together, and had said, "*You* were with us. Our angel of the 45th." And he had laughed, and pulled away, and neither of them had talked about it again.

Randolph had not thought of that moment in a very long time. That Sunday, driving to Jeremy's house for dinner with his family, he thought of it again, and wondered at it. Jeremy rarely spoke of his wartime experiences, even with Randolph. Jeremy would talk for hours of the times he had spent hunting, or drinking, or driving around upstate New York looking for strange and wonderful experiences. He wouldn't talk of the war, and much of Randolph's relationship with him was contained within that silence. How much had Jeremy known of Randolph's powers? What had he meant by angel? How had Jeremy seen him back then, at the beginning of everything? Jeremy never spoke of it. Randolph could not know. There was a grief for that lack of knowledge, one named in the Laconian "Elvleck-alfsven Sakos," "a grief for knowledge forever lost."

But then, there was the letter. Jeremy had said, in the letter he had not sent, that there was a box with a collection of other unsent letters. Perhaps they contained an account of the war, an account of Jeremy. A confession, a suspicion, a piece of knowledge never spoken – Randolph did not know what he was trying to find, but he knew that *something* would be there. Jeremy was not the type to lie. So he drove on, heading for the house, trying not to cry.

Jeremy's house was a lonely place. An old house, in the shadow of a tree-covered hill, it stood at least a mile distant from its nearest neighbors, and fifteen from the center of Door's Creek. Jeremy's father had built it there, and had done so with deliberation; none of his private business would interfere with his professional presence within the town, or so he had intended. Jeremy had kept to his father's philosophy, even as the town had expanded and as Elaine had asked him, repeatedly, to move, keeping his interactions with the town to the area around Main Street and around the store. Elaine would invite friends to the house, on occasion. Jeremy never would. Even Randolph had only seen his house a few times, despite their long friendship.

And so Randolph was surprised to see so many cars in the driveway, as he slowed and turned in from the road. Two he recognized. Jeremy's old Jeep, the one that now belonged to Abigail, was parked beneath an overhanging tree; Elaine's car, an antique, cream colored Jaguar that drove perhaps five times a year, had a place in the opened garage. The sedan beside it was, he supposed, Mary's, and the SUV in the driveway was likely Suzanne's. But the car beside it, a black sedan polished and cleaned to

an unnatural degree, was a presence he couldn't account for. He parked beside it, puzzling over it, thinking in some way it seemed familiar. Then he let it go; it wasn't, after all, that important.

Rain had passed the house within the hour, leaving the ground damp. Randolph could smell it on the air as he stepped from the car, could feel the ground sink beneath his feet and could see the darkness of the distant clouds. It worried him in ways he only dimly persevered, set him instinctively on edge. He walked past the line of cars up to the front door, thinking it over. Perhaps it was the strangeness of coming back after so long that had him rattled. Or perhaps it was enough that the house had been Jeremy's, and was no longer, and he did not know who or what he would find within. But he thought it was the rain, and the afternoon darkness that lingered in its wake.

Randolph searched for the knocker on the door. It wasn't there. His hand fell down and to the side, finding a doorbell to the right. He let it rest there for a moment, taking stock, then pressed the bell.

After a moment, the door opened, and Randolph thought he had gone back in time. Elaine stood in the doorway, Elaine as she had been 40 years ago. They had first met in that house, at that doorway. Randolph had driven in to see Jeremy, to drink together, and he had knocked on the door only to have Elaine answer, blonde hair in a bob and turquoise earrings dangling. They had said hello, and Jeremy had come to the door to take the both of them under his arms and lead them inside.

The same earrings were before him now, and the same hair. But the woman who wore them said, "Randolph? It's Mary, hi," and Randolph realized his mistake.

"Mary, hello." He smiled, uneasy. "It's good to see you."

“Yes,” Mary said. “It’s good to see you too.” She stepped back from the door, leaving room for Randolph to enter.

A doormat graced the entrance, a red and green thing of the type Randolph’s Jeremy would have hated. Otherwise, the house seemed much as it had. The walls were natural wood along the entrance hall, stained with care. The dining room lay through an arch to the left, with the kitchen beyond and towards the back. Stairs along the right wall led up to the second story bedrooms and to the attic, and down to a basement that Jeremy had never quite known what to do with. Out the back there was a small yard and a large shed. The light fixtures were all new, and the floor had been replaced. Otherwise everything was as Randolph remembered, dangerously so.

A voice from the dining room declared, “Is that Randolph?”

“Yes, Mom,” said Mary. She had closed the door behind Randolph, and was staring up at him with curious intent. “Can I take your coat?” she said.

“Sure,” said Randolph. He had worn black for the occasion, a black felt overcoat over a black flannel shirt over new blue jeans and boots. He unbuttoned the coat, slipped it off and handed it over, before stooping to unlace his boots.

“Well bring him in here.”

“There in a moment, Elaine.” Randolph finished with his boots, took them off and set them aside on the mat.

“I’m not getting any younger here.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

As Randolph started towards the dining room, Mary took his arm. "She's getting on in years," she told him. "Try and be gentle."

"Gentle," said Randolph. " 'To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.' "

"What?"

"I'll be gentle."

When Randolph walked into the dining room, he looked, from instinct, to where Jeremy would have sat. In his day, Jeremy sat at the end of the table, with Elaine at his left and an empty chair at his right, for Randolph or for the few others he allowed to visit. The children would sit further down, with Mary next to Elaine on her father's left and Suzanne across from her on his right. The chair at the end of the table was never used, but it was there; as Jeremy had said, "I bought the full set, I'm using the full set." But Jeremy wasn't in his chair. No one was. Rys had taken Randolph's old place, and was sitting uncomfortably straight, their phone out on the table before them. Elaine was where she'd always been, there at Jeremy's left hand. The rest of the table was empty.

"Let me have a look at you," said Elaine. When Randolph hesitated, looking about for a place to sit, she said, impatient, "Come here," and pointed him at the chair that had been Jeremy's.

Rys waved as Randolph sat down, looking up for a moment before going back to their place.

"You haven't changed," said Elaine.

"You always say that," said Randolph. "You've aged well."

From the look Elaine gave him and from Rys' snort of laughter, Randolph guessed he had said something amys. It was true, though. Elaine had adopted wrinkles and greying hair without losing her elegance of poise, or the cheer of her voice.

"It's good to see you," Randolph said.

Elaine reached across the table and took his hand in hers, without warning. "He's gone, Randolph. He's up there with the angels now. Up with Michael." Her voice did not falter; indeed, she seemed almost happy.

"I know," said Randolph. "He is."

From the kitchen, Abigail saw Randolph arrive, saw him sit in Haskell's chair and take Elaine's hands in his. She heard them start to talk of old times, catching up on mutual acquaintances and mutual history. But they did not talk as if they were in mourning, and she noted it, and she thought it odd.

"Pass me the cheese grater?" asked Suzanne.

"Oh – here you go."

Abigail had agreed to help Suzanne with the cooking – "I told Mary I was doing her a favor, you know, taking over for her," Suzanne had said, "but really I'm doing it for *us*." Her help as of yet had mostly consisted of handing Suzanne things, and double checking the recipes, and taste testing. "Try this," said Suzanne. She took a mushroom from a crowded baking tray, sprinkled with cheese, and offered it out for Abigail to take.

“Thank you.” Abigail took it, gently, fingertips brushing against Suzanne’s palm. She took a bite.

“What do you think?”

Abigail tried to say, coughed, spat the bite she’d taken into the palm of her hand. “It’s ... interesting, for sure,” she said.

Suzanne chuckled. “It’ll taste better once it’s baked.”

“Hey – ”

“Hey.” Suzanne laid a hand on Abigail’s shoulder, and said, in an exaggerated tone, “It’s a joke, *capisce?*”

Abigail laughed. She dumped the rest of the mushroom into the trash and went to wash her hands. Suzanne passed her a towel; she dried her hands and gave it back. “What do you need me for next?”

“Onions.” Suzanne looked around, taking stock of the baking tray, the casserole dish beside it, the pot on the stove. “Soup’s almost done, we just need some onions for the bake.”

“Right.” Abigail took a knife from the block on the counter and onions from a bag. She began to peel them, building a small mound of papery shells on the counter. Suzanne moved to stand beside her, shoulder to shoulder, shredding cheese into a bowl. The kitchen filled with the comforting scent of soup, and the oven hummed with warmth. It brought Abigail back to when she was young, to cooking with her parents on lengthy weekend afternoons. Her mother would do the bulk of the cooking; Abigail and her father would prepare ingredients and wash dishes, stealing little bites of food

from the half-baked dishes and giggling at her mother's feigned look of disapproval. They would take their time, enjoying one another's company, building the camaraderie of a shared life. Come sunset they would sit at a round table and eat what they had made. There had been a beautiful lightness about those moments, a beautiful feeling of love, and as Abigail considered them, she counted the moment at hand among them. She felt safe, there in the kitchen with Suzanne. She felt, for a moment, loved.

Once, sitting in the very same dining room, Randolph had talked with Jeremy about Elaine. He couldn't remember which of them had brought her up. She had been out, shopping or visiting friends or something of the sort, and Randolph and Jeremy had been smoking. "It's strange," Jeremy had said. "All these years and I still don't think I own her." Randolph could not remember what he'd said in reply, but whatever it was had caused Jeremy to laugh. "Oh it's fine," he'd said. "It's just, I'm chained to her in a way she isn't chained to me. She'll outlive me," he'd said, growing serious. "And I think she'll be fine."

It was early, too early to say whether Jeremy had been right. On first impressions, Randolph was inclined to agree.

"So I've been organizing his benefit," Elaine was telling him, fully animated with excitement. "The money is going to the Hudson Valley Ecological society – Jeremy always liked them, he did. I've talked with Charles, and I've talked with Dave Barenboim, and we're going to use the Town Hall for the event space, and we're going to have a classical band. Do you think he would have liked Beethoven? Or perhaps something earlier?"

The Jeremy Randolph remembered couldn't stand classical music. "Beethoven would be fine," said Randolph. "Or perhaps Mendelssohn?"

"Perhaps." Elaine sniffed, and turned onto another topic. "Do you remember Pastor Robbins?"

"Of course." They had often gone to church with Pastor Robbins, Jeremy and Elaine and Randolph. They had sat three pews from the front, Randolph on Jeremy's right, Elaine on his left, and they had listened to sermons about sin and hellfire and the importance of giving one's tithe. Hellfire and the tithe – those were the subjects close to Pastor Robbins' heart. "How is the old man?"

"Long passed." She sniffed again. "There's a youngster in his place, now."

"Oh?"

"We switched churches," said Elaine. "I've nothing against him, of course, but he doesn't have the *gravitas* that Pastor Robbins had, he doesn't have the *authority*."

Rys muttered something under their breath.

"Bite your tongue," said Mary, who had by then moved to sit on Elaine's left.

"I'm sorry to hear about Robbins," said Randolph, moving in, keeping the peace.

"Well the Good Lord takes us all in the end," said Elaine. "Our time to leave is written in his plan, and when our time is up ..." She looked to Randolph; apparently she had not forgotten his propensity for quotes.

Randolph tried to think of a passage from Scripture that would suit what she had said. What came to mind was entirely different. “Let it come, let it appear, that fairest of fates for me, that brings my final day, the fate supreme.”

Elaine raised an eyebrow.

“Antigone,” Randolph said. “It’s an old Greek tragedy.”

“Sure,” said Elaine, and again changed the subject. “What have you been up to, all these years? Still with the government?”

Rys snorted. Randolph ignored them. Elaine had always been quick, quicker than Jeremy, quicker than Randolph himself. She could walk into a room and dazzle, or guide a conversation through sheer velocity of thought. It made her more than a match for Jeremy; together, there was nothing they could not do. And she seemed undimmed by Jeremy’s absence, as fluent, as eloquent as ever.

“In a sense,” said Randolph. “I haven’t really changed.”

There were things in Rys’ life that they knew without questioning, facts acknowledged without any corresponding consideration of their implications. For instance, they had never known their father, and no one in their family (not even their mother) would talk of him except to tell them that he had been a soldier, and how he had gone missing in action when Rys was very young. That had implications, they were sure, for the rest of their life, but Rys didn’t really want to acknowledge them, and most of the time, they didn’t have to. There were, as well, the implications their grandfather’s

presence in town had on their own situation. There certainly was an impact. There were certain classes in high school that Rys, inexplicably, did not fail; there were a hundred other small ways that they could feel their path smoothed for them by their grandfather's name. But they had never asked whether that influence was direct or indirect, and they didn't really want to know. The world was complicated enough without them going and asking questions.

For a long time, Randolph had counted among the facts they did not question. The existence of a Grim Reaper, and that Reaper's presence at each of their several deaths, made their life complicated enough without them facing the questions of what that meant for the universe, or what it meant for them. They thought it prudent not to ask these questions of Randolph. It might have been so, once. Yet it left them entirely unprepared for the interaction which faced them, where the Reaper had come to dinner, and was talking with their grandmother as if everything was normal.

"Jeremy always thought you were a spy," said their grandmother. She was leaning forward, animated with interest, and her eyes flared.

"Really," said Randolph, a dry statement which showed no cards.

Rys' grandmother nodded. "He said when you were in the war together, you never told him what you were doing there," she said. "But you were in command."

Rys wanted to ask for clarification. They didn't, but they must have given something away, for Randolph looked at them and said, "I fought with your grandfather in Vietnam. I thought I told him," Randolph added, turning to look at Rys' grandmother. "I was a consultant, advising his superiors."

"The way he told it," said Rys' grandmother, "you were his guardian angel."

Rys couldn't help themselves from laughing. Their grandmother stared at them, cold, as did their mother, an identically disappointed pair glaring down at them from across the table. "Sorry," Rys said, and looked back down at their phone.

Randolph seemed to choose his words carefully, speaking half to Rys, half to their grandmother. "I can see why he would have thought that," he admitted. "I did save his life a few times. But that was me being in the right place at the right time. I'm sure he would have done the same for me."

Rys' grandmother pursed her lips. "He thought of you as good luck," she said. A hard edge had entered her voice, a touch of accusation. "That's why he wanted you there when Michael was being born."

The breath caught in Rys' throat. They looked at Randolph, to see his eyes glaze over with distance and with something less defined.

"He understood," said Randolph. "We made it up, later."

Jeremy had always wanted a boy. It had been one of his fixations, even in Vietnam. He would gather all of his squad mates around dinner – Paul Edgewood, Martin Delaney, John Pressman – and he would show them his pocket photograph of Elaine. "I'll go back home and marry my girl," he would say. "We'll buy a house up there in New York, and we'll have so many kids. I'll name a son after each of you," he would say, pressing on through their laughter. "Paul, Marty, John, Randolph. They'll be the finest in the state – they'll do the Haskell name proud." And he would take their derision with

good humor, and later on he would confess to Randolph how much it meant to him that Randolph did not join with the rest in their laughter. “You’ll get pick of the litter,” he’d said. “My firstborn son is yours.” And when Randolph had tried to turn him down, Jeremy had simply laughed, and had taken Randolph by the shoulders, and had said, “I owe you,” and that had been that.

Randolph had acknowledged, at the time, how bad an omen it was to promise one’s firstborn to the Grim Reaper. But his concern was nothing beside the touch of Jeremy’s hand.

Suzanne took the casserole out of the oven, brushing past Abigail to set it on a waiting hot pad. “You’re very organized,” Abigail said. Her own efforts cooking tended towards the scattered; the one time she’d tried to cook for Suzanne, the kind of extensive meal Suzanne liked to prepare, she’d made an absolute botch of it, and they’d had to order pizza.

“It’s practice,” said Suzanne. She surveyed the kitchen: soup, casserole, bread rolls were all in their places, as were the tray of mushrooms and the chocolate puddings cooling on the stove. “No one else in the family did much cooking, so once I was old enough ...” She trailed off.

“Not Haskell – not your dad?”

“Dad?” Suzanne made an ironic, dismissive gesture. “We were very ... traditional. My dad put the food on the table. He left the rest to us.”

Abigail could remember Haskell talking along those lines. They had been in the forest, at the tail end of a successful hunt. Haskell had been preparing a deer for transport, cutting beneath the skin, trussing up its legs. Abigail had knelt beside him, her own knife out and ready to assist as required. The

bloody work had left the ground drenched, soaked the leaves and darkened the lightness of the dirt. It had been late fall. The trees around them had offered no shielding from the sky, then a brilliant, cloudless blue. It had been cold. Abigail had turned up her collar, put on a set of gloves. Haskell had not. He never made concessions to the weather, donning the same faded baseball cap and orange jacket regardless of season.

Haskell had talked as he worked about the differences between the old and the new schools of hunter. “When I went hunting with my father, we were hunting for survival. The meat we got on those trips went straight into our freezers. We wouldn’t last the winter without it. These new folk – ” He’d made the same dismissive gesture Suzanne made, though the instances had been years apart. At the time, Abigail had kept quiet. They had prepared the deer, and had brought it back to Haskell’s Jeep, and had moved on from that place and that conversation. She had known, in that moment, that she was of the new breed he so disparaged. She had thought of mentioning it. The words had not left the tip of her tongue.

“What’s up?” Suzanne was reaching up into a cabinet, couldn’t quite stretch to the top most shelf. “Do you mind – ”

“Not at all.” Abigail went over and brought down the plates from the second highest shelf. “I guess ... I don’t know. It’s hard to put into words.”

Suzanne took the plates with patience and with a listening silence.

“Did you ever ...” Abigail stopped, tried again. “Did your dad ever say he hated me?”

“Hated?”

“Maybe not hated. It’s just, he never liked trophy hunters, and, well ...” Something was keeping the words caught in her throat. What, she wasn’t sure. Perhaps the ghost of Haskell lingered in the corners of the house that had been his, hovering about his knife block, draped with his towels. Or perhaps, it was Suzanne that made it hard to think. She had her hair down, and was wearing simple golden earrings, and Abigail had never seen her look quite so beautiful before.

Suzanne put down the plates. A certain darkness crowned her forehead, a gravity that weighted the nod of her chin. “You know,” she said, “that wasn’t his problem with you. He told us a few times how he liked your style – I couldn’t ever follow it, but it was something about respect for the craft, seeing hunting as a fully physical thing, in tune with the land and everything ... I don’t know,” she admitted. “Dad wasn’t a philosopher. I don’t think he quite knew how to describe what he was looking for, but whatever it is, you had it.”

Abigail could feel herself flushing. Was it Haskell’s praise that was affecting her? Or Suzanne’s? Or was the kitchen simply too warm?

Rys looked between their grandmother and their mother, and at Randolph, all locked in an uneasy stalemate of silence. They felt out of their depth, unequipped to break the silence, unaffected by the mention of Michael that had brought it on. So they looked down at their lap and said an impious prayer that someone would change the subject.

“Dinner’s ready,” said Suzanne.

Rys stood up, awkward in their haste. “I’ll help,” they said, and they left the table and went into the kitchen.

Abigail was balancing a platter of stuffed mushrooms in one hand and a stack of plates in the other. Suzanne had a casserole dish clutched in oven-mitted hands.

“How are things?” Suzanne asked, careful not to be heard in the dining room.

“Strained – they’re talking about Michael.”

Suzanne grimaced. “Grab cutlery, will you?” she said, heading through the door. “Food always helps.”

Chapter 10

“Will you lead us in grace?”

Everyone had their seat around the table. Rys sat on Randolph’s right; Elaine sat on his left. Beyond Rys sat Suzanne, and beyond Elaine sat Mary. Abigail sat in the chair at the end of the table; it struck Randolph as odd, to see it occupied.

“Randolph?”

Randolph started. He had not realized Elaine was talking to him. “Of course.” He extended his hands, one to Elaine, one to Rys, and tried to think of what he might say.

Hands clasped around the table; heads bowed.

Randolph closed his eyes.

“Our Father, we thank you for the bounties of your harvest. We thank you for the food you have given us to eat, for the animals you have given us to hunt, for the chance we all have to be together in this time of trials. May you bestow your favor upon this house, and upon the people who live here. God bless Elaine, and God bless the children, and God bless Abigail, and bring us all together in your worship. And God bless the dearly departed, and take him into your bosom, and take him home. Amen.”

A scattered chorus of ‘amen’ echoed around the table. A hand withdrew from his, then another. Randolph left his eyes closed. Moments like these, he thought, deserved to be savored.

“Jeremy always ended with a verse,” said Elaine.

Randolph opened his eyes. “So he did,” he said.

“ ‘Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you,’ ” said Mary, with sudden spirit. “ ‘Even as the green herb have I given you all things.’ ”

Rys chuckled, privately amused.

“That was always one of his favorites,” said Elaine.

“Was it?” said Suzanne. She was already serving, taking the casserole and doling it out on any plate within reach.

“He was a devout man,” said Randolph. “I always liked that about him.”

“He said the same about you,” said Suzanne. “He always thought you had a good head on your shoulders.”

“Yeah,” said Rys. “And a good connection with the spirits.”

Randolph ignored the jibe. He passed his plate to Suzanne’s waiting hand.

“Did you wash your hands?” asked Mary.

“Yeah,” said Rys.

“Go wash your hands.”

Rys stood from the table. They slid around behind Suzanne’s back and disappeared through the swinging door into the kitchen.

“And leave your phone in there,” Mary called after them.

Suzanne handed Randolph back his plate, filled up with casserole and stuffed mushroom and bread. “Thank you,” he said.

“There’s soup on the stove,” replied Suzanne. “You can go get that yourself.”

“Elaine?” asked Abigail. “Do you want some soup?”

“That would be lovely, dear.”

“I’ll get it,” called Rys, from the kitchen.

Elaine turned to Randolph, her cheer pointed and aggressive. “How are you finding the Creek?” she asked. “It’s changed quite a bit since your day.”

“I got in on Saturday,” said Randolph. “I’m staying at Reya’s place, the Sunset House.”

“The bed and breakfast?” asked Mary.

“In a sense,” said Randolph.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Mary offered. “We have a spare room.”

“Oh, yes, that would be wonderful,” said Elaine. She shared a glance with Mary before they both turned towards Randolph, expectant.

“I’ll be fine at the Sunset,” said Randolph. “Reya’s an old friend; it’s good to catch up.”

From Randolph’s right, unseen, came a sigh of fervent relief. Rys must have returned to their seat; when Randolph turned to look, they were there, handing him a bowl of soup to pass to Elaine.

“Wipe that smirk off your face,” said Mary.

“Sorry, sorry,” said Rys.

Suzanne jumped into the conversational gap, breaking the tension of the moment through a mouthful of casserole, repeating her mother’s unanswered question. “How are you liking Door’s Creek?”

“It’s alright.” Randolph took a bite of the casserole. “I haven’t seen much different – but then, I haven’t been here long.”

Even as Randolph said it, he knew it wasn’t true. Lots was different in the town, though less than he might have expected. He’d known Door’s Creek for centuries; 15 years couldn’t change the character of a town he knew so well, so intimately. But Haskell’s family had changed, changed almost beyond recognition.

Randolph remembered the way it used to be, fifteen years ago. Jeremy Haskell sat at the head of the table, lord and master of the household. He served the dishes his wife had made, passing out plates in order of importance or of favor. He led the table in grace and in conversation; he told them what they were thankful for and, by his laughter or his silence, indicated what topics were acceptable and what weren’t. You might call it domineering, or patriarchal, or simply (as Randolph did) as steady. You could certainly call it omnipresent. Haskell’s family did not function without Jeremy at its center, fifteen years ago. Randolph had believed there was no way it could.

And yet, there they were. Jeremy was some months dead and even in the midst of their mourning the family functioned, held together by bonds other than his. Randolph took a bite of casserole and looked on from the head of the table as Suzanne made sure that Rys was eating, as Mary laid a hand on her mother’s arm to steady her, as Elaine and Abigail began to banter, talking of musicals they both enjoyed, comparing Oklahoma with Whistle Down the Wind. Rys put in a word for Heathers, their voice somewhat shy, their opinions anything but. The butter passed around the table, hand to hand, from Mary to Suzanne, from her to Abigail and back and over to Rys. Suzanne

and Abigail shared a glance of secret meaning and an anecdote about a restaurant in Rhinecliff, falling over each other's words and drawing the rest of the table into their conversation. They remembered Jeremy, to be sure. Mary responded to one of Rys' jokes with a reproach straight from her father's lips; Elaine told a story about a time they had gone to a park in the Creek and Jeremy had lost his shoes. Yet, in their remembrance, they still remembered to live.

It was all very much unlike what Randolph had expected. It made him unsure.

"More casserole?" asked Suzanne.

Randolph nodded, and handed over his plate. "Thank you," he said. "This is all quite good."

The language of loss had words aplenty for grief, but there were words for other emotions as well, for love and for despair, for triumph and for heartbreak. There were words for uncertainty in the language, and as Randolph accepted back his plate he tried them on in his mind, one by one, seeing which might fit the situation at hand. Was it Nof-kairos Shlien he was feeling, "the feeling of not knowing one's place"? Perhaps, but Randolph was no stranger to Nof-kairos Shlien, and the situation of the moment felt deeper than that. Was it Selen-kairos Saif, "the feeling of suddenly finding oneself out of one's depth"? No, that wasn't it. Randolph had come prepared to help; if anything, he was treading in unexpectedly shallow waters, knee deep when he had thought he would have to swim. Then Randolph looked to his left, on reflex, and he realized what it was what made him feel uneasy.

"Elen-kairos Siu," Randolph muttered.

"What?" said Rys.

"Nothing."

Randolph looked around the table, taking in the conversation and the laughter and Elaine's smile, and thought of Elen-kairos Siu, "the feeling of nostalgia for a time regarded with mixed feelings." For sure, Randolph appreciated the feel of the present moment. The family seemed to have grown into itself in the fifteen years since he'd known it, had grown out of a reliance on Jeremy and into an alliance with each other. He didn't wish for them to go back, nor did he wish to see them broken in Jeremy's absence. But Randolph missed him, and he missed the time they had spent together, however complicated that time might have been, however many issues Jeremy might have had.

The trouble started with desert. At least, Rys thought it had. They had gone into the kitchen with Aunt Suzanne to get the chocolate puddings from where they were cooling on the stove, leaving the conversation simmering in a stable discussion of Door's Creek politics – their grandmother was catching Randolph up on what he'd missed, having been away. They lost track of the conversation from there, focused on remembering who wanted spoons and who wanted forks, and how many prongs each of the fork-wielders preferred. By the time they returned to the dining room, the conversation had gone into dangerous waters, without them knowing how it had happened.

"So when Michael was born," their grandmother was saying, "Jeremy was so proud. He called Pat from the hospital, you know, Pat McLoon, the editor of the Chronicle?"

"I remember," said Randolph, his face blank.

Rys stepped in between the pair of them, set a fork by Randolph's plate and a spoon by their grandmother's. Neither reacted.

“He told Pat ‘Be ready,’ ” said Elaine, her voice unwavering. “ ‘We have a son, and we’re going to name him Michael Jeremy Haskell.’ ”

“I know,” said Randolph.

“What happened?” asked Abigail.

Rys set a fork at Abigail’s place and a spoon at their mother’s. “Grandad never told you?” they asked. “He told everyone else he – ”

“Rys.” Their mother gave them a cold look, warning them not to speak ill of the dead.

“Michael died,” said Suzanne. She came around behind Abigail and put a cup of pudding at her place. “It was a miscarriage.”

“He lived long enough for me to hold him,” said Elaine. “I still wonder, you know, if Jeremy had been there, if he could have done something – ordered the doctors to try and save his life, or given him some parental strength. But no – he was calling Pat to say we had a son.”

Rys settled back in their seat, pulling their phone from their pocket, preparing for the storm to come. The Michael conversation came in a pattern, reoccurring every so often around the dining table. They knew how unpleasant the next few minutes were likely to be.

Rys could not remember how young they’d been when they first heard Michael’s story. In their psychiatrist’s opinion, they had been too young. They knew the story of Michael as they knew that of the Boy who Cried Wolf, or of Little Red Riding Hood, as a fairy tale or a fable, omnipresent in their life, invoked whenever a figure of authority wanted to make a point or stake a claim. The details varied with each retelling, but the core elements formed the backdrops of their world.

With their history in mind, it shouldn't have surprised Rys that Abigail hadn't heard about Mathew. And yet, it did.

Haskell had told Abigail only once that he'd had a son. She remembered the occasion then as she had not in the graveyard, memory sharpened by the conversation and her presence in Haskell's house. "This was going to be my boy Michael's," Haskell had said, presenting her with a hunting knife of such quality she would have balked at buying it for herself. "He's got no use for it now, up there with the Lord," he'd said, and he had turned away with such finality that Abigail had known not to ask further. That was his way. He rarely opened up, rarely gave her more of his life than she needed for the task at hand. When he did, he chose how much to say with care. He said just what he felt he needed to say, then went silent. Abigail expected that of Haskell. She couldn't blame him for it – he had every right to constrict their relationship along whatever lines he chose. Yet at times like these, when his silence had left her entirely unprepared, Abigail could not help but regret it, couldn't help but wonder if things would be different if he had grown to trust her.

"Hospitals weren't what they are today," said Mary. She took a small bite of her pudding and swallowed it without chewing. "They didn't have the same facilities."

"Oh, the facilities weren't the problem," said Elaine. "It was the doctors, those horrible doctors."

"Dad took her to McMillian Medical," explained Suzanne. With the words came a sympathetic grimace Abigail wasn't sure how to read. "There had been some problems when Mary was born, and -"

“He wanted somewhere ‘modern’,” Elaine said. She sniffed.

“It wasn’t all that,” said Mary. “Better than Dr. Picoult’s place, but then – ”

“Dr. Picoult’s would have been fine,” said Elaine. “I trusted Dr. Picoult.”

Rys broke in, unexpectedly, not raising their head from their phone. “Didn’t he tell grandad to go to the McMillian?”

“He did not,” said Elaine, indignant.

“That’s right,” said Suzanne, her words overlapping with her mother’s.

“He told me afterwards it didn’t matter where they had the baby,” said Mary, placid. “Michael wasn’t likely to survive, wherever he was born.”

“He would have stood a better chance with Dr. Picoult, that’s for sure,” said Elaine.

Abigail’s head whirled. She couldn’t get a grasp on the tone of the conversation. They were talking about a child, a dead child, with the same tensions and the petty point scoring of an argument over who was to do the dishes. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” she managed to say, knowing it not to be the right response, not knowing what the right response might be.

“Thank you,” said Mary.

Elaine didn’t seem to hear. She was looking at Abigail as if she didn’t see her, as if she was looking at someone else.

“Mom?” Mary asked, quiet. “Are you still with us?”

“I’m fine, dear,” Elaine said. In the same, absent tone of voice she said, “He was just so disappointed.”

“Disappointed?” Abigail said it without thinking, aghast. “I can imagine he was a little past disappointed.”

Suzanne and Rys shared a look.

“Yes,” said Elaine. “Disappointed.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Mary.

Elaine nodded, still absent, and started talking to no one in particular. Speech flowed from her, not flood like, but like the quiet overflow of water spilling over the lip of the kitchen sink when the drain has been plugged and the tap has been left forgotten. “He was disappointed in me, mostly. After all, I was still trying to work at that point in my life. I was traveling, trying to give talks even when I was pregnant with Michael. He let me know that it was my fault Michael died, in no uncertain terms. A woman’s place is in the home, he said. The Lord had punished me for my insolence by taking Michael away from us. And of course he was right. I couldn’t be both a wife and a working professional. I had to honor Jeremy, and honor the Lord through my service. I did, afterwards, but it was too late by then. Michael was already dead.”

Abigail did not know what to think. She felt herself at the bottom of an ocean – entirely, utterly, out of her depth.

“Of course, it wasn’t just me who disappointed him. It broke his heart when Suzanne ran off living in sin with that woman in California.” Elaine spoke now not with water but with acid, thrown as carelessly as rice at a wedding. “Losing Michael was my punishment from the Lord; losing you was his, for not keeping his house in order, for not being strong. And Mary – well, Mary was his perfect, his

little girl, but getting pregnant out of wedlock – ” She made a noise of disgust. “He didn’t like that. He didn’t like that at all. And then there was you.” She looked at Rys, then, with an oddly dispassionate anger. “You were the final disappointment for a man who only ever wanted a son.”

Rys stood up so quickly Abigail barely had time to see that they were shaking. “I’m going to just ... leave for a bit,” they said, and they moved around the table at speed and went out the front door, not bothering with shoes or a coat.

In the silence of the shut door, Elaine turned to Randolph. “And you,” she said. “He trusted you to be there for the birth of his son – why weren’t you? Why weren’t you there?”

“I’m not a miracle worker,” said Randolph. His voice came out choked, and his stillness had a fragile brokenness about it. “I couldn’t have saved him.”

“Tell that to my husband.” Elaine pointed at the end of the table, at Abigail. “Michael could have been sitting there right now instead of some woman he barely even knew if you had been there.”

Abigail braced herself against shock. All that came, in the end, was pity, pity and a memory. She and Haskell had been drinking, and he’d said, unprompted, “If I had to give the store to – well, you’re not so bad.” That had been all. She thought he’d prepared to say “a woman;” that would have made sense, in its own, hurtful way. Now, she wondered if he’d meant to say “a stranger,” or “anyone other than my son.” She wondered about the job she’d done as Michael’s replacement.

Randolph had been there for Michael’s birth. As a Reaper, he’d walked the hospital floor, skeletal, dressed in a black doctor’s coat with a scythe like a stethoscope around his neck. He’d watched

Elaine be brought in, watched over her in the birthing room, tried what he could to comfort her, to ease her pain. But he had known for weeks that something was wrong; he had known, even as he picked up the tools of his trade and went to Elaine's side, that he was not there to save a life.

Reya had put it best, once, when they were walking through Glemwood Forest talking of mortality.

"Magic is not a cure all," she had told him. "If it was, the world would look a lot different than it does.

Magic can stretch the boundaries of the possible. It cannot break them. Even your hands don't hold power over life and death. Not always."

Randolph had not known the exact nature of Michael's ailment. He didn't need to. As a Reaper, he knew that it was fatal, that the most he could do to help was to give him a quiet death, to keep Elaine healthy through the birth and to be around in the aftermath, for comfort and for care.

"I was there," Randolph said, numbly, as if saying it would make up for the fact that being there hadn't been enough.

Mary put a hand on Elaine's arm. "I think we've had enough for now," she said.

Elaine said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on Randolph, asking the same question, unsatisfied with his answer.

"Up you come." Mary had stood up, and was helping Elaine to her feet. Elaine came with her, slowly; Randolph saw in that moment just how old she had become in the long years of his absence. Together they walked over to the stairs, navigated them step by careful step. They disappeared up into the second story, leaving shellshock behind them.

Suzanne stood up. "I'll do the washing up," she said.

“I’ll help,” said Abigail.

“Do you – ” asked Randolph.

“We should be fine.”

Randolph took that as a cue to exit. “I’ll go check in on Rys,” he said.

“Alright,” said Suzanne. “And, don’t take too much of that to heart ok? She has ... incidents, sometimes.”

“I understand,” said Randolph. “Truly. I do.” He left Suzanne and Abigail to create their own comfort, heading off to see what comfort he could offer Rys.

Chapter 11

When Rys turned ten years old, their grandfather came to their birthday party with a gun and a dog. “Take these,” he had said. “Happy birthday, kid.” Their mother had taken the gun away before they had gotten more than a glance at it – a hunting rifle, they thought it had been, something long and brown and overly large for their small frame. Only the dog remained, an elderly golden retriever that peed in the house very few weeks and died less than three years later. All they were left with was the memory.

Rys was remembering that moment in an abstract, unanalyzed way when Randolph joined them on the porch.

“Mind if I sit?” Randolph asked.

“Sure.”

Randolph took the chair next to Rys, an old rocker that had become weathered through age and experience.

“I wanted to check if you were alright.”

Rys shrugged, uncomfortable. “I’m fine,” they said.

“Jeremy used to sit here with me,” said Randolph. “He’d look out at the forest, and he’d point out bird calls. He knew all their names – the white tailed thrush, the dark eyed junco, the turkey.”

Rys couldn’t think of anything to say. The forest came alive in their silence. Rys couldn’t see any motion in the trees, other than their gentle back and forth in the wind. But they could hear bird

calls, cries that rose only to fall, low, warbling calls that sounded of tragedy, single pitched shrieks that repeated in patterns without end.

Rys grimaced, and as a high pitched wail overrode all sound else they asked, “What’s that one?”

“I have no idea,” said Randolph. “I never listened to him.”

Rys couldn’t help themselves. They laughed, a little, and sniffed back a tear. “You know, it’s funny,” they said. “It’s not like grandad ever talked about Michael. He never talked about him.”

“There’s a lot your grandfather never talked about,” Randolph agreed.

“Well yeah,” said Rys. “But like, he was always thinking about it, you know? Like it was always on his mind.”

Randolph nodded. “It’s hard, letting go of that kind of grief.”

“Yeah,” said Rys. They remembered a passage from the Language of Loss, said, “Sie-alfsven Koros?”

“How do you know that?” asked Randolph, restrained.

“He gave me a book – like a dictionary – when he was dying.”

“Why?”

Rys shrugged. “He said it would help.”

“Dying gifts usually don’t,” said Randolph. “Like the letters – they never say what you want them to say.”

“The letter ...” Rys had forgotten about the letter. They reached to their back pocket; it was still there, crumpled, battered, and half forgotten. They took it out, blindly, slipped a thumb beneath the seal and broke it.

“I don’t know if I’d read that now,” said Randolph.

Rys’ only answer was to take the letter from within the envelope; Randolph made no move to stop them.

The letter read,

Dear Rys,

I’m dying. By the time you get this I’ll already be dead.

There’s a lot I should have told you. There isn’t room for it here. Even if there were, I wouldn’t know what to say. Words were never my strong suit, especially for something like this.

Remember the day we were making that pie, and you asked for the recipe? I wish I’d given it to you then. I’m including it on the back. Call it even.

Love,

Your Grandfather

Rys stared, numb, reading “Love, Your Grandfather” over and over until the words blurred together into a single line.

“What does it say?” asked Randolph.

Rys handed it over, still staring, blank. “I don’t remember that,” they said. “I don’t remember making pie with him.”

Randolph frowned. “Maybe it was important to him, and not to you.”

“Why don’t I remember that? I should remember that.” Something broke within them, and they were laughing and they were crying and they reached out, instinctive, to Randolph, and Randolph wrapped them in a hug.

The dining room had a window that looked out on the front porch. From where she stood, Abigail could see Rys and Randolph, sitting together, talking. She couldn’t hear what they said, but it seemed full of weight; Rys had tears in the corners of their eyes, and Randolph looked over at them with concern and with care.

“How are they doing?”

Abigail turned around. Suzanne stood close behind her, closer than she’d expected. She had a dishrag draped over her shoulder; her hands, held out in front of her, were wet and wrinkled.

“They’re alright.” A rush, a chance – Abigail reached out and held Suzanne’s hands, squeezing them warm. “How are you?”

Suzanne returned the squeeze, the chill of her touch sending tingles up Abigail’s arms. “Oh I’m alright. This ... this is normal for us.”

“If you’re sure.”

They stayed holding hands for a moment longer, stretching a gesture well beyond its significance. Then Suzanne let go, brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “How are you?” she asked.

“I’m ... still processing, I think.”

“I’m sure you are.” Suzanne stepped across to the table, started gathering what remained of plates and cutlery and serving dishes. “I’m sorry you had to see Mom like that. I should have warned you.”

“No, it’s ok,” said Abigail. She joined Suzanne at the table, and started to help her clear the plates from a dead man’s table.

They worked well together, Suzanne and Abigail. Their hands moved with a shared understanding of the task at hand, words abandoned in favor of a host of smaller gestures: an open hand which said “Give me that plate, there;” a nudge that prompted one to move and make space for the other; a small nod of gratitude, and “I am glad you are here with me.” The shared language of such gestures reminded Abigail of how Haskell would work with her in the store, organizing inventory, working on their separate projects in the woodshop. Yet there were differences. Working with Suzanne felt, to Abigail, like rowing in a canoe, each stroke a partnership of paddles, each shift in the intentions of one reflected in or made discordant by the actions of the other. With Haskell, they had been piloting separate kayaks, embarked on the same journey, discussing on occasion where to go or which direction to steer but, ultimately, alone.

Abigail looked up at the head of the table, at Haskell’s chair and Randolph’s. It was a simple chair. It cast no shadow over her, nor did it loom. And yet, looking at it, she couldn’t shake the feeling that Haskell himself still lingered within it, that he was watching her and judging what she did.

“Hey,” said Suzanne. “Stay with me.”

“Oh.” Abigail looked at Suzanne, standing across the table with a dishrag in her hands and a look of care on her face, then back at the table’s head. “I just – it feels like he’s still here, you know? Your father?”

Suzanne shook her head. Her gaze hardened and went unblinking; she seemed sure, in a way she rarely did. “You weren’t here when Dad was alive. He had a big personality – if he was still here, he’d be a *lot* louder.”

“Of course,” said Abigail. “You’re right.”

“I do miss him,” said Suzanne. “But it’s quieter with him gone. Is it horrible of me to think that?”

“It’s not,” said Abigail. She reached over, enclosed Suzanne in the comfort of a hug. “It’s grief, I guess.”

Abigail could not see Suzanne’s face, buried as it was in the side of her shoulder. But there were tears in her voice when she said, “Thank you,” and a slight trembling that started in her upper back and spread to Abigail so they both shook, leaves in a nonexistent wind.

Randolph left Rys on the porch without misgivings, heading inside and taking off his shoes. They were still sniffing, tears dripping from their chin onto the paper of their letter. But that was a part of grief, and Randolph knew better than to keep them from it, or to try and accompany them.

Besides, he had a grief of his own to unravel.

The stairs leading up to the second floor had been redone since Randolph had last been there. Off-green carpet had replaced wood, and someone had added an exquisite handrail along the right hand wall. It bothered him, a little, but the feeling fell away as he began to climb. For a moment, even with the stairs as they were, he could imagine no time had passed, and Jeremy was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Randolph didn't dwell in it – there were dangers, he knew, in forgetting one's place in grief – and yet he was surprised, faintly, to find Mary at the top of the stairs, where Jeremy should have been.

"How's your mother?" Randolph asked.

"She's alright," said Mary. "She just ... gets emotional."

"I know what she's like," said Randolph, though the Elaine he'd known would never have said the things she had, not at her husband's table.

Mary reached up with both hands and pushed the hair out of her face. There was a single bulb burning above her, lighting up the hallway. In its glow, she looked tired. She let out a shaky breath, not quite looking at Randolph, and she said, "It's really hard without him."

Randolph said nothing. All too often, the best condolence for grief was companionable silence.

"It was Dad who held us all together," said Mary. "He was the only one we all listened to. Now it's ... I don't know what to do. I really don't know what to do, Randolph. Rys is gone most nights, and Sue's only here half the time and my mom's dying and I'm scared, Randolph. I'm scared." She took in a long breath, forced it out with a shuddering huff. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry. I just ... I think I need a moment."

“Of course,” Randolph said. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“Yes,” Mary said. “Yes, I would. I just ... I’m gonna go make some tea.”

“I’ll join you,” said Randolph. “I just have something to do, first.”

“Alright,” said Mary, and she passed him, heading down the stairs.

In a while, Randolph knew, he would go down and join her, and he would listen to her griefs and he would find words to say in consolation. But that was not the work of the moment.

The attic could be accessed from two different rooms, from a closet in Jeremy’s bedroom and from the ceiling of the room that was Rys’. Randolph chose Rys’ room – the door was open, and he did not want to disturb Elaine. He passed through the doorway, stood beneath the trapdoor, and whispered, “Fall.” The trapdoor unlatched itself, a ladder bounding and unfolding down and out. He caught it before it hit the ground, guided it down the last foot or so. He put hands on either side and rung by rung began to climb.

The ladder had not changed. It was as Jeremy had built it, rough and sturdy beneath Randolph’s hands. And yet, it felt less familiar; it brought back no memories, did not set Randolph adrift in time. He had not often been granted access to the attic. He had few recollections of the place.

Randolph climbed up into the attic and barely avoided hitting his head on the ceiling. It was a crowded space. Sunbeams skittered like spiders across the boxes and the shelves, hiding away from the disturbance of his entry. Clothes lay in a heap off to the side – Jeremy’s clothes, flannels and jeans and thick boot socks. Plastic storage tubs labeled “Papers” or “Mementos” or “Misc.” with scotch tape and black sharpie were stacked against the walls. The detritus of a life lay there, clutter, unimportant and

unused. Had Randolph been there as a Reaper, his task would have been to burn it or to take it, shepherding it either way to its rest in Glemwood Forest. But he was not there bearing fire, or a scythe; he was not there as a Reaper.

Off to one side, a wooden box sat on a shelf, gathering dust and spiderwebs.

“There you are,” muttered Randolph. He had to crawl to reach it; on his knees, his head almost reached the rafters. He took the box from the shelf and lay it down on the floor, leaned back, let himself sit and curl himself around it, hunched over, legs splayed. The box had no lock, just a metal latch and a lid ornately carved. Randolph undid the latch, lifted the lid.

Inside the box lay a heavy stack of envelopes and a familiar gun.

Randolph stared at the pile for a long moment, memories blunt and pained against his skull. He picked up the gun from the box, knew without checking that it was loaded, flicked the safety on. He spoke a single word and a holster came into existence at his side, summoned from the possibilities of Glemwood Forest; he slipped the gun in with the grace of long practice. He took the stack of letters from the box, closed it, placed it back on the shelf. Then he crawled back to the ladder and began, slowly, to descend into the house.

Somewhere, there was tea getting cold, and a conversation about grief that he needed to have. The letters, and the gun, could wait.

Chapter 12

Glemwood Forest met the Hudson River in an intricate bay. A stream snaked under footbridges and down waterfalls, splitting and emerging in two separate places onto the shore. The line of non-existent trees thinned a ways before the river. The possibilities of trees were younger, less imposing. Their shadows did not reach as deep or as long. You could sit beneath the sky, there, resting on open grass or rocky ground. The possibilities that lay within Glemwood Forest were dark and consistent. They felt regulated, set, all trees and discarded objects and intrusion. There, at the edge of irreality, you could open everything up.

Rys came there, sometimes, not going into the Forest itself, only resting at the edge of the forest and the river. From their favorite spot, a fallen log directly beside one of the two creeks, they had an uninterrupted view of the river and of the mountains beyond. The shore stretched out farther than it deserved, fading from solid ground into marshland and from there only slowly into open water. It held on for as long as it could, grasping at the current with flimsy, whimsical reeds. The river pulled gradually away and the shore let go, leaving the river to its course. The open waters beyond the reeds wrinkled with waves and the wakes of passing ships, speedboats and cargo ships and the occasional kayak. Birds accompanied them, not in flocks but as stragglers, circling as if asking where they were going and why. Beyond their path, beyond the boats and the birds and the deep water of the river, the shore along the other side caught again at the water. A small town on the edge of the land extended docks into the river, drawbridges that invited and could not be drawn back. Each house stood as a splash of color against a treescape of brown and grey, red rectangles and blue and white squares

arranged in miniature. The trees around them swallowed up the town, let the landscape rise around it until it met the mountains, seamless as an expert tailor's work. The mountains stood behind them, behind everything. They seemed, somehow, larger than could be comprehended and yet small, too small for the weight of the sky that they carried.

Few views around Door's Creek were as beautiful. None, in Rys' estimation, surpassed it. And so it did not surprise them overmuch to find Randolph there, sitting, looking out at the mountains.

Rys did not quite know how to approach him. They had not met since the afternoon of the dinner party, several days ago. They had cried on his shoulder, then. They wondered whether they should bring it up, and if so, what they should say. "Thanks for being there for me?" "Sorry you had to see that?" What did one say, when all one's barriers had been let down, before one was sure they were again in place?

Rys decided to avoid the subject altogether. They walked up to the log where Randolph was sitting and sat beside him, and hoped he would not bring it up.

"I mostly meet the dead here," said Randolph.

"Oh?"

Randolph nodded. "Part of my job as a Reaper involves escorting out spirits who want to stick around. Sometimes I have to go find them. Sometimes they gather here."

Rys looked back at Glemwood. The trees were, as always, nonexistent. "I've never seen a ghost in there."

"There's a time and a place," said Randolph. "There's a way of looking."

“Could you show me?”

Randolph stared out at the river. His hands were by his sides, unshaking, and he took a very long moment to think before saying, “Come back tonight.”

After Rys had left, and enough time had passed that Randolph could be sure they were not immediately coming back, he reached into an inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out Jeremy’s stack of letters. Almost half of them were open. He set them down on the log beside him and pulled one of the unopened letters from the pile. The seal came apart in his hands; he didn’t even have to ask it, so eager his hands were to read what lay inside.

This letter was short, scribbled with haste on what looked like hotel stationary:

Randolph,

I looked for you the other day. Sue told me about a new thing called the Internet, and I had her look you up. Nothing came up, except an old Chronicle piece and an obituary for a Randolph Beauchamp from the Revolution.

You told me I didn’t make you a ghost. I wonder if that’s because you always were one.

-Jeremy

The beauty of Glemwood forest lay in its possibilities, especially at the borders where the forest meets with a world more solid. The dead remained dead, and the living remained with the lives they

have chosen to lead, but none of it mattered. The forest knew how things might have been, had the world been different. Those who knew where to look and how to listen could learn.

Randolph knew how to listen. He did so in the silence of reading Jeremy's letter, turning his attention away from the silence of the river washing against the pebbles of the shore, the silence of the real, and towards the silent possibilities of the forest. In that silence, he could hear Jeremy talking, reading the letter out loud. His voice carried a multitude of inflections. One moment, an older Jeremy spoke with sorrow, slurring his words. The next, a Jeremy much younger said "I didn't make you a ghost" with venom on his tongue. The possibility of Jeremy raged, and the possibility of Jeremy wept, and the possibility of Jeremy asked questions first as if he knew the answers, then as if begging for a single clue. Randolph closed his eyes, let Jeremy's voice fill his ears and his world, strong as an ocean, soft as a summer rain. Then he closed the letter, folding it and pulling it back into its envelope.

Jeremy's voice stopped. A single tear dropped onto the envelope. The silence of the river resumed, as the silence of the forest slunk back to the shadows of the nonexistent treeline. Randolph stood up, putting the letters back into his pocket, and he walked away without looking back.

Of all the moments that Abigail spent as Haskell's apprentice, it was the last which stuck most clearly in her memory. Haskell had not mentioned to her that he was sick, nor had he told her about his plans to retire. She had guessed at both. Haskell had taken several days off for hospital visits, and had gone, several lunches in a row, to the law offices of a nearby friend. But they had not talked about

Haskell's retirement, even as a hypothetical, not until the day he'd taken her to the Blue Dragon and ordered her a whiskey and said that he was quitting.

Haskell had wasted no time talking around the subject. As the bartender had handed them their drinks, he'd said, "How soon could you take over?"

"Take what over?"

"My shop," Haskell had said. "How soon could you take over running it?"

Abigail had taken a moment to think before answering. Had she realized, in that moment, what Haskell was asking? She could not remember. Everything had happened too quickly. "I could run the place for a little while," she'd said. "You've shown me all the day to day."

Haskell had nodded, had passed her a few sheets of paper and a pen. "It's yours," he'd said. "I'll stick around for a week, then I'll get out of your hair."

If Abigail had not realized it before that moment, she had after it. "Haskell – I can't just –"

"I'm not doing well," Haskell had said. "I don't have more than six months to live. It should go to you before I'm in the ground."

"Haskell –"

He had raised a glass, offered it out. "You'll do fine," he'd said.

Abigail had raised her glass, and touched it to his, and they had drunk as one. They had said no more about it that night. Haskell had told her stories of the old days. Abigail had told him about her family. Later, back in her apartment, she had read over the contract, had seen it gave her full ownership of the building and of the business, of the inventory and of the bank accounts. She had brought it to

Haskell's lawyer friend in the morning, and he'd confirmed that everything was in order. She'd signed it, and she'd brought it back to Haskell, and he'd taken it with a nod of silent thanks. A week later, he had been gone. Nothing else had been said.

Abigail worried, in telling Suzanne the story, that it would come off as unrealistic. She didn't seem phased. "He really didn't say anything else?" she asked, dipping a mozzarella stick in marinara sauce.

"No," said Abigail. "He didn't."

They were at Door's Creek's resident sports bar, a place along Main Street called Brandon's. Suzanne had offered to take Abigail there, after she'd said she'd never been. Neither of them had called it a date, not in so many words. Neither of them had had to.

Suzanne chewed her mozzarella stick with thought. "Did I tell you he visited me at Berkley?" she asked.

Abigail shook her head. To the best of her knowledge, after Suzanne had run off to California, no one in her family had talked with her for years.

"He called," said Suzanne. "He found my number, somehow, and called to let me know he'd be flying in the next day."

"From here?"

"Yeah, all the way from here. He flew in early, took a cab to meet me, and we had lunch together." Suzanne shrugged, and took another bite of mozzarella stick. "We had a really basic

conversation. He asked me how I was. I told him. We talked about sports for a while, and he told me the happenings of Door's Creek. Then he left, went straight back to the airport, and flew on home."

"That sounds like him," said Abigail.

"It was very in character."

The waitress came by, asked them how everything was doing. Abigail smiled through a mouth full of cheese and said that everything was fine; the waitress moved on, satisfied.

"Why did your dad kick you out?" asked Abigail. They had talked around it before, enough that Abigail knew Suzanne would be comfortable talking about it. She hadn't asked, not directly.

"Well it was somewhat mutual," said Suzanne. "Dad ... he wasn't at a great point in his life. He did a lot of drinking, poured a lot of time into the shop. To put it lightly, Mom was not a fan. She took some of it out on him, and some of it out on us. And Rys was three, three or four, and they were an ornery child."

"I'm so sorry," said Abigail.

"Thanks." Suzanne tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You know they found out I was gay? I told Pastor Robbins about kissing Lizzie Tillwater, and he told my dad."

"Oh that's horrible," said Abigail, but Suzanne was smiling, almost laughing, and Abigail couldn't stop herself from smiling along.

"Yeah, I, uh, didn't go back to confession after that," said Suzanne, still chuckling.

"How did he react?"

“He didn’t, really,” said Suzanne. She wasn’t smiling anymore; she stared, distant, down into the plate of mozzarella sticks, and let her hands twitch on the table. “That’s what I most remember. He just sat there in an easy chair, reading the paper, while Mary yelled at me about living in sin.”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah – I think she enjoyed not being the focus of attention, for once. Even as a single mother, she was closer to grace than I.”

Abigail said nothing, not knowing what, if anything, there was to say.

After a moment of thought, Suzanne returned to herself and took the second to last mozzarella stick. “I thought it was a good time to split,” she said. “I’d already met Claudia – you remember Claudia? – so I stayed at her place for a bit, then when she went to college in Cali, I followed.”

“I’m glad you had a friend.”

“Me too.”

They took a moment, together, letting the silence grow and wrap them in a single blanket and recede, leaving them warm.

“How’d your parents take it?” asked Suzanne.

“Honestly, they’re still trying to figure it out,” Abigail said. “They’re supportive, really supportive, but they get confused sometimes.”

Suzanne made an unreadable face. “Better than the alternative, I guess.”

“They’ve been alright,” said Abigail. She smiled, remembering. “When I first told them I had a crush on a girl, my dad said he thought I was asexual, not lesbian.”

“Like he thought it was one or the other?”

“Yeah.” Abigail nodded. “I’d explained the difference between being ace and being aromantic, and I’d told him I liked women. He just had a hard time keeping both of those in his head. He’s trying, though,” she added, as Suzanne started, gently, to laugh. “He’s trying.”

“I know,” said Suzanne. “I know.”

“Did he come around? Your dad?”

Suzanne shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s weird – I know Mary mellowed out of her ‘fire and brimstone’ phase, and Mom’s still on the fence, but I don’t know what Dad thought of me. He never brought it up. I don’t know – maybe it was ‘live and let live,’ maybe it was something more.”

The waitress came back, then, bearing plates of salad and bowls of wings. The conversation became lost in the clatter of food being arranged on the table, in the tangle of limbs between them, and they moved on to talking of other things.

Rys knew the paths around Glemwood Forest as well as they knew the streets of Door’s Creek, few as they were. They could picture the trees and the fences that landmarked the way as clearly as they could the crossing signs and the shop windows along Main Street and Elm. They could, if given a moment to think, figure out which paths to take to reach any corner of the woods, down one block, two streets over, left at the blue house or at the cracked and mossy rock. But they did most of their exploration during the day – parental worries and their own fears of the dark kept them inside or in the company of others during the darkness. Earlier in the day they had taken an obscure path to reach the

river at the border of Glemwood Forest, a path which ducked under low hanging branches and skirted around the thorns and brambles of bushes. Now, after nightfall, they chose a different path, longer but more clear, a dirt paved road that circled around the local college and delved downward through hills and ravines towards the river.

The road went almost all the way to the forest where Rys and Randolph were to meet. They had hoped they could drive all the way down – sometimes they could, if the chain on the gate was undone. That night, the gate was shut, and the truck parked beside it gave them little hope that they could open it. They turned in beside the truck and let the song on their phone come to a screeching stop and turned off the car.

Armed with a flashlight that had once been their grandfather's, carrying their phone and their silver dollar in their jacket pocket, Rys walked down the road to the forest. The darkness made everything unrecognizable. They knew this place, knew the trees were real and the road beneath them had no memories or grave markers around it. Yet they could only believe it as far as their flashlight reached. Lit pale yellow, the bark of the trees and the crisp orange of the leaves had its own reality. Outside its reach, Rys could imagine they were back in Glemwood Forest, that the trees around them were unreal and that they were walking in the midst of their own death.

The thought stuck in their head like a hamster in a wheel, running ever faster. They shied away, tried to think of something, anything, else.

They thought of their car, then, and wondered, as they often did, where it had come from. A black sedan, it had showed up in the driveway of their grandfather's house months after the first time

they died, with keys in the ignition and a printed note on the dashboard which said “To Rys.” Their mother thought their grandfather had given it, wanting to do something for them without giving them the opportunity to refuse. It was possible, except that their grandfather had paled when he’d first seen the car, almost afraid, and that he would never have passed up an opportunity to gloat. Their grandmother had suggested, privately, that Aunt Suzanne could have been involved. Rys thought this a little more likely. Suzanne had offered to help with finances, in arguments with their mother that Rys had overheard from the top of the stairs as a child, and she cared that Rys could drive themselves, could live with some agency separate from their mother. But it didn’t seem her style, and besides, she had shown no signs of recognition when Rys had told her.

Rys had their own thoughts on who it might have been, though they didn’t share them often. Practically, they suspected Randolph was involved. A black sedan seemed clearly within the style of a Reaper, and the sudden appearance of a sedan without an apparent source spoke to their sense of the fantastic. In moments of wistfulness, on the border between sleeping and waking, they allowed themselves to believe it had come from their father. They had never met him. They knew only the barest of stories about him, that he had disappeared soon after they were born, that he had not been from Door’s Creek, that he had been a soldier. Beyond that, they knew nothing. Most of the time, they didn’t feel the need to know. Rys felt their father’s absence through their mother’s insecurity, through the presence their grandfather had in the lives of them and their mother both. They rarely felt it themselves. They had lived without a father for long enough that they rarely minded the lack. Yet it was

nice to imagine, on occasion, that their father was watching over them, that the car was his way of showing care.

They didn't put excessive thought into it. They enjoyed skipping stones across the lake of the mystery of the car; they had no desire to dive in, to dredge the lake and bring the solution to the surface.

"Hello."

Rys jumped, the beam of their flashlight twitching towards the sound of the voice. Randolph Beauchamp stood there, wearing denim on denim, boots caked with mud. His eyes glinted in the beam of Rys' flashlight.

"You startled me," said Rys.

"I'm sorry."

Randolph stepped, comfortable, into the lead. Rys followed along beside him, trying not to trot at his heels.

The silence and the darkness had a different flavor to it when there were two of them. Accompanied, Rys could appreciate the peace of the place, the quiet of the forest. Alone, they could only feel unsettled.

"Where'd you come from?" they asked.

Randolph tilted his chin upwards, like he was scanning the skies. "I manifested out of thin air," he said, in an odd, formal tone.

"Really?"

“No,” said Randolph. The formal tone was gone, and he sounded, again, normal. “I was visiting a friend.”

They came then to the edge of the water and the wood. Randolph sat on the log they’d been on earlier. Rys joined him. Together, they looked out across the river at the mountains. The clouds had come across the moon. There were no stars visible in the sky. The world was still and silent in the moonlight, as breathless as the moment before the passing of a train.

“Is something supposed to happen?” asked Rys.

Randolph passed them a pair of glasses, bronze rimmed with green and blue lenses. “Put them on,” said Randolph. “Then look.”

Rys put on the glasses. They blinked, and looked towards the river.

At first, their vision blurred, as if they’d had their eyes closed at noon on a sun drenched day, and they were just now opening their eyes. They squinted, trying to protect their eyes from the glare. Their vision gradually cleared, their eyes adjusting slowly to the newfound light. First they could see colors, golds and blues and greens in varicolored combinations that flickered and flared into one another like the edges of a kaleidoscope. Shapes started to appear, vaguely human shapes, hearts of green outlined with fingers and toes and heads of purest blue, swimming against a background of liquid gold. They could not tell how far away the figures were. Their perception of depth seemed skewed, somehow. They looked over at the mountains, and could not tell which side of the river they were on. They looked at the figures and could not tell if they could reach out and touch them, or if they were just too far away, or if they were miles and miles off down the river. They squinted, trying to

put the world together in a way that made sense. Then they opened their eyes, fully and entirely, and found that they had adjusted to the unnatural light, and that they could see clearly.

The world made no further sense with their eyes open. The river lay before them no longer dark; light glimmered a layer below the surface, soft and gold as a blanket warmed by the sun. The forest still approached the river. The trees were no longer insubstantial and inexistant. They were, instead, too present, multiple trees existing in the same space, a thousand different forest flickering and trying to occupy the same space in reality. A scattering of figures passed through them, people of all descriptions and walks of life, transparent in shades of green and blue. An old man with a missing jaw came stumbling out to Rys' left. A woman passed them in a dress of shimmering gold, a wedding dress in all but color. A hawk flew over a litter of stumbling kittens, while a farmer in overalls and bare feet sat watching from the shadows of a nearby log. The whole mass walked into the river, a march into the water that, somehow, had the figures meet the water as if it were a portal stretched across the horizon. The people out of the forest, vertical, and the river lay before them, horizontal, but somehow, impossibly, they met each other face to face, parallel. The figures passed beyond the water without a ripple, without a sound or a disturbance, and were gone.

Rys looked to Randolph, for answers or for explanations. The found a figure of blinding scarlet, tongues of flame dripping from his stillness, hands clasped over a core of fire in his lap.

Rys slipped off the glasses, let them fall to the ground, uncaring if they shattered. There was Randolph, silent, and there was the river, silent, and it was as if nothing had happened.

“What -”

“Those are ghosts passing out of reality,” said Randolph. “Untethered spirits, drawn to the nearest place of passage.”

“And what happens then?”

Randolph shrugged. “Some of them have an afterlife. Some of them don’t. Either way, they all pass beyond in the end.”

“What does that – ” Rys thought of a question more pressing. “Where is my grandfather?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you could find him, right? He’s there, isn’t he?”

Randolph didn’t look at Rys – he kept staring out at the river, his eyes lit with the reflection of a nonexistent flame. “He might be in the afterlife,” he said. “He might be beyond. Either way, I don’t think I could reach him.”

“Could you try?” asked Rys. Their voice cracked; they sounded desperate, and they hated it. “I just want to talk to him.”

“No you don’t,” said Randolph, with quiet authority.

“I just want to see my grandfather. Why won’t you let me see him?”

“Rys – ”

“Why won’t you let me see him?”

Randolph sighed. He seemed quiet enough, sitting on the log by the slowly moving river, but the fire around him was burned into Rys’ vision, an afterimage without end. “That won’t help as much as you think it will.”

“I want to see him,” said Rys. They could not think of anything else to say, or to want, or to feel. They stood, shaking, and started walking along the shore, not knowing where they were going, not knowing if they should care.

Randolph did not go immediately after Rys. He slumped where he sat, shifting so he rested on the dirt of the shore with the log at his back. He watched the migration of the spirits, letting his tears gather until his vision blurred and his mind went blank.

Randolph could have answered most of the questions Rys asked of him. Questions about death, about the workings of the universe, about Rys’ place in it all – those were questions that Randolph could have answered, answers that Rys could have understood. The question of why Randolph and Jeremy fell out was different. That one he could not answer. It was a question that could only be answered with the story of how it had happened, and the story was not one Randolph could tell without opening more of his heart than he could bear.

It had been summer, fifteen years ago. Randolph had come to Door’s Creek for business, something to do with the college, something he could no longer remember. He had gone to Jeremy, and the two of them had spent a golden afternoon together, driving around the diners of Door’s Creek and stopping at every roadside fruit stand along the way. Jeremy had seemed off. Randolph had known that from the first moments they’d spent together. But he hadn’t realized how off Jeremy had been until after they had gone their separate ways, until he was driving away from Jeremy’s house with the memory stuck in his head of him saying “I feel like God’s gonna call me home, one of these days.”

Randolph had turned around, some distance from Jeremy's house. He had turned around, and he had gone back, and he had driven back, trying to reach Jeremy in time. When he had arrived, he had parked quickly, not taking the keys from the ignition. He had run into the house, slamming doors and thundering up the stairs, until he'd reached the door of Jeremy's room.

Randolph's memories went blurry from there. He had found Jeremy with his handgun in his mouth. Of that, he was certain. There had been a scuffle, and the gun had gone off. That too he knew. He remembered nothing else for certain, until he'd woken up two feet beneath the ground, covered in packed dirt.

The mixed blessing of the Reapers meant Death would not claim him, that being killed did not lead to passing beyond. The process of dying was no less traumatic for it. Randolph had panicked, briefly, lying in the grave, the weight of the dirt pressing on his chest. Then he'd whispered for it to move, convincing the earth to uncover him and let him claw his way out. He'd followed the tire tracks from Jeremy's truck out of the forest where he'd come to, met the highway and continued onwards towards town. He knew Jeremy, knew he'd need a drink after burying him, knew where he'd go. He walked for hours, as the sun set and the warmth of the day faded, until he reached the Glemwood Meathouse and opened the door.

Jeremy had been sitting in a booth in the back corner. Randolph had joined him, grave dirt still clinging to his clothes. They had talked. Randolph could not remember what they had said; sometimes he thought that mattered, sometimes he thought it didn't. The only moment that stuck with him came at the end of their brief conversation, when he had laid his hand on Jeremy's chest and told him that he

was not allowed to die, not yet, not until he was old and decrepit and until he had lost all of his strength. Randolph had said it, and he had inscribed it into Jeremy's spirit, a blessing and a curse, and he had left. He had never seen Jeremy again.

It was a story he would not tell Rys. They would not understand it. Randolph did not think he understood it himself.

Chapter 13

It had just about stopped raining when Abigail decided to read Haskell's letter. The skies had clouded overnight, leaving the morning grim and gloomy. A drizzle of chill rain had accompanied a dark bluster of wind around breakfast, leaving the ground semi-slick and shining. No customers had come to the shop. Abigail had turned on the lights as soon as she got in, not trusting in the day's weak sunlight to make its way through the windows, boarded up as they were with signs. The world was on edge, Door's Creek waiting beneath a darkened sky for something to happen, some storm to break.

The feel of the day had some impact on Abigail's decision to read the letter. It wasn't the grandeur of the day that inspired her towards it, or the sense of destiny in the wind – Haskell himself preferred clear skies and good weather, and was too blunt to appreciate grandeur. But the grimness of the day and the lack of customers in the store drove Abigail to distraction, and she had been meaning to read the letter for a while, in any case.

It took Abigail a while to find the letter. She had placed it in the cash register for safe keeping, and didn't think to check there until she'd checked almost everywhere else. When she found it, she laid it on the gloss top of the counter, her name in Haskell's handwriting hanging above the shelves of fishing lures and hunting knives. She reached beneath the counter, took one of the knives from its place, drew it and lay the sheath on the counter. She slit the top of the envelope open, extracted the letter within, lay it and the knife down on the counter.

The letter read,

Abigail,

You'll read this after I'm dead, most likely. That's how it ought to be. I've had my time – "The days of our years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore year, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." I had seventy years. It's my time.

There aren't many regrets I have left. Breaking your bow – that's one of them. I didn't know you then. I didn't like you then. Now, things are different. You're my inheritor, for better or for worse. That changes things.

Your bow is in Glemwood Forest, for what it's worth. Not that you need it – you shoot well, whatever you've got to hand. If it still matters to you, that's where you'll find it.

Good luck with the store. Keep it well. Keep it strong.

Jeremy

Randolph had watched the morning's storm from the porch of Reya's bed and breakfast. The rain had blown against him, wet his cheeks and his forehead, dampened his hair. The wind had taken his worries and his spirit and had carried them both away, dispersing his anxieties across the closed off sky. He'd felt refreshed, afterwards. The grey of the sky and the hint of sourness on the wind had passed him without bothering him, without having an impact.

He remarked on the bluster of the day to Reya as they stood together in the kitchen, afterwards, him making coffee, her making toast. "It's a day of reckoning outside," he said. "A judgment day."

“I know,” said Reya. “I was out in it this morning, riding Shimmer on the trails.” She reached a hand over his arm to grab a plate, withdrew with care.

Randolph reached up into the cupboard for a mug. “Don’t talk to me before I’ve had my coffee ... or after, for that matter,” it read. He put it back, wincing, and reached for another.

“You got in late last night,” said Reya, lightly. “Erea-alfsven Kainos?”

The grief that does not sleep, thought Randolph. Aloud, he said, “I was sharing grief, actually. Ker-alfsven Sharos.”

“Oh?”

“I was out with Rys,” he explained. The next mug he grabbed was blank, except for a hand painted flag that signified no country he could name. “We talked about Jeremy together.”

Toast sprang up from the toaster. Reya went over to grab it, plucking it onto a waiting plate. “You worry me, Randolph,” she said, looking around for butter.

“Here you go.” Randolph handed over the butter and turned to pour himself coffee. “I’ll be fine.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Randolph did not know what she did mean. He went back to pouring coffee, knowing she would tell him in her own time.

Of a time, Randolph would have taken nothing with his coffee. Black coffee had been a part of Jeremy’s religion, same as classic rifles and the word of God. The more a man put in his coffee, the more he tried to twist the words of the Bible from their truth, the less Jeremy would trust him. “Trust

is everything,” Jeremy was fond of saying. “I can only trust what’s simple; that’s my way.” Randolph hadn’t agreed with him, not exactly, but he’d taken some of it to heart and to habit. He’d started drinking his coffee black in the time he’d known Jeremy, and kept up the practice for a while after they’d fallen out. Gradually he’d let the habit slip, let it be replaced by honey and by a fondness for caramel lattes.

Reya handed him a squeeze bottle of honey. “You’re too close to help them,” she said. “You can’t help Rys through their grief and walk through your own at the same time.”

“Thank you.” Randolph took the honey, flipped open the lid. “And it’s fine. I grieved Jeremy when we fell out. I’m doing alright, now.”

Reya said nothing, keeping a silence that sounded of disbelief. Randolph couldn’t blame her, couldn’t say anything that might convince her or change her mind. He couldn’t say for sure whether he was lying, or self-deceiving, or whether he was telling the full, real truth. He couldn’t place himself in his grief.

When Rys was younger, and the dog their grandfather bought them had died, he had taken them to the local animal shelter for a replacement. “You can have your pick,” he’d said. “I owe you this.” They had been too much in grief to pick a dog – and with uncharacteristic tact, their grandfather did not insist – but through the visit they had met the owner of the shelter, a friendly faced vet by the name of Charles Oakley. Mr. Oakley had taken a liking to them and offered them a volunteer position,

offered that they come in once a week or so to groom the dogs and the cats. Their grandfather had told them not to accept. They had done so, anyways, though they were careful to do so out of his earshot.

Later, driving them to a shift at the shelter, their mother had told them about their grandfather's grudge against Mr. Oakley. "They had a disagreement over a hunting dog a decade back," she had said. "Charles tried to bury the hatchet, but your grandfather wouldn't have it." Rys had their own thoughts on why their grandfather didn't want them volunteering at an animal shelter. Something about a place meant to keep animals safe seemed to them antithetical to the aims of a hunter. But they had never asked him, and with their grandfather dead, they never would.

Rys was thinking of their grandfather, brushing an elderly dog's fur in the back of the animal shelter, when they heard a familiar voice.

"Hello?" asked Abigail. "Charles?"

Rys stood up; the dog they were grooming started to lick their dangling hand. Abigail came around a corner from the front of the shelter, dressed for rain.

"Hi Rys," Abigail said.

"Hi," said Rys. "Mr. Oakley's out, if you're looking for him. He's on a call." Mr. Oakley had left them in charge of the shelter a half hour earlier, heading off to attend to the emergency of a small dog.

"Alright." Abigail hesitated, rethought, asked, "How are you?"

Rys shrugged. "Alright," they said. "I'm not a big fan of the rain."

"That's fair."

There was a certain stilted awkwardness to their conversation, a way Abigail had of avoiding looking Rys in the eye. Rys wondered at it. They realized to some surprise that they couldn't remember a time they'd talked to Abigail on their own, without their mother or Aunt Suzanne or their grandfather there as accompaniment.

"Actually," said Abigail, "I was going to ask Charles, but you might know."

"Alright," Rys said. "I don't know a lot about the shelter."

"It's not – it's about your grandfather."

"Oh."

Abigail pulled a sheet of paper from a pocket of her jacket, uncrumpled it. Rys' grandfather's handwriting stood boldly out from the top of the page. "Do you know a place called 'Glemwood Forest'?"

Rys went numb, eyes wide, headlight glazed. Somehow their voice remained unfrozen. "Yeah, it's behind the Bays. Do you know the river trail and the boat launch?"

"Yeah, I've been there."

"Take the river trail south, and you're there."

"Thanks," Abigail said.

"Do you -" Rys' voice went dry. They coughed, swallowed, tried to clear their throat. "Do you – uh, why?"

"Oh, uh." Abigail held out the sheet of paper, almost as a prop. "Your grandfather recommended it."

“Oh.”

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rys said. They waved, awkward. “Have fun.”

“Thanks.”

Rys dropped down to sitting as Abigail turned to leave, letting the dog at their side step over and onto their lap. They listened to her boots ringing from concrete as she made her way out of the store, and they buried their face in the dog’s fur and let their eyes fill with tears.

The rain began to fall as Abigail left For Paws Sake, a light, misting drizzle that speckled against her hands and added patches of shine to the road. She got back in her jeep – in the jeep that had been Haskell’s – and she turned on the wipers. They smeared raindrops across the windshield, turning the lights outside into streaks. She hesitated for a moment, thinking of where to go, how to follow the directions that Rys had given her. Then she pulled out of the parking lot and away, driving north and away from the center of town.

Once, in an uncharacteristic moment of candor, Haskell had admitted that he didn’t know how to relate to Rys. “They don’t make sense to me,” he’d said, talking at her from the driver’s seat of the jeep. “Sometimes we’re out together and they just shut down. They stop talking, they just thousand-yard-stare or look down at their phone and I get it, I’ve seen people go through some rough times, but it’s not like they’ve got a difficult life. They’ve got school ... that’s about it. They’re not being bullied, they’ve got a stable home, they don’t need to worry about money. And they can’t explain

it to me.” Haskell had lifted his hands from the wheel in frustration, gripped it again after a moment of suspension. “Work with me, buddy,” he’d said, softer than she knew him most often to be. “I just ... don’t know.”

There was much Abigail thought unlikely about the way Haskell described Rys and their life. She could have told him so, could have talked of depression or of the changing times or of the blindness of age and of authority. She chose, instead, to tell a separate truth; “I don’t know, either,” she’d said. “I really don’t know.”

The conversation had ended there. Haskell had asked if she was hungry, and turned off at a local diner and bought them both burgers. She thought of it again, driving away from For Paws’ Sake, where she’d left Rys with an uncomfortably quiet look in their eyes. It was true now as it had been then that she did not know how to help them, did not know how to ask if they needed help, or what she would do if they said yes. All she could do was hope.

The rain thickened. Abigail turned the windshield wipers up another notch.

Abigail knew how to reach the boat launch Rys had mentioned. The paths around the Bay weren’t suitable for hunting – she had the impression that it was illegal there, and regardless, the Bay bordered Primavera College and the town to its north both, far too close to civilization for her liking – but she had walked them before, once or twice with Suzanne, once or twice on her own. She didn’t remember a trail leading away from the dock. She had not been looking, and yet, it struck her as odd. That stretch of woods had no special meaning to Haskell, not as far as she knew. They had never gone there together. They had met, and he had broken her bow, in woods nowhere near the place. She

wondered why, then, her bow would be there, why in Glemwood Forest, and why he wouldn't simply have given it to her, had he known all along where it was.

Time passed in a blur after Abigail left. Rys could remember trying to call their mother, then their grandmother, could remember dazedly caretaking the shelter's armful of dogs and cats (and its handful of lizards), could remember Mr. Oakley getting back and telling them they had done enough for the day and could, if they desired, leave early. None of it stuck especially clear in their mind. None of it registered an impact.

Randolph had warned Rys away from Glemwood Forest. That was their fixation; that was the cloud which came across their mind and kept them detached from the world. Randolph had said that the living could not enter Glemwood Forest and return, not without training. Randolph had intervened for Rys; they did not know why, or whether he would do the same for Abigail. Rys wanted to talk to him, to ask, but they had no way of getting in touch. Their mother or their grandmother might have his number, but neither of them had answered when Rys called.

The rain brought Rys back to themselves. They had left their car at the shelter, gone wandering up towards Main Street and Elm. The rain soaked their hair, drenching them before they could make it even a single block. An orchestra entirely of percussion rang around them, raindrops landing on concrete like drumsticks on snares, landing on rooftops like mallets on gongs. Cars flew by along the road, kicking up mist in a sear of sound and water. The air smelled sharp and heavy. They could feel the

beginnings of a headache coming on, the type they would occasionally get when the weather turned sour.

The center of town had its lights on, fortifying the place against the weight of the storm. Rys stood for a while on the corner by the deli, looking at the way the light fractured against the rain. Millions of tiny droplets shimmered on the ground, each reflecting a fraction of the glow of a streetlamp or a neon sign. The glow of the crosswalk indicators changed from red to white, accompanied by a mechanical ticking and a voice stating that the walk signs were now on in all directions. The lights turned back to red. The last of the passers by jogged their way out of the street and traffic began to flow, first down Main, then down Elm, two streams that crossed over each other and led into the center of town and away.

If Rys had been thinking clearly, or at all, they might have stayed on that corner, looking at the lights, enjoying the rain, until the sign turned white again and they could safely cross. But they were not thinking, not really. They were listening to the rain, and they were watching the lights, and they were thinking in an abstract way about Randolph and about Abigail and about their grandfather, and when they stepped out into the road, the standing water at the curb chill against their ankles, they did not expect to get hit by a truck, not exactly, but when it happened, when they ragdolled, limp, across the pavement at the center of Door's Creek, they did not entirely mind.

A single death left little ripple in the world. Hundreds of people were dying in even the quietest corner of the world, hanging over the precipice of the afterlife held by the thinnest of strings. The

snapping of one made a sound. No trees fell quiet in the forest; no one went soundless and alone into the hereafter. And yet the sound more often than not registered only as a single note in a symphony of sound. There was too much death for an individual passing to stand out. You could say that was natural, that was how it should be. Death and life, two sides of a weighted coin, came always in each other's company. For a single death to make an impact, for it to be heard, something would have to be wrong with the world. You could also disagree. There were reasons behind graveyards, you might say, reasons behind funerals and days of remembrance. The passing of an individual should have weight, should have meaning, else life would start to lose its footing.

Randolph Beauchamp, Reaper of Death, had his own opinions on the matter, kept carefully close to his chest. They were hardly relevant. Randolph had been listening for Rys' death since he arrived in Door's Creek, filtering out the everyday deaths occurring in chorus around him and waiting to hear if Rys should die, keeping tabs, making sure they were alright. When Rys died, hit by a truck at the intersection of Main and Elm, Randolph knew, and his spirit left his body almost before Rys hit the rain slick road.

The last time Rys had died, Randolph had waited for them at the footbridge in Glemwood Forest, waited for Rys' spirit to find their way to the forest and become oriented. Randolph didn't grant them that courtesy, this time. He flew fast, and he appeared at the scene of Rys' death before they could leave.

Rys stood in the center of the intersection, their body at their feet, staring down the headlights of the truck which had killed them. Time seemed frozen around them, the truck still in its motion, the raindrops around them suspended in their falling.

“Rys,” said Randolph.

Rys turned around. They looked rough, rain drenched and bloody nosed and shaken. “Hi,” they said. “I was looking for you.” They said it simply, without reflection, without acknowledgement of the circumstances or of the body at their feet.

Randolph took a breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. “If you go looking for death,” he said, “sooner or later you’ll find it.”

“I found you, didn’t I?”

Randolph nodded over at the curb. “Let’s sit,” he said. Rys nodded. The two of them walked over together and sat on the curb, legs stretched long to keep their heels from sitting in the puddle beneath them.

“Abigail’s going to Glemwood,” said Rys.

Of all the responses Randolph had thought himself prepared for, he had not expected to hear that. “How do you know?” he asked.

“She asked me for directions.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Directions,” said Rys.

A moment passed, as Rys stared at the rain and as Randolph tried to wrap his head around the concept of Abigail in Glemwood Forest.

“Did grandfather know about the forest?”

“No,” said Randolph. He had never told Jeremy about Glemwood Forest, about any of it, nor did he know anyone who might reasonably have done so. “Why?”

“She had a letter,” said Rys. “She said he suggested it.”

Time would tell, thought Randolph, whether Jeremy’s involvement answered more questions than it raised. A different question, related only by tangent, came to mind. “Is that why you wanted to see me?”

Rys shrugged. “I thought you should know.”

“You got yourself killed, Rys.”

“It’s not like it matters.” Rys dug around in their pocket, produced a tarnished silver half dollar. “Tails, right?”

The coin arced up into the air, colliding with suspended raindrops along the way, collecting water. Randolph noticed its motion a moment too late. The words of magic he had used to rig the toss time and time before didn’t leave his mouth before the coin fell into Rys’ waiting hand, bouncing against their palm and recoiling onto their fingers, Lady Liberty showing her fatal head.

Rys had thought they knew what it was to die. They had done so often enough. They had felt the slip of their hands on roof tiles and the crunch of bone, had known the gradual ache of weeks spent

in a hospital bed surrounded by sterility and strange blinking machines. Yet now that the moment had come, and their coin sat heads up in their hand, they found themselves entirely unprepared. They felt sick. Acid caught at the back of their throat; tears caught in their eyes. The beating of their heart came loud against their chest, like the desperate rattlings of a convict. The ground felt small and impossibly far away, and for a moment, they had the impression of great velocity, as if all their previous deaths had been stumbles, small and insignificant, along the cliff at the edge of life, and only now had they fallen off.

“I’m not ready,” Rys said, and they found to their own surprise that they believed it. “I don’t want to die.”

“Good,” said Randolph. He reached out, took the coin and pocketed it. “Maybe we can stop meeting here, then.”

Rys kept looking at their now empty palm, the afterimage of the coin burnt into their vision. “But I’m dead,” they said.

Randolph shook his head. “The coin never mattered,” he said. “I rigged every toss. All except for this one – you threw it early, I didn’t have time.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rys.

“It’s time you did.”

“You saved Aunt Suzanne,” Rys said. “You let her win.”

“I made Jeremy a promise,” said Randolph.

“My grandfather?”

“Let me explain,” said Randolph, his voice firm.

Rys went quiet. There was too much to think about, too much to consider. Sometime, someday, they would have to process everything that was happening, everything they were being told. For now, all they could do was listen.

“I was there when Michael died,” said Randolph. “There wasn’t anything I could do. Sometimes it just happens that way – something’s wrong, and there isn’t anything I or anyone else can do.” Randolph stopped, took a long, shuddering breath, refocused. “Jeremy – your grandfather – he took it hard. There wasn’t much I could do there, either. I gave him the dictionary, the Language of Loss, and I tried to help him through it, but your grandfather, he felt things deeply. It’s part of why ... it’s part of what made him who he was.”

Randolph looked over at Rys, as if expecting some kind of reaction. Rys could not answer. Numbness had taken their entire body, had wrapped itself around them and left them unable to feel.

“We went drinking one night,” said Randolph. “Your grandfather and I. He was drunk. He told me how his father had lost a child, a son, at a very young age, how he’d been so afraid of having the same happen to him, that now it did he didn’t know what he was going to do.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Rys.

“Neither had I,” said Randolph. “Not until that moment.”

There was something Randolph wasn’t saying, something he was circling around, reluctant to approach. Even numb, even staring down their own death, Rys could tell that much. “Just tell me,” they said. “What happened?”

“I promised Jeremy it wouldn’t happen again. That no more of his descendents would die young.”

Rys’ head spun. They stared at Randolph, marked the way he regarded the rain, inhuman.

“I saved Suzanne,” said Randolph, talking slow and deliberate. “And I’ve been saving you. But I am a Reaper, and I have a duty. I can be your safety net until you’re an adult. After that, if you die, you’re on your own.”

“Oh.”

“You need help.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve walked into traffic twice – you’re not fine.”

Rys looked around, at the truck that had hit them, at their body on the ground. Everything seemed to glow, in that moment, the rain in the air, the streetlamps and the signs above the intersection, white light seeping into the edges of their vision. They were about to leave, they knew it, about to return to their body and to the land of the living.

“Randolph -”

“I’m sending someone to find you,” said Randolph. “Stay at the curb when you wake up.”

Then all was light and wet and pain.

Miles away, Randolph came back to his body with a start. He’d been standing in his room at the Sunset House when he’d gone to Rys, pacing between the desk and the bed. In the aftermath of his

return, he collapsed onto the bed, laying on his back with his arms flung to his sides and his legs dangling off the edge, staring up at the ceiling, trying to think what to do.

Most of what had passed with Rys had struck too deep for easy remembrance. Randolph had not meant to tell them the truth about why he kept saving them; now that he had, he could not approach the memory, could not decide whether it had been a mistake. Either way, he'd done all he could for Rys in that moment – all or almost all. Time would tell if it had been enough.

Randolph rolled over on his side and picked up the phone from the bedside table. He had, after all, told Rys that he would send help.

Sharmon answered at the first ring. He didn't say his usual spiel, didn't say he was from the coffee shop, didn't ask who was calling and why. He said, instead, "Is that business at the center of town yours?"

"You can see that?"

"I'm on the balcony," said Sharmon. "It's nice out."

Randolph looked at the window. Rain covered it, trickling down in furtive streams, and the sky beyond it appeared dark.

"I assume you want me to help?"

"It's Rys," said Randolph. "I can't be there, and I don't know how to help."

"I'll bring them in," said Sharmon. "Check in when you can."

Sharmon hung up; Randolph followed suit. He would explain, later, if he could, if Sharmon wanted to know. Likely enough, Sharmon would say he knew enough for his liking, and would call him for an unrelated favor weeks or months later.

With Rys settled, Randolph stood up and began again to pace, thinking of Abigail and of Rys' warning. He would have preferred it, of course, if Rys had not died to tell him about Abigail going to Glemwood Forest. All the same, it was good that he knew. Few could go alone and unaccompanied into the forest and expect to return alive. Someone like Abigail, who knew not that there was any danger, had almost no chance at all. Randolph could guide her, could keep the dangers of death at bay long enough for her to make it in and back. But he would have to be there, and without Rys' warning, he would not have known to go.

If Randolph had been a mage more advanced, he could have appeared to Abigail from the comfort of the Sunset House. Astral projection, the removal of one's spirit from one's body and one's spectral appearance elsewhere, took some time to master, but any reasonably talented mage could manage it. Randolph had always struggled with magic. He had access to a handful of simple tricks, the persuasive magics that could open doors or envelopes, the older, mortal magics that he had learned as a Reaper of death. Astral projection was beyond him. He could, as a Reaper, appear before others at the moment of their death, but he could not manifest where and when he chose. For Rys, he could simply appear, arriving as a figure of salvation in an hour of need. For Abigail, he would have to travel there in person.

The preparations were few. He grabbed the scythe charm that served as a badge of office from its place on the dresser. He took a dark felt long coat from the closet, laced up a pair of all weather boots. He swiped his car keys from the bedside table, together with a comforting set of rosary beads, and slipped them into the pocket of his jeans. Then, almost as an afterthought, he opened the drawer and pulled from it Haskell's gun, placing it with care in a summoned holster behind his back.

So armed and armored, Randolph left his room at the Sunset House, heading out into the storm.

Chapter 14

The storm worsened as Abigail made her way out of Door's Creek, turning loud and thick and ugly. Traffic along the highway slowed from five above the speed limit to ten below. The trees of the forest swayed with the wind, not loud enough to be heard above the rain and the whine of the radio in Haskell's jeep, wild enough to drag Abigail's attention from the road to follow their movement. The jeep's headlights glowed, reaching less far with every passing mile. Its windshield wipers slipped back and forth, turned to their highest setting. Even with their help, Abigail had to squint to see, had to follow the taillights of the car before her, had to drive very nearly blind.

It was, by anyone's standards, a poor day for a hike. Yet Abigail did not reconsider or think of turning back.

Haskell had never minded the weather, not in the time she'd known him. He'd never complained about it, never joined the half-joking resentment of his fellow hunters. Nor had he bent to the weather, never worn thicker boots or rain resistant coats or extra layers of shirts. The greatest concession he'd make was a hat, and even that was half-hearted – he'd wear a threadbare baseball cap whatever the weather, passing up whatever felt covered or wool lined options the Bait and Tackle had in stock.

In a rare venture of humor, Abigail had once asked how Haskell could sell the store's selection of waterproof gear without ever using it himself. "Are you trying to fool our customers into wanting what they don't need?"

“Our customers can want whatever damn fool gadget they please,” Haskell had told her. “They aren’t paying me to change the way I hunt.”

Abigail had always worn weather appropriate clothing, going hunting. With the employee discount that Haskell had, as an afterthought, given her, she’d bought whatever gear came into stock, whatever gear she could use. Boots and jacket and cap were all new, well fortified against the rain. She used a recurve bow while hunting, a long-owned classic, but she owned a state of the art compound, and well-made quivers and arrows and carrying cases for both. She’d never asked Haskell’s opinions of any of it. He hadn’t said, hadn’t commented on it when they’d show up to hunt together with gear and clothing fifty years apart. She wasn’t going out into the rain to prove anything to him, not going to show that she could be as impervious as he. Then again, she wasn’t entirely avoiding it, either.

A clap of thunder made itself heard above the noise of the radio. She continued driving, squinting through the windshield and the rain.

Randolph did not hear the first clap of thunder. The rental car he drove had gotten its CD player stuck on, despite Randolph not having used it since he’d gotten the car, and he could spare neither the thought to figure out where the off switch was nor the energy to whisper it into silence. Some foreign group – Celric, if Randolph guessed the language right – drowned out all sound from the world outside, leaving the rain to strike voiceless against the window, leaving the car to race noiseless along the road. Yet he could feel the thunder, feel it in his bones, feel it in the impact it made on the magic of the world.

Randolph frowned, and let his foot rest more heavily on the pedal. The car sped ever faster, advancing into the rain. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow,” he muttered, “I am not afraid.” In truth, he was afraid; the quote was only one he said in moments of unease, to calm his nerves, to make himself believe it.

A pile of letters rested on the passenger seat, Jeremy’s letters, the letters unsent that Jeremy had written for Randolph in the long years they’d been apart. Randolph read them as he drove, left hand on the wheel, right hand tearing open envelopes and extracting letters and flattening them against the dashboard. Each letter opened hurt him, embroidering his heart stitch by stitch with regret. He’d meant to save the letters, meant to read them one by one, dragging out the time of Jeremy’s last farewell. He’d meant to read them with tender attention, alive to every nuance of phrase. With Abigail off to Glemwood Forest, with Rys recuperating from recklessness at the heart of Door’s Creek, that became a luxury he could no longer afford. Randolph needed to know, needed to learn what Jeremy had wanted to tell him. He needed to know why Jeremy had sent Abigail to the forest. He needed to know what Jeremy thought of Rys. He needed a guide, even if answers were out of reach, anything to help him salvage the situation, to help him with saving Rys, with saving Abigail’s life. He could no longer linger. And so he tore through letter after letter, attention split between the words Jeremy had sent for him and the rain-washed road.

Rys heard the thunder start from the roof of Sharmon’s Cafe. Sharmon had found them after the accident, had guided the owner of the truck back from where Rys was struggling to stand and had

told them he was there to help. “Randolph sent me,” he’d said, and he’d guided Rys back to the cafe from the intersection and brought him through the back to the small balcony on the roof. He’d sat them under the awning, and given them a rag for their nosebleed, and had gone off to make them tea. Now Rys was resting on the balcony, looking out at the roofs of Door’s Creek, admiring the rain.

The thunder brought a new darkness to the scene. The clouds above the rain had thickened, had gone from pale grey to the color of soot. The rain had thickened with it, falling less in an army of discrete droplets, more as a continuous downpour. The awning above them rattled with the impact. The air itself felt wet.

A small meow came from beside them. Rys looked down. Chevalier sat there, undrenched by the rain, half leaned back on her haunches, prepared to jump.

“Alright,” said Rys. “Come on.”

Chevalier sprang, landed in their lap. Rys buried their fingers in her fur, soft and grey.

“She likes you,” said Sharmon. He’d appeared in the propped-open door behind Rys, holding a to go cup. “She doesn’t just go up to everyone.”

“Thank you,” said Rys. They didn’t think it was true, but it was a comforting thought, and they didn’t press it.

Sharmon took the chair beside Rys, handing them the cup. “I don’t know about you,” he said, “but I’ve always liked this kind of weather. It’s bracing.”

Rys smiled, but did not laugh. They held the cup in a hand that did not shake, and let their other rest, trembling, on Chevalier’s head.

“I can’t say I know everything,” said Sharmon. “I’m no Reaper, no scholar. But I’m safe to talk to, if that’s what you want. Or I can leave you alone.”

“I ...” Rys could not think of their most recent death. The memories had not yet settled; they had not yet decided how to feel, how to react. “Did you know my grandfather?”

“Haskell?” Sharmon nodded. “Yeah, I knew him.”

“Did he ... was he ok with dying?”

Sharmon let out a sharp breath, harsh through gritted teeth. “I didn’t know him that well,” he said.

“Oh,” said Rys. “Sorry.”

Another crack of thunder echoed in the distance, louder than the first. No lightning accompanied it, not that Rys could see. All around them was rain, rain and slick rooftops, rain and the sound of its fall.

“You know,” said Sharmon, “some happenings divide your life into before and after. Getting married, say. Getting divorced. Losing all your money in Cambridge and having to walk your way back to London. They don’t come around often, but once every twenty years or so you change, and that’s for good.”

“Did you lose all of your money in Cambridge?”

“That I cannot confirm or deny.”

Rys took a sip of the tea. It tasted almost of camomile, less sweet, with a greater depth of flavor.

“A lot of people in this town knew your grandfather before he lost Michael,” said Sharmon.

“More have met him after – that was thirty odd years ago, now – but still, we remember. That changed him. That was his happening.”

“What?”

Sharmon looked out at the rain. “The way I heard it told, he lost purpose. He wasn’t here for anything, anymore. He was just counting out the days until he died.”

“That doesn’t sound like him,” said Rys.

“Well, no,” said Sharmon. “It wouldn’t, to you. You didn’t meet him until after something else had happened to him, something big.”

“What?”

Rys had meant it in confusion. Sharmon took it as a question of specific intent. “No one knows what,” he said. “At least, I don’t. It happened when you were young, whatever it was, some scare or some decision. Maybe he came to God.”

Shevaliei meowed, a hint of sharpness in her voice. Rys realized they’d let their hand rest heavy on her neck, too heavy. They snuggled their face in her fur in apology; she began to purr, slightly.

“All I know is he found some purpose again,” said Sharmon. He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and let his hands steeple. “He was ready for death twenty years ago. Recently, just before he died, not so much.”

“I’m not ready to die,” said Rys.

Sharon smiled. “Good for you,” he said. “I think he’d be proud of you.”

Another burst of far off thunder made its way across the sky, accompanied this time by a flickering flash of lightning.

The trail at the boat dock had no marking, no sign to show it was there. Abigail took only a moment to find it regardless, tucked behind a pale beech tree. It wasn't much of a trail. It might have been, on other occasions, but what bits of it were uneroded were covered with mud and fallen branches from the storm. Yet it was a trail, and Abigail was wearing sturdy boots.

Abigail made slow progress along the trail. Every few steps she stopped, or had to reorient herself and step with care over a fallen branch. Sometimes she had to scramble up slopes, grabbing roots and thin, young trees as handholds. Sometimes she lost the path, and had to trace back through the forest, hunting around until she could find the way forward. The rain came down all the while, harder and ever harder, a constant pressure that stung at her hands and at the tip of her nose.

Abigail did not know whether she expected to find her bow or not. She had never known Haskell to lie. Then again, he had not been himself in his last weeks, not entirely, and she could not conceive of Haskell breaking her bow, finding it and leaving it in a strange forest for her to find after his death. She was not there for the bow – although, she thought, it would be nice if it were there, the reward at the end of a rain-soaked quest. She was there because Haskell had told her to be, because the last letter he'd written to her had pointed her to the forest, because she wanted to accompany him to the wild, one last time.

So thinking, Abigail passed across an unseen threshold, and found herself somewhere else. The scenery around her changed only gradually. For a while, all she noticed was the sudden tapering of the storm, the lessening of the rain from a downpour to a trickle, then to nothing at all. She removed her hat, set it in a pocket of her coat. Without the rain, she could see around her with clarity, could notice the change in the character of the woods. The path she took had become more solid, dry packed dirt untouched by wear and tear. It led clearly through the forest, impossible to miss, widening into a broad, tree flanked avenue. A strange light had fallen over the forest, the kind of silvery shadows she associated with the woods at midnight on a full moon. The trees looked insubstantial in that light, almost unreal. She walked between them and under their canopy without hesitation. Junk lined the road; every few feet she saw a discarded piece of clothing, or an abandoned coffee cup, or a scattered herd of pens. Parts of the woods around Door's Creek had issues with littering, Abigail knew, but she'd never seen it as bad as she did then. And yet, the scene was beautiful, silver dusted, clouds overhanging and leaving the leafless woods cool and dry.

Abigail wondered, dimly, why she had not found this place earlier, why Haskell had not mentioned it before.

Once, when Randolph and Jermy were three beers deep in conversation at the Door's Creek Meathouse, Jeremy had told him how much he disliked writing letters. "If I've got something to say, I'll say it in person," he'd said, fist pressed in emphasis upon the table. "I'll give you a chance to hear me out, and if you've got something to say back, I'll hear you out. Letters are the coward's way," he'd

added. “With a letter, you don’t need to face your consequences.” True to his word, Randolph had never known him to send a letter. Jeremy would call, once in a blue moon, but that was as distant as he’d get.

Randolph had not thought of that moment in years. He remembered it then, hidden vaults of his memory unsealing, as he drove too fast along the highways of Door’s Creek and tore through a stack of letters that Jeremy had left for him.

Some of the letters were short, almost to the point of bluntness. One read,

Randolph,

Remembered your birthday was yesterday. It’s odd, remembering. You’d think, after this long, I’d have forgotten.

Happy birthday.

Jeremy

Randolph tossed it aside, fumbled through the pile beside him for the next. This one, longer, he merely skimmed. It spoke of Door’s Creek gossip, of the businesses that had failed, of the figures who had died, of the marriages and divorces and of the price of corn. It was the sort of conversation they used to have, when Randolph would pass back through Door’s Creek. Reading it written felt wrong, like a false memory.

Most of the letters Randolph read fell along those lines, blunt or mundane. Only when he reached the second to last letter, a letter placed inside a pale green envelope, did he find something different.

Randolph,

- *I met a friend of yours today – big, shaggy man, called himself ‘Grim.’ I asked how you were. He said you were alright, that he hadn’t seen you in a while but that he’d heard you were fine.*

The pastor read from Timothy last Sunday. “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than any infidel.” I’ve tried to provide, always. God only knows what kind of job I’ve made of it.

I miss you. I guess I can say that, now that I know you’re alive.

Randolph winced, reading that, blinking back an oncoming tear. It only kept him distracted for a moment, but in that moment, the road curved sharply to the right, and Randolph reacted late, and the car slid softly off the road into the adjoining field.

Randolph sat, unhurt and undazed, in the stopped car. He looked back over his shoulder, gauged the slope down which he and the car had come. Given time and effort, through magic or through the bare strength of his back, he could get the car back on the road. He had precious little of either, and he was, by then, almost at the borders of Glemwood Forest.

Randolph gave a grudging sigh. He steeled himself for the rain that was to come, threw open the door and stumbled out of the car. Celtic music continued to play behind him, escorting him out. Every step across the field squelched with mud, dampness seeping over the tops of his shoes and biting at his ankles. Rain stung against his face, began soaking into his scalp and running down the collar of his shirt. His long coat, open and unbuttoned, flagged and swelled behind him, throwing off his

stumbling progress. Thunder split the sky above him; the occasional flash of lightning lit his way.

Ahead of him were trees, and beyond those trees was Glemwood Forest, and Abigail was somewhere therein.

Only when he reached the treeline did he realize Jeremy's second to last letter was still crumpled in his hand, now soaked and unreadable. He put it in the pocket of his coat and kept going.

Abigail did not know how long she wandered through Glemwood Forest. The eerie lightning and the odd shadows of the trees messed with her sense of time, altered her sense of space. She could not see the sun, could not tell if she'd been there for minutes or for hours. The trails wound beneath her feet; it felt as though she'd traveled the same stretch of woods over and over in succession, circling back around despite going ever onwards. She reached for her phone, to check for a map or for the time, and found it dead, drained entirely of battery. She wasn't surprised – she had a habit of leaving her phone on low battery – but she thought she remembered it being at full, earlier.

Abigail wondered why Haskell hadn't told her about this place while he was alive. Surely it was strange and beautiful enough to warrant mention, what with all the conversations they'd had about the area and its scenery. But then, that had been his way – he'd shared exactly as much of himself and his experience as he wanted and left the rest to exploration or to random chance.

The path Abigail followed narrowed, after a while. The trees closed in around her, not quite close enough to touch. The shadows made it hard to tell distance; she kept raising a hand to brush away their overhanging branches, only to touch nothing but air. Roots kept appearing in the ground

ahead of her, only to disappear when she reached them. The strange light of the forest gave her eerie feelings of desolation, as if she were half asleep in the darkness of an abandoned world.

The path turned and twisted, came around a gleaming oak and opened out onto a ravine. Ahead on the path, a wooden footbridge crossed to the other side. To the right, she could see the river, could glimpse it through the trees, blue and wide, bordered by mountains. To the left, a pile of trash lay in the path of the ravine's twisting river, contained within walls of jagged rock. There was furniture in the junkheap, tables and chairs and old, warping dressers. A shattered lava lamp rested beside a discarded pile of books. A mannequin lay draped on a pile of curtains and drapes.

On the near side of the pile rested a single splintered bow.

Abigail stared. It was her bow, the bow Haskell had broken. Somehow, impossibly, he had told her the truth.

The slope of the ravine was shallow enough that Abigail could slide down it without difficulty. She did so, landing boots first in the shallow water of the stream. A step brought her across the water. Another brought her to the bow. She picked it up, staring at the damage. It wasn't at all as she remembered it. She'd thought it cracked at one of the tips; instead, the center was warped and bent. She could repair it, possibly, but it wouldn't shoot with its old power, and it had always been on the weaker side. Its hunting days were over; that was irreparable.

A cough came from above her. She looked up, hand raised on instinct to shade her eyes from a sun that was covered in clouds.

Randolph Beauchamp stood on the bridge. He wore a soaked long coat. His curls were plastered to his face. He seemed somewhat out of breath.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Abigail said.

“You have no idea.”

Bow in one hand, the other free to grab handholds and steady herself on the rocks, Abigail made her way back up the slope. It occurred to her to be afraid, to wonder at Randolph and at the coincidence of them meeting out in a strange forest in the middle of a thunderstorm. Somehow, she couldn’t muster the energy.

Randolph was hunched over the railing of the bridge when she approached, resting his weight on his forearms, looking out at the ravine and at the junkpile. “I can’t convince you to leave the bow, can I?”

“Why?” asked Abigail.

“It doesn’t help,” said Randolph. “Taking artifacts from graveyards.”

“It’s my bow.”

“Fair enough.” Randolph stood straight, brushed aside the coat and fumbled with something Abigail could not see. He drew from within the coat a handgun, finger off the trigger, barrel pointed well away from Abigail. “A weapon for a weapon,” he said, and tossed it onto the junkpile. “Keeps things in balance.”

“Sure.”

“That’s the bow Jeremy broke?” asked Randolph.

“Yeah.” Abigail gripped it, tight, her hand still slick with rain. “I still don’t know why.”

Randolph shrugged. “He could be careless,” he said. “Maybe it’s as simple as that.”

“Maybe,” said Abigail. “But he could have told me if that was all it was. I would have understood.”

“Either way,” said Randolph. He seemed on the verge of adding something, some wisdom or some mundane saying. Either he changed his mind, or she had read him wrong; instead of wisdom, or reminiscence, he raised his hand and said, “You’ll make it back alright,” with the cadence of a prophecy.

Chapter 15

Rys had only been to their grandfather's grave once before the storm. They had accompanied the funeral party to the graveyard, wearing their best black jeans and a coat which didn't quite fit, and they had stood beside their mother and their grandmother as their grandfather's body was lowered into the ground. Someone had handed them a shovel. They had taken it, and helped to shift earth over the coffin, into the hole that had been made. But they had not taken time, then, to examine the site, to assess the headstone and the graveyard. They had been too numb to take it in. They could only remember the dark, rich brown of the coffin, and the splinty handle of the shovel, and the brusque, "Let's stop standing around" cadence of the priest.

Their mother had gone to the grave regularly since the funeral, a little more than monthly, a little less than weekly, always on a Sunday. The day after the storm, as she was getting ready to go, Rys asked if they could go along.

It was raining when Rys and their mother went to the graveyard. The thunderstorm of the day before had passed, but it had left clouds in its wake, showers of light, cold rain that made the air brisk. The graves in the cemetery glistened. Rys' grandfather had been buried in the larger of the town's two graveyards, and the graves surrounding his were new and glossy. Some struck Rys as ostentatious. Body sized mausoleums came up to their chest, lids slick, rain turning them into pools that reflected the dark and distant sky. It could have been a dismal scene, a graveyard covered in rain, but the air was crisp and clean, and the rain glittered like so many tiny crystals, or like stardust laid out to dry.

Rys' mother led them through the graves without saying much. She wore a black coat, her formal coat, and even with them by her side she seemed barely unalone in her grief.

"Is Michael buried here?" Rys asked.

Their mother shook her head. "He's buried somewhere else," she said. "Dad never said why." She stepped off the paved road which led through the graveyard, walking down an aisle of graves with Rys clearly in tow.

A bouquet of yellow roses lay at the foot of their grandfather's grave. Rys' mother knelt, laid a sprig of some small white flowers beside them. Rys looked at the grave. "Jeremy Michael Haskell" was carved at the top of the headstone. Below it, in letters half as large, was written a Bible verse, Revelations 21:4, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." There were no more markings; aside from a date of birth and death and a few chips at the edges, the gravestone was blank.

Rys had expected more, somehow. What, they weren't sure. Graves were not obituaries. A grave could not tell you who a person had been, could not recite their loves or their losses or what they liked to eat for breakfast. And yet, there seemed to Rys a happy medium between full knowledge of a person and the blunt absence of a name and a single quote.

"What would you say?" asked Rys. "If you could see him again."

"A last conversation?" Rys' mother put her arm around their shoulders, pulled them close. "I wouldn't."

"Oh." Rys thought it over, asked, "Why?"

“I’ve said all I wanted to say.”

A gust of wind picked up, blew through the graveyard and sprinkled rainwater on Rys’ face.

“What would you tell him?” asked Rys’ mother.

Rys shrugged. “I miss him,” they said. There was more, and they almost said it, almost opened the floodgates and let their fears spill forth. They couldn’t find the words.

“I know,” said their mother. “I miss him too.”

“Aunt Suzanne said it’s ok to miss him,” said Rys. “But that I should move on.”

Rys’ mother made a face. “Your aunt’s never lost anyone,” she said. “You don’t move past someone dying, you just live with it.”

They left the graveyard together, Rys and their mother, went to the car and drove home and did not look back.

Randolph visited Jeremy’s grave a few days after the storm, the last of his letters in hand. The grass of the cemetery was dry beneath his feet. The graves held no reflective shimmer; the breeze held no shadowed dampness. Yet his progress through the graveyard was slow, and the sky above them was clouded over, and his limbs felt heavy.

Jeremy’s grave sat towards the back of the graveyard. As Randolph approached it, he saw a great black dog sitting beside it, waiting.

“Hello, Grim.” Randolph sat beside the dog, resting on the grass in front of Jeremy’s grave.

The tongue of the Grim hung from his mouth, dangling in a pant or a grimace or a grin. “You really made a mess of things,” he said.

“Of what?”

“Of the letters.” The Grim sniffed, seeming, for a moment, almost human. “One dead, one nearly so.”

“I kept them both safe,” said Randolph.

“Sure,” said the Grim. “At what cost to you?”

Randolph leaned back, resting against the grave behind him, stretching his legs. “What about Jeremy?” he asked. “How did he know about Glemwood?”

“He stumbled across it.”

“And you let him leave alive?”

That’s part of the mess you made of things,” said the Grim. “You cursed him not to die, remember? There wasn’t a thing the forest or I could do. I just talked him out of coming back. I couldn’t do anything else about it.”

Randolph drew the last of Jeremy’s letters from his jacket pocket, toying with it, running his hands along the edges. The Grim lay down beside him, ears alert.

“What did he say about me?” asked Randolph.

“Do you really want to know?”

Randolph thought for a moment, looking down at the letter in his hands. “No,” he said. “Not really.”

The scythe around Randolph's neck glowed red. With slow precision, Randolph touched Jeremy's last letter to the scythe, as if cauterizing a battlefield wound. The letter burned to ashes in Randolph's hand, ashes which fell scattered on the flowers at the foot of the grave.

Abigail had been to Haskell's grave a few times since the funeral. She had gone on those occasions to ask him for advice, to talk with him about the problems she was facing with the shop, to ask what he would do in her place. She had no illusions of talking to Haskell's ghost, or anything like that. She did not know whether she believed in an afterlife, but she was certain that the dead would have no reason to hear the living, or to respond. It just felt like the thing to do, to ask him how she should run the shop, to make the gesture of reaching out to the past.

When Abigail visited Haskell's grave with Suzanne, a week or so after the rainstorm, there was much she could have asked him, much about which she wanted advice. But it felt better, then, to talk to Suzanne, to ask her all the questions she would have otherwise asked an empty headstone.

"I'm thinking of taking the signs down," Abigail said. "Opening up the windows a little bit."

Suzanne squeezed her hand. "I think that's smart," she said. "You can make the place friendlier that way, draw more customers."

"Yeah," said Abigail. "That's the hope."

A groundskeeper on a riding lawn mower passed by, exchanging with them a nod and a slight wave. Abigail and Suzanne drew closer together, still holding hands.

“Rys asked my sister about going to therapy,” said Suzanne. “There was a lot of argument, but she agreed, in the end. They have their first session Thursday.”

“Is Rys ok?” asked Abigail.

“They got hit by another car last weekend,” said Suzanne. “I think the worry is it’s less an accident and more suicidal carelessness, or something.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Abigail.

Suzanne shrugged. “We’re going to get them help,” she said. “I think they’ll be alright.”

Abigail nodded, let an appropriate amount of silence pass between Suzanne’s confession and her own. “I found my old bow last weekend,” she said. “The one your dad broke.”

“Really,” said Suzanne. “How?”

“Randolph gave me a letter from your dad.”

Suzanne reached an arm around Abigail’s shoulder, gave her a squeeze. “Did it help?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Abigail. “I think I remember what happened, now.” She had thought it over, bow in hand, using it as proof for what she thought happened. “He wanted to throw his weight around,” she said. “To make me feel uncomfortable. So he asked if he could shoot it, and he did, then he leaned on it, talking about the draw weight or something, trying to patronize me.” She shrugged. “He just leaned on it a little too hard, put a little too much weight on it. I don’t think he meant it to happen.”

“Christ,” said Suzanne. “And then he ditched it?”

“That’s the part I still don’t understand,” said Abigail. “I saw him put it in the back of the truck. I saw it not be there when we got back to the shop. I don’t get how it disappeared.”

“There’s also why he didn’t tell you about it,” said Suzanne.

“Yeah,” said Abigail. “But it still helps, even if I don’t know everything. He was being careless, and he hired me to try and make up for it once that carelessness had consequences.”

“That sounds like a little more than carelessness,” said Suzanne.

“Maybe,” said Abigail. “But it’s a version of him I can accept.”

A car parked in a far corner of the graveyard. Three men got out, clad in blue military uniforms, white caps, white gloves, white bands wound around their waists. They started walking in loose formation, backs straight, hands swinging, heading for a clean white grave.

“I should feel worse about this,” said Suzanne. “About him dying.”

“Do you not?”

“Not like Mary does,” said Suzanne. “Or like my mom.”

“He kicked you out when you were a teenager,” said Abigail. “You’re allowed to have mixed feelings.”

“I guess,” said Suzanne.

Abigail put an arm around Suzanne’s shoulder. Suzanne folded into her, cheek resting against her chest, hair tickling her throat. They stood like that for a long time, swaying in a breeze that brought with it the faintest flickering of rain. Then they turned in unspoken agreement and, hand in hand, left the graveyard.

FINIS