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Snake Eyes

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Bard College

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Snake Eyes

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

Of Bard College

By

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

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House Edge - The casino in-built advantage, usually gained by paying less than the odds

On their last morning in California, Tierney shoved Sinclair into a bathroom mirror. Purple-red anger crowded the edges of her vision and pounded in her ears, clearing only when her half-sister's head hit the glass with a gruesome *crack*. Sickening slow, Sinclair's body slid down to slump against the sink, leaving a ragged lattice of glass in its wake. Tierney couldn't keep from seeing her reflection then, mercifully distorted by steam and damage; a messy blur of white and red. She sucked in a breath of air so thick and damp she almost gagged.

Sinclair had spent forty-five minutes in the shower, as if they weren't in smack the middle of a damn water shortage. That wasn't why. It didn't matter now. Tierney's inexplicable rage evaporated, as all her rages seemed to, with one eyeful of the aftermath. Sinclair gazed bluey, bleakly up at her through a haze of shock and wet gold curls, of sprawled limbs and water dripping all over the tile.

And Tierney didn't know what she'd been thinking. Sinclair wasn't tough or hard or mean. Liked to hang around folks that were a few or all those things, but Sinclair herself was more for fucking than fighting. The light to which all eyes are drawn, everybody's friend, the diplomat, the tiny bubble of calm that somehow floats to the top of all the chaos. And here was Tierney, gaping down at the damage and choking on "I'm sorry" like it was a chicken bone stuck in her throat.

A sort of groan rolled out of Sinclair's mouth, and Tierney tasted bile. Worst part was, she had one foot out the door and wanted more to run than to help.

"The *fuck* did you do?"

That wasn't Sinclair. That was Narcissa, biting out every word cold and precise as she stalked towards the threshold. Framed by a window's worth of soft morning glow, Tierney's *other* half-sister looked sharp and stark as a blade.

“—an accident,” Tierney blurted. It didn't feel like she was lying, but Narcissa hadn't been waiting on an answer.

At least, she didn't ask questions or glance at Tierney as she passed; just muttered “Pack your shit,” out of the corner of her mouth before sinking down beside her sister on the glass strewn floor. Tierney saw Narcissa slip a hand behind Sinclair's head, heard her mutter “Getcha anything?”

Sinclair's lips parted around a reply, but Tierney didn't stick around to hear. She'd been dismissed.

x

The night before, the three of them had laid in the sand outside the bungalow, smoking and half-dreaming into the L.A. smog. Between that sepia haze and the unnatural music of ocean waves, the lawn of their old vacation home felt like an alien world. First they took turns mocking the slippery-slick nightclub they'd wasted their night at, then Sinclair said,

“Tierney's gonna be Miss Santa Ana this year. Did y'all think of that?”

Tierney hadn't. She'd forgotten about this summer's Hell Hop altogether. “Doubt it. Time for a tourist to win.”

Sinclair shook her head with serene authority. “You moved out this year. Daddy'll crown you.”

“Nepotism ain't good for business.” Even Narcissa's voice was moony.

“No, but it's sentimental,” A yawn stretched Sinclair's words like taffy, “S what I'd do.”

Tierney shivered in the night's damp heat. The softness of everything felt suddenly dangerous. “Guess it's true what they say—about absence doing weird shit to the heart.”

Narcissa chuckled. The sound was smoky. “You're alright, Red. Even if you're not like us.”

What's that supposed to mean? Was not a question Tierney could ask. Narcissa was stating a fact.

“You know you can come back to The Star any time, right?” Sinclair was asking, earnest even as she began to drift past consciousness, “visit any time...”

The words came at Tierney distorted and vague, like underwater voices or a song played backwards. They resonated anyway. Tierney had grown up at The Star, but her childhood felt like borrowed time. It was Sinclair and Narcissa's world, and she'd been a tolerated trespasser.

The smog transformed the sky into a vast nothingness. At some point in the night, Tierney must have closed her eyes against it. She woke up to the sun prickling against her sticky, sand-crusting skin like so many needles. Except for one gull picking at a gelatinous mound of seaweed, she was alone.

“Ugly-ass thing,” Tierney greeted the bird. It didn't pay her much mind.

Ante - A bet required to begin a hand

Sinclair was set up in the kitchen with a bottle of aspirin, a shot glass, and the dregs of last night's Jack. Cowboy cure. One French-manicured hand held a slice of cold pizza; the other was pressing a handful of their father's whiskey rocks to the back of her head. Narcissa had her legs propped up on the table and a tweezers in her hand. She gnawed contemplatively at a lunate of crust as she fished slivers of glass from her shins. They both looked up in unison when Tierney entered with her duffel bag.

“Ready,” Tierney told their blank faces. She sat down and pondered the wax paper in the empty pizza box. Its Rorschach of grease looked like a butterfly, or a vagina, or an explosion.

Ain't that just the way?

They packed Sinclair's baby blue jeep in silence, mostly. Narcissa haphazardly straightened up while Tierney arranged their small trio of bags in the back. Tierney felt a pang in her chest, cause Sinclair was still rubbing soft circles at the back of her head as she slid behind the wheel.

“You good?” Narcissa nudged her sister's shoulder from the passenger seat, and Tierney knew that her dark eyes were full of rare concern.

“Ain't *concussed*,” Sinclair laughed it off as she started up the engine.

“Clair, listen. I'm real, *real* so—”

“Buy me a sundae at Pinky's,” Sinclair cut in, arching her blonde brows at Tierney through the rearview mirror, “And we're square.”

Relief shot through Tierney as she got in the back, followed by another pulse of guilt because that had been too easy. Sinclair pulled out and started fiddling with the dials; when she twisted the volume, Mozart's *Lacrimosa* burst through the car like a death knell.

“Holy guacamole, Cissa,” Clair turned to her sister with widened eyes.

“It's on shuffle.” Narcissa snatched her phone up, toggled around.

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“Take your chances with the radio, then.”

“Baby, I got *boundless* faith in the radio.”

Tierney picked at the poppy seed muffin she'd stuck in her purse the other morning. Bone dry. “Let's Have A Party” bubbled through the speakers, but it kept getting tangled with an ad for some kelp-based weight loss supplement that *may cause facial swelling, insomnia, internal bleeding as a result of trauma to liver or spleen, suicidal thoughts... I've never kissed a bear, I've never kissed a goon—consult you're doctor if—shake a chicken—right for you...*

They left the station on.

x

52 hours ago, Tierney had left her apartment with the cotton candy light of dawn at her back. She'd arrived at the Wandering Star Hotel & Casino with a belly full of stale gas station coffee and the nerve-trembling tension that sometimes preceded her blow-ups. *It'll be fine*, she told herself as she rode the elevator to the penthouse suite, *once we get out of here; it'll be fine*, as she hugged Sinclair a stiff hello, *once we get on the road*. Sinclair's lips brushed her cheek with the softness of flower petals and left a slimy-sweet residue of gloss.

“Working out, Tier?” Clair's face was pink and raw from an exorbitant, skin-shucking salt scrub ritual, but her hair smelt like last night's perfume and peach schnapps.

“Sorta,” Tierney said, lips pulling into their usual off-kilter grin. Two hours every day this week—an increase from her usual one per four, taken on to work away the knot of tangled anxiety and hope that manifested in her gut before every family roadtrip. The muscles in her arms and legs felt swollen and sore, but the knot had never gone away.

“You look good.” There was a sort of tenderness in Sinclair's voice and eyes that Tierney knew was only there because she'd never visited. “Maybe we'll come to your gym sometime.”

Before Tierney could reply, the beaded curtain separating the sisters' room from the penthouse lobby shivered, strings of fake gems rattling together like dice. Narcissa announced her presence with a loud and thorough yawn which exposed astoundingly white teeth, set like pearls in a cavernous pink maw shot through with purple lightning veins. The foundation she'd smeared below her eyes failed to hide the violet sleep-loss rings, despite being shades darker than her skin.

Narcissa was supposed to be almost two full years younger than Sinclair, but the alarming prematurity of her birth had brought the age gap to barely a year and a half. She'd entered the world silent, still, and cool to touch, her indigo lips and eyelids squeezed tight shut. A miracle baby, healthy despite it all. She'd never completely lost the blue-tinged pallor.

Tierney, of course, was born to a different mother four years later—an accident punctuating a longer string of mistakes and misfortunes that their father seldom spoke about. That was how it seemed sometimes, anyway. When they were in high school, Narcissa made her suspicions as clear as she could manage, sometimes in innuendos and others in jaw-clenched, eye-narrowed arguments with Dad.

*“She wouldn’t have left **us** behind, if she had a choice.”*

“Maybe none of us knew your mother as well as we thought we did.”

But on that day in the penthouse lobby, against the beads and pink-glared glass, a hungover Narcissa treated Tierney to a serene grin. Her lips and nails were painted deep plum today, covering up corpse shades of cyanosis. “Ready to hit the road?”

“Ready and raring.”

So they were off.

On the way out, the girls passed through a blinking no man's land of empty casino. The main lights were off for the day, shadows oozing from every corner. Chandeliers dripped pale crystals above them, but the flicker of electronic machines cut through the twilight dimness and bounced off the room's ample gilt accents. Illuminated craps tables formed tiny, blue-green oases along their path while the leaves of potted palms whispered against each other in the air conditioner's mild gusts. Tierney observed their murky, pearl-swirled reflections in the same marble floor that announced their steps with hollow *clicks*.

When they passed the slot machines, Tierney spied one forgotten, bowler shirted patron slumped snoring on a stool, his ruddy face pressed against the fluorescent screen. A jagged ring of jade-colored glass surrounded him from the bottle that must have fallen from his limp fingers. Tierney could see his brows twitch with some unfathomable dream. His all-too-human presence made the whole place seem less haunted.

“Is Dad around?” She asked, though they were almost to the doors. Leo Astrifera's absence was palpable; The Wandering Star seemed to miss its owner and progenitor like an empty seashell would its living mollusk.

“On a trip,” Sinclair sounded faintly apologetic, “It's Uncle Eli and Aunt Ellie watching the place.” The Astrifera girls had a lot of aunts, uncles, and cousins that shared no blood with them; a compensation for the lack of actual kin.

Tierney nodded. She didn't ask, now, about her mother; even if Jasmine hadn't accompanied Leo on his trip, she wouldn't have gotten out of bed this early for anything less than a 5.4 earthquake.

Outside a morning coolness still pervaded, though the fat ball of orange sun would be baking the highway soon enough. The Wandering Star sat square in the middle of scenic nowhere, rising up from the baked red earth like a shimmering mirage, differentiating itself from the spiraling rock formations around it with constellations of neon. It was a surreal attraction, offering the razz and risk of central Vegas against a backdrop of kaleidoscopic desert sunsets, blazing desert starscapes, hard desert emptiness.

“I want you to do my next one,” Sinclair was saying as they tossed their bags into the trunk. Through the candyfloss gauze of her dress, Tierney could glimpse the cursive ink looping along her ribs: *Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love.* “I don't know what it'll be yet, but I want you to do it.”

“Sure you want an amateur scribbling on your hide?”

“Skin ain't nothin' but skin, sweetie.”

Sinclair got the car up to 90 miles per hour on the empty stretch of highway, and the air rushing down Tierney's throat dissolved the lingering knot like a tonic. When they were on the move like this, everything was good between the three of them. The speed made them deliriously free, and the promise of a destination bound them up to each other. With every mile, a kinetic connection spread itself through the car and grew strong enough to taste. It was the connection,

maybe, that Clair and Cissa felt everyday of their lives. On the road, Tierney never worried about being cut loose once the destination came into view.

On Tilt - A bad reaction to an unlucky hand resulting in uncontrolled wild play

“Damn Clair, looking *good*.”

“Zip it, slit.”

While Tierney picked poppyseeds from her teeth, Sinclair sped passed her own fourteen-foot-tall self, poised provocatively over a golf club in a green vinyl bodysuit.

Liliput Amusements—4 Miles—Come play with AmphibiAnna!

The mascot Sinclair had the honor of portraying here appeared in most of Liliput's promotional materials as an anthropomorphized cartoon frog, sexed up with a little pink bow on her head and some zoologically inaccurate curves. The garish colors on the billboard were mercifully sun-faded.

On their way down Route 66 two days earlier, they'd passed a more recent example of Clair's work, this one advertising a small chain of alternative clothing stores called *Kink*. She didn't model any of their clothing, but the billboard gave an unparalleled view of her cello-curved back, emphasized by two descending columns of piercings laced with pink satin ribbon.

Clair's career—based mostly in calendar work and a few car dealership commercials—was pushed forward when she appeared in her ex's break-through music video, *Queen of Hearts*. There, she strutted down suburban streets in a blue velvet corset and white leather pants for a while before finding the band's garage and bludgeoning the lead singer to death with a lawn flamingo. The single played on some country rock stations and had infiltrated the Top 100 with a dance remix.

A step up, at least, from the put put gig.

“Want to go a few holes?” Narcissa turned toward Sinclair with one of her usual smiles—the sort that was more a baring of teeth.

“You're kinda sick, Ciss.”

“As a dog.”

The knot in Tierney's stomach wasn't loosening, even as the highway emptied out and the speedometer pushed 100. She tried to focus on the wind streaming around her face, the white-hot light baking her shoulders. Claustrophobia preceded trapped animal-feel preceded lashing out, teeth bared. The air had no right to feel this heavy.

Tierney looked down at her own right arm, at the unfinished sleeve she was nurturing there. A calming technique of her own device—one that even worked from time to time, which was more than she could say for the breathing exercises that Ocotillo High's sweaty therapist coached her through once upon a time.

She forced her eyes to trace the lines of ink, the cascade of a river falling from her shoulder and the organic plant tendrils swirling the elbow and growing lazily outward, flowers in the form of bright starbursts and tight, shy whorls. Birds, fruit, a citrine-eyed fox peeking out from lush foliage. Arcadia. She stared too at the blank spaces and unfinished lines, filling them with the designs and colors of her vision.

The second part of the exercise was recalling the act—the hum of the gun in her hand and the hot arcs of pain consuming her skin. Sinclair, self-proclaimed sensation junkie, got off on tattoos, on the endorphin rush that accompanied that level of pain. Tierney wasn't wired like that, but she was nonetheless obsessed. Being behind the gun was therapy and being under it was pure focus. Together they were meditation, the only kind of zen she'd ever felt.

She could use some zen now.

“Well, *something's* coming.”

When Tierney's attention snapped, she saw Narcissa leaning out, head tipped up to the sky like she was scenting the air. The sight made her pulse thud hard—*they feel it too?*

Sinclair drew the tip of her tongue along the edges of her lips, sucked it back in and seemed to ponder. “Dry storm?”

“My teeth are *vibrating*.”

Clair's fingers tightened on the wheel. “Shit.”

When Tierney tried, she thought she could taste it too. Coppery electricity settling like a ghost in her mouth. She could have laughed with relief, but the tension in her belly wasn't easing with the explanation.

“Maybe we'll get some scenic destruction,” Narcissa offered, relaxing bonelessly back into her seat.

“Or dust devils.” Reflexively, Sinclair ran a hand through her hair. “I hate those little bastards.”

Narcissa spared Clair a conciliatory glance. “Air was flat as Tierney's tits when we left.”

“You are a *cataclysmic* bitch,” Tierney declared at the same moment Sinclair muttered, “That ain't much comfort, babe.”

“I know,” Narcissa said, gaze turning blankly towards the unaltered blue sky without any indication of who she was replying to.

I see the bad moon a-rising, the radio interjected with far too much perk and prescience for Tierney's taste, *I see trouble on the way...*

“More's the pity,” Sinclair sighed, hands fluttering dramatically on the wheel, “I was thinking of taking you kids to the playground.”

It took them a second to remember. The playground. In the old vernacular: Death Valley.

“Were you gonna warn a girl?” Narcissa rattled one impractical boot against the dash.

The heel was white and shaped like a chunk of spine, sand all wedged in the slots between vertebrae.

“Were you gonna do anything better with you day?” Clair countered. Cissa shrugged.

“I don't get off on nostalgia.”

“Mm.” A disingenuous hum. “I just got an itch, is all.”

Tierney had an itch now too, but it wasn't for Death Valley. It was for home, for the Star, or for Rattlin' Rays, which was at least a half a home; anything other than the flat expanse of highway that felt like it was getting emptier and emptier, less and less real the more they drove. The road didn't feel like a creature she knew anymore.

Bug - A joker

Two days ago, when the road was still behaving the way it oughta, Sinclair's jeep had slid from the Mojave's backroads onto Route 66. The growls in their bellies rose up with the sun, and for the Astrifera girls there was only one real option. They connected just outside of Kingman and kept driving until their car fell in the shadow of an eleven-foot diamondback made of plywood and neon. His cheerful paint job was perpetually peeling, but the details were still clear: the beer can wrapped in his tail, the cowboy hat angled jauntily on his patterned head, the single gold fang.

Rattlin' Rays Gas & Bar-B-Q, declared the red scrawl below, *Slither In For A Bite!*

The place itself sat behind a set of antique gas pumps, a sprawling wood shack with big windows full of neon and a tin roof bloodily eclipsed by rust. They parked in a spot *Reserved for Johnny Cash (Violators Will Have the Devil to Pay)* and sauntered on in. The clang of a cowbell above the door, got the attention of an early lunch crowd, scattered as they were through rows of ruddy picnic tables and hunched over bottles of beer, lotto tickets, plastic baskets piled with pulled pork and corn fritters.

Sinclair assumed the middle position of their little unit naturally, and whatever eyes their entrance had drawn locked in on her pretty quick. Clair always drew attention, and not all of it good. It was an unspoken rule that her sisters had to deal with the fallout when Dad or a boyfriend or some anonymous good samaritan wasn't around. Tierney once saw Narcissa pin a trucker's hand to the bar top with a pen knife, and her own taste for tussling stayed pretty well satisfied when Sinclair was around.

“One box'a Dynamite wings if ya please,” Clair said now, leaning on the counter and grinning up at the skinny high school dropout behind it, “and a sixer of Bighorn.”

“Well hey girls,” he said—a beat late with his gaze still pinned to Sinclair's baby blues. This was Ray Junior, the heir apparent.

“Hey R.J.,” Tierney replied, cause someone had to.

“Chicken?” Narcissa suggested with affected brightness, “Beer?”

“On it,” R.J. coughed, grinning sheepishly at both of them before turning to the hot case.

“Much obliged,” Sinclair breathed after him. They shared looks behind his back. R.J. was a decent enough guy, but the Astrifera clan didn't afford him any special patience.

“Well if it ain't the amazons!” Boomed a familiar voice. In the same instant, the kitchen doors flew open and there stood Raymond Ronove, Rattlin' Ray the Second in the flesh. He clapped his son on the shoulder, said, “get the girls a little something from the back.” When R.J. left, he turned back around. “Y'all get taller?”

“You're getting shorter, Ray,” Tierney said dutifully.

“Shorter, fatter, and balder every day, that's the story of my life now,” Ray chuckled merrily. He shucked off a grease and sauce stained apron to give each of them a squeeze. “That father of yours started losing his hair yet? Course not—bastard.”

“I'll tell him to pay you a visit,” Sinclair said.

“Tell him he's banned.”

“That's no good. He'll be busting your door town by tomorrow.”

“You're right. Keep telling him to visit.” Then, to Tierney, “how's your mama doing?”

“Last I checked, she's got an orphaned fox named Brimstone living in my room.”

“Reeks something awful,” Narcissa confirmed.

“Never a dull moment with y'all, is it?” Ray asked. It sounded almost like a lament.

R.J. returned with a glass jar of cloudy amber liquid: *Thunder Moon Peach*, read the crude label. Ray'd been making his own hooch since his pop ran this place a small eternity ago, but the infusions were a recent hobby.

“For later,” he said as R.J. packed it in their bag, “and let me know how it is.”

“Thanks, Ray,” they chorused. Tierney and Sinclair offered their brightest smiles—Narcissa her most pleasant flash of teeth.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ray muttered, then called to their backs, “Do me a favor and be careful out there.”

In the car, Tierney made to check the time on her phone but caught sight of a new text. *Thinking of you girls on your trip. Look out for each other. It's a weird & wild world. - L.A.*

Up front, Sinclair was tearing open the box of chicken, while Narcissa cracked the bottles with her seat belt latch.

“Y'all get any texts from Dad?” She asked. They hadn't. There was a twinge of uneasiness, then. Tierney and her sisters hadn't been raised on warnings.

But the sun was bright and the beer was cold, and the wings glittered in their nest of wax paper, jewel-like with grease and Ray's special Dynamite Sauce. From where Tierney was sitting, there wasn't anything much to look out for.

The hollow howl of a siren took them all by surprise. As the unmistakable wail cut through radio warbles and Baby Blue's 85 mile per hour death rattle, the girls looked back.

“Neither of you clocked that?” Sinclair hissed.

Thought you were. You know.” Narcissa set down the pocket knife she'd been using to pick her nails. “Watching the road.”

For a one delirious second, Sinclair accelerated. Like they were in their Dad's old Firebird, and the cop behind them was another anonymous meathead messing around on the backroads. And Tierney's pulse kicked up in tacit approval.

“The *fuck*—” Narcissa braced an arm against the window, but Sinclair was already toeing the break, easing them to a crawl.

“Foot slipped.” A giddy giggle threatened to swallow Clair's words, but she guided them smoothly to the shoulder.

Tierney shook her head to clear the adrenaline off. Wasn't just the world being weird and wild today.

“Church faces, kids,” Clair muttered as Cissa stashed a few stray empties beneath her seat.

Tap-tap.

Sinclair leaned out the window and peered into the bright heat. “Something ‘a matter, Officer?” When Sinclair wriggled her way out of a ticket, it was with soft speak, sweet smiles, and shy glances—the sort of stuff that made people fall all over themselves to reassure her before they knew what they were doing. Tierney and Narcissa just did their very best to go unnoticed.

“Are you aware that you were speeding?”

“Sorry, I—” Sinclair sounded embarrassed and wry at once as she flicked her gaze along the empty highway, “I was following the flow of traffic.”

“License and registration, please.” But his voice had begun to warm. When Sinclair handed the documents over, he gave them a cursory glance. “Rushing off to anywhere exciting?”

“Nothing like that, sir. But between you and me—” She pressed a little further out the window, “I’m racing against time to get my sister here to the nearest rest stop. Poor girl’s fixin’ to *burst*.”

“I’ll run these through as quick as possible, then.”

As Sinclair beamed her thanks, Tierney really looked at the cop for the first time. His face was half hidden by the brim of his hat and a big pair of reflective sunglasses, but he seemed on the younger side. When he flashed Sinclair a smile, though, wrinkles rippled outward like disturbed pond water, and all his teeth were sulfur yellow. Tierney turned in her seat and watched him amble back to his car.

“Well, shoot,” Sinclair wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at the rear view. Then she poked her sister in the side. “Enjoying the fucking view?”

Narcissa jolted and turned away from her window for the first time since they’d pulled over. “Don’t got a church face, Clair.”

“When he gets back, you better *squirm*.”

“He ain’t writing you up.”

Tierney turned around, trying to see passed the glare of the police cruiser’s windshield. Frowned at the state of the car; the dust must’ve been a half inch thick in on the hood, and damage on one corner puckered and tilted the grill and bumper into a Glasgow smirk. The tires looked wrong. Oversized. When the cop re-emerged, she gave him a harder once over but didn’t

catch much she hadn't already seen. Tall, wiry guy in a uniform that bagged around his waist. Sun-baked skin, loping gait. Sinclair noted his approach and dug her fingers into Narcissa's ribs, making her writhe just as the cop came up beside them.

“Miss, I'm terribly sorry but would you mind stepping out of the car for a minute?” He sounded genuinely apologetic, but the request set Tierney all the way on edge and drew a sharp look from Narcissa.

Sinclair's shoulders tensed, but she produced a breezy smile. “Sure thing.”

“Y'all,” Tierney murmured, low but urgent. Clair was busy unbuckling her belt, but Cissa looked back. With a jerk of her head, Tierney indicated the dirty, dented cruiser behind them and saw Narcissa's dark eyes narrowed as she followed the gesture.

“Clair,” Narcissa inched her fingers towards the glove box, “don't.”

But Sinclair was already stepping out by the time she heard. “Hm—?” The instant she swiveled around towards her sister, the not-cop had an arm around Sinclair's neck, pulling her back against his chest. Tierney saw Clair's elbow jerk back reflexively for a blow, then freeze mid-arc at the feel of a gun muzzle pressed against her temple. Narcissa was similarly frozen with her hand in the glove box, wrapped around the Colt .380 they kept there—*for emergencies*.

“Fingers out of the cookie jar, little sister,” the not-cop said over Sinclair's shoulder, “or I'm gonna have to tell your mommy on you.”

Narcissa withdrew wordlessly and slid the glove box closed, eyes trained all the while on her sister, who had gone almost limp in the man's hold. Meanwhile Tierney was trying to think useful thoughts—the possibility that another car would pass by, potential applications of the little novelty switchblade in her back pocket, the likelihood that this guy would mess up and give

them a chance to pull something. Thoughts without conclusions, mostly, acting as wedges against the useless panic that had started to buzz at the corners of Tierney's mind.

“We don't have much cash,” Sinclair's voice was soft and reasonable, even though her eyes had taken on an odd glaze, “if that's what this is about.”

“I know you girls got phones,” the man was fishing around Sinclair's pockets for hers, but he was speaking to Narcissa and Tierney, “let me see you put'em to the side, then step on out of the car.”

Behind them a door slammed and a woman in a denim jumpsuit and red bandana slipped out of the the cruiser. A sawed-off dangled carelessly from one delicate-boned hand. Above them all, wispy clouds had started to streak the sky like greasy fingerprints.

“Bad odds,” Narcissa murmured—to herself or Tierney, it was hard to tell—and slowly began to comply.

Tierney's skin had gone electric with the impulse to act. The fight or flight instinct wasn't any more useful than panic right now. Or so she told herself. Was it better to do something stupid or do nothing at all? But Narcissa had already taken the lead, and that made it easier for Tierney to ignore her dogged instincts and step out, phone lying in plain view on the seat. At least leaving it behind didn't feel any worse than leaving the Colt. At least she'd manage to slip her little switch into the safety of her right boot.

Narcissa had been holding a pocket knife when they got pulled over—the bone-handled hawkbill she'd generously allowed a customer to wager during one of her shifts dealing blackjack at The Star. Did she have it on her now?

“Whassat?” A reedy new voice chirped, and for a paralyzed instant Tierney wondered if she'd been thinking out loud. “Preserves?”

The woman in denim was looking at a glass jar that had rolled free from under Narcissa's seat, dislodged by one spine-heeled boot.

"Just some hooch."

"Distilled local?"

Narcissa blinked at the woman, then gathered herself. "Local as it gets."

"Give it here."

The woman appraised the label briefly before tucking it into the beaded satchel at her hip. Then she nudged Narcissa's cheek with the sawed off to turn her around. The guy cleared his throat.

"Ladies," he said, "my name's Zeke, this here's my baby cousin Zelda, and despite all appearances—" he shrugged, jostling Clair's head with the barrel, "we don't want trouble."

"What's there to want," Tierney asked, emboldened by the fickle privilege of not having a firearm pointed at her, "besides trouble or money?"

"Traveling companions," Zeke's voice was low and level, inscrutable as his face was beneath the hat and glasses, "we're taking a trip."

Before Tierney could open her mouth, Zelda threw a winking glance her way. *Her* face had the look of a kewpie doll's beneath the red bandana, except that her round, pale eyes were lined with a strata of bright pigments. "Should we tell'em where?"

"Sure," Zeke grinned, creasing up the tanned leather of his cheeks, "you girls've been to Death Valley before, right?"

Hole Card - In blackjack, the facedown card that the dealer gets. In stud and hold'em poker, the facedown cards dealt to each player

The summer before her Senior year of high school Sinclair started seeing one of the younger, better-looking bikers who frequented The Star. He'd blow in late on nights when the crowd was rougher and stand at the entrance for a moment, blinking, as though he'd just stumbled on Atlantis, before shuffling over to the tables or the bar. He was lousy at Hold'em but great at Quarters.

Tierney was heading into her last year at Jack Rabbit Junior High at the time. She didn't catch how the whole thing started, but it wasn't hard to imagine. Sinclair wasn't shy around older guys, and this one looked at her like he looked at The Star's gleaming interior. Like she was a revelation.

Once they got together, he was around all the time, and so were his friends. They were all in their late twenties or early thirties, and they all wore heavy leather jackets that said "Sidewinders" across the backs. Narcissa glared and growled more than usual those days. After a rare dispute between the sisters, she started ungluing herself from Sinclair's side when the Sidewinders came around.

But Tierney's presence was always tolerated by Sinclair and her boyfriend and his friends. Narcissa was a Spooky Bitch, but Tierney was a Pretty Cool Kid. A kinetic tomboy who listened to metal and got in fights at school, who already knew how to pick a lock, shotgun a beer, and curse creatively. Sinclair started thinking Tierney was cool because the Sidewinders did. Tierney enjoyed that, and she enjoyed not being talked down to by adults, and she enjoyed having her hair ruffled and being called "kid."

Hanging out with them made Tierney feel younger and older at the same time. The way that being “one of the guys” made her feel simultaneously sexless and hyperaware of her sex.

Gia was one of the guys, but Tierney couldn't have been any more alert to the fact that she was a girl. Gianella Mancini was the only woman sporting a Sidewinder jacket, and Tierney had the biggest, dumbest crush on her. Classic preteen infatuation—desperate, hopeless, impossible to ignore. Gia had amber eyes and olive skin and thick dark curls that fanned out around her face like a lion's mane. She wore jeans and leathers mostly, but a few times she wore shorts that exposed a green-faded tattoo of busty nude pixies flitting up her lean calf and thigh.

Tierney thought about that tattoo a lot.

She also thought a lot about Gia's hands, which were long-fingered and graceful. And always moving. Gia quit smoking when her niece was born, and she said her hands were the only part of her that still missed cigarettes. She was always fidgeting with something—the pendant she wore around her neck with the portrait of Saint Quiteria, or the lady leg pocket knife with its high heel shaped bottle opener and chipping red fishnet design. Gia would stroke her thumb along the smooth curved handle, then she'd toy with the blade, teasing it in and out. Maybe play a lazy round of pinfinger. Riveting stuff, Tierney could attest.

One time Gia leant her the knife to open a beer, and Tierney forgot to give it back. And she kept forgetting. And then Sinclair broke up with her biker, the Sidewinders vanished from The Star, and the only time Tierney saw Gia was in her hormone-soaked, adolescent daydreams.

And then not at all.

But she kept the knife. Growing up at The Star left Tierney skeptical of good luck charms, but that's what the kitschy little blade was. A charm.

It hadn't done much for her so far today, but it was still in her boot, so maybe the luck would kick in soon.

Any minute now.

x

"I *love* your *hair*. Did you use henna?"

Zelda was a talker. She'd draped herself backwards on the passenger seat to face the girls, knobby elbows propped on the barrier that used to bolster a cage. Nothing but clear air between the cousins in front and the sisters in back now. If Zelda'd only put the damn sawed off away, the conversation might start to go better. Or if she'd only put the bandana back on.

"S natural," Tierney muttered, the phrase a reflex at this point.

"No way." Zelda reached out and ran one index finger through Tierney's split ends. Tierney was entertaining herself with a running list of things she'd do if her wrists weren't zip-tied behind her. Breaking Zelda's arm suddenly jumped to the top.

But Tierney's wrists were zip-tied behind her, so all she could do was glance between the 12 gauge swaying inches from her face and the top of Zelda's head and wonder how the day had turned so unreal.

"Go on," Zelda said, withdrawing her hand, "you can ask."

"Don't wanna know," Tierney said, but again she caught herself looking.

Zelda's head was shaved shiny, but a set of long, bumpy ridges rose up from the skin just above the pale arches of her brows and curved along the sides of her skull. They—the ridges—were a few inches high at their center peaks, tapering down in either direction. When Zeke

repositioned the broad-brimmed hat, Tierney could glimpse similar augmentations starting at his cheekbones.

She knew what subdermal implants were. One of the sweetest customers at the Black-Spine parlor was a surfer from Half Moon Bay who'd transformed his back into a collage of ink and braille tattoos; during her apprenticeship, Tierney watched Jack weave a mural of waves, reefs, and tiger sharks around constellations of raised skin. She asked the surfer about his inserts, and he said that they were lines from his blind girlfriend's favorite Pablo Neruda poems. Tierney had liked subdermal inserts then, and she'd liked them as nubby little devil horns on the pink haired, pixie-faced percussionist she used to hook up with now and then.

She didn't much like the look of them now.

"I'll ask something," Zelda chirped, angling the gun at Narcissa to signal her attention, "howdja say the name again? Hard *C*?"

Tierney felt Narcissa tense at her side, then relax into as liquid a sprawl as the tight seating allowed. "Yeah," Cissa said with the same sneering drawl she always used to answer that question, "As in *Nar-cotics*, *Nar-colepsy*."

"Ciss, Really." That was Sinclair. Tierney didn't know why she was doing it either, but Narcissa replied to her sister with a wild flash of teeth. Then Tierney saw Sinclair's face soften with a wan half-smile, and she knew why Narcissa was being all crazy brightness instead of quiet ice.

"Hard *C* as in *cunt*, or *ca-daver*," Cissa went on, nudging Clair's shoulder as though bravado could be transferred.

"How about calamity?" Zelda sang back, "Catastrophe, cataclysm..." The word game was interrupted by a burst of static from the cruiser's radio.

“How bout we all *cool* it for a sec,” Zeke grabbed the radio, “while I get this.” There was a low, jagged sound below the garbled signal that Tierney recognized as a voice. “Coming through now,” Zeke was telling it, “yeah well, there’s three of’em.” The voice again. Zeke pressed the radio to his ear. “Girl. Gotta speak up man, this connection is . . . We improvised. It’s an improvising kinda day. . . Smooth so far, see you on the other side.” The static stopped. He turned to Zelda. “Was I supposed to say over?”

“Who was that, Zeke?” Sinclair’s voice sounded real and solid for the first time since he’d grabbed her.

“Welcoming committee.”

“Welcoming for what?”

“Big party.”

“Couldn’t you tell us just a little something about what’s going on?”

“Easier show than tell.” There was a hint of strain in Zeke’s voice. Tierney knew what it was; reckoned Clair and Cissa did too. Uncertainty—a gambler rethinking his strategy mid-bluff.

Losing move, Tierney hoped, mark of an amateur.

“Come on,” Sinclair pushed against that weakness in her own sweet way, “put a girl’s mind at ease.”

It was Zelda who saved him. “I think we’ve all gotten to know each other pretty good for now. Like I’m sure you’re all bored of me goin’ on and on.” She turned the 12 gauge in a lazy arc, expressive with it the way some folks are with their hands. “How bout some music?”

Even though Tierney suspected the cousins of being amateur kidnappers, she had to admire their performance of the role. “Sounds good to me.”

Zelda beamed and turned, presenting them with a new view of her ridges. Tierney found the undulating curves soothing to stare at, compared to the Remington's barrel and Zelda's big glassy eyes.

"I can dig it," Zelda nodded the pale canyon of her head to a thumping rockabilly beat.

"I was in the video for this," Sinclair said automatically.

"No shit, really?"

Double or Nothing - An even-money bet. A bet that pays off exactly the amount wagered

They were deep in the park. Zeke weaved the cruiser through a convoluted network of backroads, while Zelda fiddled with the busted AC as if it was gonna blast anything but hot air.

“Sorry bout that, ladies,” Zeke said.

“Heat’s not nothin’ new,” Sinclair shrugged her bunched shoulders. Tierney’s thighs and arms felt like they’d been stuck onto the leather seat with a hot glue gun, and air from the slitted windows whipped her hair into a red tempest around her face, but sure. No air conditioning in the hottest spot this side of hell? Didn’t quite crack the top ten list of screwy shit happening today.

“Can’t stand the heat get outta the kitchen,” Zelda tittered. Then she took a sip of Ray’s fire water and damn near choked.

“Speak for yourselves,” Narcissa grumbled to her window, “you fucking maniacs.”

Sinclair laughed and so did the cousins, making things a little too cozy for Tierney’s taste. Memory yanked her back to when it was fun to cruise the park on lawless heatwave days, when the apocalyptic emptiness of low season felt exhilarating, and so did getting lost. Their dad racing his beloved convertible Eldorado through heat-shimmering roads, Jasmine with her fiery hair contained in a black silk wrap, urging him faster. Dad and Sinclair laughing and achingly bright under the high sun with their too-white teeth, their too-blue eyes, their golden halos of curls blown back by the wind. Narcissa grumbling.

How many years since the five of them took the California trip together? Same weekend every summer, same detour back along the Devils Speedway. Sinclair and Narcissa saw it all before Tierney, of course, with Leo and long-lost Lena. Story went that the trip started with Leo,

his girlfriend, and his best friend, back before he could've imagined himself marrying either of them.

They'd know a way out of this ugliness. Jasmine and Leo. Mom and Dad. Lowbrow local legends. Runaways from Draper who chased money and danger around Las Vegas back when there was still some to be found. Somehow made their bogus last names into brands people knew, ended up well-off and dangerous in the middle of dusty nowhere like some neo-western dream.

So Tierney couldn't help wishing one of'em was around.

Wish in one hand, shit in the other, right?

She tried to shake herself off the bad trip that *deja vu* and irony were dragging her on. They hadn't passed another living soul in hours of driving. There'd been two ravens fighting over the scrawny carcass of an antelope squirrel, a tarantula emerging from its burrow near a tangle of flowering creosote, a ruminative chuckawalla basking on some boulders. No help out there. The sun blazed away, cheerful as can be, but the clouds were massing together. Lumpy tubes with oily indigo bottoms. Zeke and Zelda had matching tattoos on their arms. Simple line-work depicting twin bundles of abstract shapes. Something familiar about the style, but Tierney couldn't finger it. The air that rushed in still tasted electric.

"Hold on, now!"

Tierney's head smacked Sinclair's much-abused skull as Zeke yanked them off-road, swerving into some dead-end ravine at a ninety degree angle. Tierney swore, and all the breath went out of Clair in a sharp hiss. They'd gone from sunburnt flatness to crags and colorful shadows. Skirted the Rhyolite ghost town and the mouth of Titus canyon, Tierney was pretty

sure. Now they were nowhere—rattling along uneven ground enclosed by towering walls of granite.

Teeth knocking around in her head, stone scraping the cruiser's sides, Zelda hollering like a kid on a roller coaster, walls narrowing... Then Tierney felt herself lurch forward and slam right back in her seat as Zeke hit the brakes. The cruiser skidded a few more feet, and then they were somewhere else. An oblong bubble of space in the ravine.

“So what now?” Tierney asked, not sure of who she was asking. Silence sang in her ears. The familiar tension in her gut burned molten. They weren't anywhere anymore, except a spot that was tight in every sense of the word. Damn well time for inspiration to strike.

“Downways is outways,” Zeke answered, nodding at a long slit in the granite.

Tierney couldn't keep back a snort. “A skinned jack rabbit couldn't fit through there.”

“Everyone's fitting,” he said, “with their skin where it belongs.”

“You reckon?”

That was Narcissa. She had the hawkbill after all. Specifically she had it in one freed hand, and she had it pressed up against Zelda's swanny neck. In the rearview, Tierney saw the curved blade molded against flesh, the tip digging in just east of the jugular. The other hand had caught Zelda's wrist and twisted it behind the seat. She yelped and jerked, knocking the shotgun from her lap to the floor. A shiny sequin of blood appeared, then, complementing the hawkbill's metallic glitter.

Zeke had his handgun out, but Sinclair was shaking her head at him. Her hands were free now too, clasped neatly in front of her. “Looks like we have a few new things to think about.” Her voice was gentle and friendly like her smile. For once, it wasn't hard to picture what was going on behind Zeke's oversized glasses.

“Looks like.”

Pit - An area of a casino in which a group of table games are arranged, where the center area is restricted to dealers and other casino personnel

“Come on honey, let’s make a deal. None of us here wanna see your cousin hurt.”

Speak for yourself, sister. The zip-ties seemed to chafe more now that Tierney was the only one wearing them. She met Zelda’s bulged, darting eyes in the rearview and felt a little bit better.

“It’s not going down like that.” Zeke was still, except for his convulsing throat. He sounded dazed but not panicked. He sounded like he knew what Tierney knew: that he was down but not out. He knew that he could flip the disadvantage as long as he held onto his Smith & Wesson; he just hadn’t figured out how.

“Maybe it is, maybe it ain’t,” Clair’s voice hardened just a degree. Titanium gold. “But you’re gonna take those glasses off and look at me when you talk, got it? ‘S basic manners.” Their Dad could talk anybody against their own self-interest. Tierney never thought Sinclair was *that* good, but Zeke was complying for now. Like Tierney thought, his cheekbones were raised to impossible peaks. She hadn’t expected the scleral tattoos, the gradient of green and gold phosphorescing around his pale irises. Sinclair barely missed a beat. “We want the guns, and we want the car.”

Zelda managed a choked, breathless laugh. “You’re not getting out of here—” The sequin of blood expanded, then overflowed, trickling down one delicate clavicle and pooling around the jumpsuit’s neckline. Tierney noticed that the denim was embroidered with patterns in red, gold, and cyan matching the streaks around Zelda’s eyes. Blood made ugly rust blotches on the faded blue fabric. “—I mean not like that. Not the way you came in, ya know?”

“Man, your cousin better shut up,” Narcissa said, and for a second it felt like the AC had finally coughed up some cold air, “cause I’m about a word away from cutting her vocal chords.”

“Hey hey,” Zeke’s foxfire eyes darted between the two sisters, “how about we all toss the weapons and talk.” He fixed on Sinclair in the end, “Put your mind at ease, like you asked before.”

Little late for that, now. Tierney didn’t say it out loud because Sinclair’s face said the same thing, but then Narcissa nudged her.

Clair sucked in her lower lip and chewed it for a second or two, then she smiled at Zeke like a greeting card angel. “Okay honey, that’s a good start.”

Zeke’s shoulders relaxed, and so did the pressure of the knife on Zelda’s neck. “I’ve still gotta piss,” Narcissa said. “Why don’t you empty that magazine on the floor, and I’ll go empty my tank outside.”

“And then we’ll talk,” Sinclair finished serenely.

He did it. He fucking *did it*, but then the really unbelievable thing happened: Narcissa did it too. She grabbed the bandana off Zelda’s belt loop, muttered something about wiping, and retracted the blade. Tierney could have shouted in frustration as Narcissa slipped out the door. Zelda rubbed her throat, avoiding the wound. Fresh blood flowed slow and harmlessly down her neck. Tierney wanted to do something violent and stupid, just so that she would be the one doing it. So that it would be her show, for however long it lasted. Instead she kicked Zeke’s seat like a sulky kid.

“Eyes down, creeps,” Sinclair told the cousins, as if she still had an edge or something, “you think she’s gonna try and walk home?” They must’ve been feeling pretty defanged, cause they stopped trying to find Narcissa in their periphery.

“That’d be pretty damn stupid of her,” Zeke said.

“We seem stupid to you, babe?” Sinclair asked without the expectation of an answer.

Tierney watched Zelda’s hands pick at loose strings on her clothes, itching for the 12 gauge under the seat. Tierney’s hands had the same itch but a hell of a lot less chance of scratching it. Then she noticed something else—the empty cup holder. Didn’t Zelda leave the jar of shine there? Could Narcissa... with the bandana and her clever dealer’s hands...

Of course she could.

Tierney’s door flew open a half second before Sinclair launched herself through the one Narcissa never closed.

“Haul ass, Red!” Narcissa said from around the cruiser’s front.

Tierney dove sideways, landed on a shoulder, rolled twice for momentum and was up. Clair was already contorting herself through the hole in the wall by the time Tierney started running. Cissa stood between the entrance and the dashboard with the improvised molotov in one hand and a lighter ready in the other. She seemed to have things handled. Getting through the narrow opening didn’t seem so ridiculous anymore, and before Tierney knew it she was in darkness skidding downward—first on her heels, then on her ass.

Somewhere below her, a splash. Somewhere in the receding light above, a gunshot and shattering glass. All around her, the rumble of rock-on-rock and its echo repeated again and again by cavern walls.

Tierney had been beneath Death Valley on two separate camping trips in the last decade: once with some high school friends who wanted to go swimming in Devils Hole and once with her first real girlfriend. She hadn't spoken to any of the friends since graduation, or to Mari since their breakup two odd years ago, but the trips were good times. Before them, there was the summer after her eighth birthday spent crawling through damn near every hole the park had to offer.

It started because of the endless stretch of time and hundred degree days. It started because Sinclair was trying on some bratty tv teen queen persona in preparation for Junior High, because Narcissa was taking her blistering sunburn out on everyone else, because Tierney had gone from getting in fights at school to getting in fights with kids at The Star. When Leo couldn't ignore their shit anymore, he made the rare parental intervention.

"It's a big house, girls. Get some space." The first time around, they didn't take his advice for a cue to scatter until he snapped his fingers and said, "*Now.*"

When that stopped working so well, he'd dole out endless chores to keep them separate and busy all day. It tired them out but didn't sweeten their moods any, and somehow by dinner they still had enough energy to make each other miserable.

They'd all seen Dad angry, but never at *them*. That seemed like it was gonna change. Except it didn't, cause Leo Astrifera never did what anyone expected. What happened was, Tierney woke up one morning in June to Dad telling her to pack a bag and Sinclair bouncing on her heels behind him.

"Wass goin' on?" She'd asked them, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“You’re Mama’s gonna take care of The Star for a few days,” Leo said, smile flashing white in the morning gloom. His hands were propped against the spokes of a Y-shaped dowsing rod carved from desert white cedar. “We’re going treasure hunting.”

Well, she scrambled right up and started packing.

“I’m going to make us all necklaces when we find it,” Sinclair sang in the background, “out of moonstone and fire opal and sapphire the color of skies.”

On the way to the park, Dad told them all the stories again: the abandoned underground city that folks kept finding and losing under Windgate pass, the labyrinth of catacombs leading to rooms of riches, of mummies and statues made from gold and drawers overflowing with whole rainbows of gems. That time around he didn’t mention the Kingdom of Shin-Au-Av from Paiute legend, except to say that they wouldn’t be going that deep anyhow. He might have been joking, but Tierney was relieved; at that age she was sure that if a netherworld existed, it was buried somewhere in the Mojave.

(Or maybe the Amargosa; not like anyone knew how deep Devils Hole actually was, or where it ended. If it ended.)

Narcissa got surly pretty quick on their first cave crawl. “How’s there gonna be a city down here?” She asked after scraping her knees bloody on some limestone, “What lives in an underground city?”

“Probably something big and bad, with lots of sharp teeth” Their Dad mused, “and if you keep giving me that look I’ll leave you here for it.”

“I’m not *eight*,” Narcissa growled low enough that she could pretend she hadn’t “I don’t buy that crap.”

Tierney thought Narcissa might get along with a big, bad, toothy something. But Cissa didn't grumble much after that, and when Tierney glanced back she saw her half-sister moving through the liquid dark with a sort of wonder; head canted like she was listening for something, nostrils flaring to scent the subterranean air, sloe eyes glittering oddly in the flashlight beams.

Dad and Clair stayed in the lead most of the time, telling each other about all the ways they were gonna spend their cuts of the treasure. Sometimes Tierney would scout ahead through the gestalt of rock chambers and passageways. She liked the climbing, the crawling, the non-stop movement.

They never found any hidden treasure or catacombs, but the air felt thick with the possibility that they would. Stillness with the expectation of rupture. After days of treasure hunting, Tierney had built up a collection of interestingly shaped rocks. At a roadside gift shop on the way home, she picked out a scorpion fossil pendant. The tear-shaped chunk of amber glowed like gold in the light, and the fat little scorpion was set in the center like a cheap garnet. She took to wearing that instead of the necklace of her baby teeth that Jasmine made a few years back, but eventually the cheap black cord snapped and Tierney lost her souvenir without hardly realizing it.

x

On the long tumble to the bottom of the pit, Tierney's arms got yanked up above her head. She hoped for some sharp rock to snap her zip ties open, but all she got was the *pop* of a dislocated shoulder. She landed on her ass at the bottom, and Narcissa landed square on her bad side. A yowl like a struck bobcat's hit off the nearest wall and fractured. Tierney bit her tongue.

“Clair?” Another flare of pain as Cissa rolled off and started feeling around. “You around?”

Tierney turned until she found the slit of light above, hazed red with dust and fire.

“Here,” Sinclair’s voice seemed to come from somewhere lower. Tierney felt along the ledge she’d landed on until water lapped against her hand. “We all in one piece?”

“Sure,” Narcissa said, “but the Cretin Cousins are probably in a few up there.”

Tierney tried to be surprised about Narcissa blowing two people up and acting glib about it, but she couldn’t. They were assholes anyway.

“Who’s in what, where?”

The voice came from a distant part of the cave, and it didn’t come from an Astrifera. It wasn’t the voice from the cruiser’s radio, but that’s what Tierney was thinking about now.

Something white flashed, and the near-absolute darkness of the cave became absolute light.

Tierney clutched her eyes as rainbows seared the edges of her vision.

This is one of those frying pan-oven kind of deals, ain’t it?

Playing the Rush - A poker term referring to a player who has just enjoyed a short-run of good luck and subsequently begins to play more loosely or aggressively

The walls of the cavern were jammed with pointed chunks of pale crystal, and the whole place sparkled like a showgirl's crotch. They had grown over each other into sheets of blinding whiteness, but the jag-toothed protrusions were prisms, clear and angular. Dazzling bands of color pressed her vision to a tunnel whenever she turned her head. Narcissa had fallen back against the wall, heels of her hands pressed tight against her eyes. Sinclair floated with her face tilted up in a kaleidoscopic pool, wonderstruck despite everything.

Tierney heard the hum of a generator before her eyes adjusted enough to make out the bright square of a portable flood light.

"Whadjoogrlsdo?"

That was the voice from the cruiser, the one that sounded like it'd been used as an ashtray, run over by a few cars, and gnawed at by coyotes. It took a second to parse the long growl into words.

"Turn off the brights an' I'll tell you," was Cissa's answering growl. Her hands stayed over her eyes, but her head was turned towards the faceless welcoming party.

"Turn 'em off?" The first voice again. Older male, too good-humored for Tierney's taste. "You're looking at the ninth wonder of the world!"

Tierney couldn't look at much of anything here without getting a headache. "How's this hole make that list and Cadillac Ranch don't?"

"Alright, that's plenty," A young, strident voice sounded as the floodlight snapped off. Darkness filled Tierney's eyes again, swimming now with bright aftershocks of color.

“Aw, Sammy...”

“No, I mean it!” Sammy must have meant it, if she was the one who fired a shot into the water. Being in the cave with that sound was like being on the inside of a thunderhead. The reverberation rolled around in the dark, tangling messily with echoes of Sinclair’s shriek. “Stay put, Blondie. That’s where I want you all to be.”

What Tierney thought was that this was getting old. What she said was, “My arms are tied.”

“You’ve got legs, right?” There was a hysterical edge to Sammy’s voice, and it didn’t make Tierney feel any safer. A flashlight beam cut a line through the dark, It flashed on Sinclair in the pool, then Narcissa crunched up with her head between her knees, then square in Tierney’s eyes. “Go on, then—see River? I’m getting it done.”

A sigh. “Guess you are.”

Tierney’s vision throbbed red as the pain in her shoulder. The air here was thick and steamy like the bungalow’s bathroom this morning. “You bunch,” she said into the heavy dark, “have gotta be the worst kidnappers in the game.”

“You think I won’t shoot?” Sammy sounded shaky, but not with nerves. With rage.

“No.” Rage never did make Tierney’s voice shake. “I’d just rather you did than fuck around playing Simon Says all day!”

She was squinting at the tan, high-boned face just visible behind the beam’s pale nimbus, but the response came from below.

“Hey Red,” Sinclair had drifted over towards her sister, “bring it down a bit.” She was propped up on the edge as if it this were the deep end outside The Star, and she had one hand curled around Narcissa’s bloodless calf.

“I’m fucking blind,” Cissa was saying to Clair, “I’m fucking blind and now I’m fucking deaf.”

“You’re alright Ciss, come on. The water’s fine.”

Tierney watched Narcissa unfurl and slink into the water. She dug her nails into her palm and bit down on her cheek to divert the mounting frustration. Then, grudgingly, she followed. Treading water was a bitch in her state, but Tierney could see better now. Sammy was young, maybe younger than Sinclair. Her dark hair was cut spiky-short to frame the unnaturally sharp peaks of her ears. Her hold was awkward on a worn bolt action rifle, but her taut, trembling body was braced for recoil. There were three others: two solid guys around fifty and one skinny thing hanging back.

“Now what did you say about Zeke and Zelda?” Sammy seemed a little calmer with things going her way, but not by much. The bigger of the men took the rifle from her and leaned against it like a walking stick. Sammy’s free hand slipped down to the handle of a long, toothy rescue knife that hung on her belt.

“They’re done, hon” Sinclair said.

Narcissa must’ve been feeling better because she snorted. “Well done.”

The adrenaline still rattling around in Tierney’s veins made her laugh like that was the funniest thing in the world. “Put a fork in’em, they’re done.”

It was satisfying to see Sammy’s mouth hang open, even though her canines and eye teeth were filed to points. Before she could go apoplectic, the man named River put a hand on her shoulder. “You need to walk it off, kid?” He was unarmed, from what Tierney saw. The big guy’s rifle was old and carved from mesquite with a fancy new scope slotted parasitically on top.

It could have been a pretty piece once. Tierney squinted at the boy in the back and saw he was holding a black, insectoid contraption that she eventually identified as a crossbow.

“I’m cool man, I just—we only need the two, right? So how about I stick around and carve up the loudmouth?”

Tierney reckoned that was about her, and it made her a little indignant. Narcissa was the one who started in with the barbecue cracks. On the other hand, she didn’t hate her odds against Sammy if she could only get her hands free.

“Scuse her,” River stretched his arms outward and shrugged, “she and Lex back there were close with the cousins.” The boy glanced up from his bow at that, then went back to fiddling with some angular intricacy or another.

“Take it you weren’t?” Tierney said. There was this spooky serenity to River that felt worse than Sammy’s edginess. He wasn’t modded up as far as Tierney could tell, and neither was old gravel voice. The two of’em looked like they could be anybody’s uncles—graying hair and ungracefully aged faces, River in a cheesy pineapple print button down and his buddy in threadbare tie dye.

“Don’t matter much now.”

A sound like rocks in a blender might have been Tie-Dye chortling at that.

“So what’s the game?” Tierney asked. She’d been working her bad shoulder up against the cave wall as gently as she could to reverse the pull. It wasn’t her first time resetting a joint, but she half couldn’t believe her luck when the socket connected. She tried to snap her zipties against the wall at her back, but all she managed to do was scrape up her wrists and aggravate what was probably a torn rotator cuff.

“Red rover, red rover, come on over,” River said. The echo made him sound even more like a game show host.

Making it to the other side wasn't the only rule. Before Lex helped haul Tierney out he shoved her head under for a three count. Minded the shoulder like she'd asked, though. He stayed quiet as a mouse, and up close Tierney saw the slight bulge in his cheeks, like he was holding something inside.

“What's your deal?” She asked.

“*Un-func-tun*,” came out as a cross between a mumble and a lisp. The glimpse Tierney got inside wasn't pretty.

River laughed while his better-armed pals herded the girls towards another aperture, a jagged darkness just barely visible against the cave's lesser gloom. “Kid decided to get his tongue cut apart last week. Guess you could say it left a bad taste in his mouth. Har-har-har.”

“You're not that funny, man,” Sammy said at the same time Tierney muttered, “What's the other guy's excuse?” Before being shuffled to the front, she noticed that they all had tattoos the same as Zeke and Zelda's. A circle, a curved arc around the top half of it, and a jagged V at the bottom. She also caught sight of an engraved section on the rifle, tarnished almost beyond recognition. For a second, it reminded Tierney of the nickel-plated Colt in the glovebox with its scrollwork of desert lily, primrose, and strawberry cactus flower. Their Dad had commissioned it for Sinclair on her sixteenth, even though she was the worst shot in the family. *For emergencies*. Fuck.

“Old Slate had a brush with *La-ran-geel* cancer a little while back,” River drawled from the back of the line they'd formed, “any kind of good living does that to you, but he's in remission now.” The tunnel was cramped and dark and new, but Tierney didn't mind it so much.

She was moving, at least, and when she was moving she could think. Her favorite red cowboy boots were soaked, but Gia's pocket knife was still pressed against the knob of her ankle, rubbing her skin raw with the most comforting blister ever. "Sammy-girl, are you still fuming? How's it matter that Lex mangled his mouth up before the big day, huh? It don't. It don't because nothing does."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Sinclair's voice wasn't far from Tierney's back.

"Because," River seemed to take great pleasure in answering, "tonight the world's going to crack open like an egg, and what comes out is gonna change things in a big way."

Sammi's flashlight beam cast a diffuse puddle of murky light, and when Tierney looked at the walls, she could just barely make out patterns. Some of them weren't natural. She knew what the tattoos reminded her of, now. Petroglyphs.

"I get it," She laughed because all the pain and fear canceling chemicals were making her go funny in the head, "You guys are like the discount Manson family, and this is your Devils Hole."

"Family, sure," River said, "but we've got nothing to do with that guy. And we started up earlier."

"La-di-fucking-da," Tierney said, since she felt a safe enough distance away from Sammy and her kayaking knife. She felt her way around a bend and saw the cavern widen up ahead. A sickly greenish light filtered from somewhere unseen, and she remembered the legends.

"*Shinoww 've*," Slate rasped.

"Y'all look a little pale to be Paiute," Tierney said.

"We're borrowing a phrase until we get the real thing," River said, "but you know what it means."

“Sure.”

Shin-Au-Av, land of gods and ghosts.

All-In - In cardroom poker, to call with all your chips. If another player bets more chips than you have in a No Limit game, you can go All-in and stake your total stack against an equivalent amount of your opponent's stack

The underground city wasn't all that fancy, in the end. Sure the chambers were smooth and round like river stones, connected by cathedral-arched passageways. Sure the winding stone stairways and spiraled columns were something to behold. Sure the walls were pearly with thousands of phosphorescent glow worms, and sure the quartz glimmered otherworldly in their strange light, but there were no precious gems or golden sarcophagi. And the company was lousy.

Who needs it.

At one point Sinclair slipped Narcissa's hawkbill into Tierney's back pocket, punctuating the gift with a light smack to her ass. A sharp, surprised laugh left Tierney's mouth before she could stop it.

"Whuzfunny?"

"Dunno. Everything's kinda funny today." She made sure to sound as sour as she felt.

"Just you wait, kid."

They split up when the passage forked. Tierney swung her head for one last good look at her half-sisters. Sinclair seemed ok—maybe a little too ok, peering around with tourist-like fascination. Narcissa was worse for wear, grey in the face and blotchy around the eyes. Her lips had gone an impossible shade of blue, but they were fixed in such a savage grimace that Tierney almost didn't feel worried about her.

Maybe that was the point.

Tierney got stuck with Sammi, who insisted on walking pressed up to her back with the rescue knife against her collarbone. Sammi's little arms had more strength in them than Tierney expected, but that's why she didn't make a habit of getting into it with crazy people. *You can never tell*. Sammy gripped the knife a lot better than she'd held the rifle. The blade's grooves bored bluntly into Tierney's skin with every stilted step, and she could just feel the bruise brewing beneath the surface.

"If you like me, you can just say so," She muttered at her own shuffling feet, "cause this is a real shitty way to get a real ugly hickey."

"You're about as funny as River."

Tierney could tell Sammy was trying to sound cool and even, but her voice still had that unhinged tremble. Maybe she was still really broken up about Zeke and Zelda. Maybe their friendship went way back and the three of them used to paint each other's nails and torture stray cats together. Maybe someone like Dad or even Sinclair could use that little splinter of emotion against Sammy in some clever way, but Tierney couldn't imagine how, so she'd settle for annoying her.

"Maybe he's right, anyway. If you think the whole world's gonna end in a few hours, why get bent out of shape about a little pig roast?"

Sammy jerked Tierney to the side, swerving them down a narrower passage. A short ways down, Tierney saw a chamber, a small archway overflowing with artificial light. As they approached, Sammy detached herself all at once, and Tierney lost her balance.

"Because dummy," Sammy shoved her roughly through the arch into the bright chamber, "this ain't the only world."

For a second, lying sideways on her better shoulder, Tierney thought she'd woken up from some post-blackout nightmare in the middle of Jack's parlor. The illusion didn't last long. Memory of checked tile, framed art, and neon she-devils faded to ragged rock swarming with glyphs and graffiti. The old red barber chair stayed dead center, rusted where the metal should have shined and cracked where the vinyl should've run smooth. The double coil machine and power box and the work table with a scattering of inks and needles didn't go nowhere neither. A hand closed around Tierney's forearm. She writhed away and the grip loosened.

"Uh, hey help me out."

The guy was half consumed by the white glare of a medical lamp, and his hands fluttered above Tierney like hawk moths around neon. She thought she could probably land a pretty good side kick in his gut from here, but then she'd take about as long to get on her feet as he would to recover. So she sat and helped him pull her up by the good arm, which he didn't seem too keen on letting go of once he had it.

"This," he said, running fingertips along curves and swirls of her sleeve, "is nice work."

"S'mine."

"Real nice," he repeated, easing her into the chair, "What's it mean to you?"

"Don't mean shit," Tierney sat perched forward and managed to get one bound hand around the hawkbill, "It's just pretty."

He nodded like she'd confirmed something for him, and also like that something was disappointing. He had a heart-shaped face that made him look soft and young, and his eyes were round and unlined in a way that suggested he'd had work done. Tierney couldn't guess his age.

His seersucker shirt was unbuttoned halfway to show off a thick-lined piece that covered most of his torso. Tierney could see enough to tell that it was a skeleton and that it was crucified.

The top of the cross was a black bar beneath his chin, and the skull appeared halfway down his breastbone, tipped to one side and slack-jawed in agony or ecstasy. Then there were shoulders with arms stretched outward, bare sharp ribs, a spinal cord pale against the cross's stark backdrop. Through the pale shirt Tierney just made out the horizontal bar running along his arms, and from there she could picture the arrangement of homunculus bones on their human frame.

"It means plenty to be able to look at something nice and feel better for it." She didn't know why she was defending herself to him. *Maybe art's just one of those things you have to be sensitive about.*

"Sure," he nodded and rearranged the contents of his makeshift station, "it just doesn't seem very. I dunno. *You.*"

"You've known me about thirty seconds, motherfucker. Not one of them good."

He raised his eyebrows as if to say, *See?* Now Tierney wished she could keep her mouth shut. Or that this guy had sore spots like Sammy. Or both.

He settled in a little metal stool at her left and examined her bare arm. "I'm good at reading people. Kind of an, uh. Empath."

"My ex thought she was psychic too."

He didn't say anything to that, just started prepping a section of her arm with alcohol and a razor. The truth was, Tierney knew that the landscape of her sleeve had nothing to do with the landscape of her mind. The truth as, she'd brought up Mari just now because Mari'd had a lot to do with the design at the time. *There's nothing wrong with wanting to be a better person than you are, she reminded herself, there's nothing wrong with trying to make that person real, even if you never do manage.*

The truth was, she'd already imagined what her second sleeve might look like—a red and seething hellscape. Fire, jagged rock, monsters, blood. After the big break-up, Tierney had considered abandoning her right sleeve altogether to start on the new one, but that felt too wrong. Backward. So she stuck with her vision of another world, a better self. Arcadia. Imaginary, impossible, but nice to think about when reality got too rough.

Another charm that hadn't helped her much today.

"This is my own mix," he said as he loaded the machine, "India ink and diamondback venom." Tierney must have goggled at him because he added, "not enough to cause trouble. Unless you're sensitive."

"I think my blood might just be sensitive to a rattlesnake bite."

"If it helps, you're not gonna live through the night anyway." Then, "Sorry."

"Why all this, then?" She asked, half curious and half indifferent about hearing the answer, "trying to drive me crazy before you kill me?"

"No. No, it's ritual," he sounded almost defensive, "there's gotta be a sacrifice and she's gotta be initiated so."

"Who says?"

"Boss says."

"Why's it gotta be a she?"

"I don't know. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"How can you initiate me if I don't wanna join?"

"It's worth a try."

"What if it don't work?"

“Gotta use someone else.” He gripped her arm around the elbow to hold her in place. His fingers were very thin, but his hand went all the way around.

There was nothing much to ask after that, or at least nothing that would make a difference. The buzz of the machine filled the chamber, and Tierney set to work with the hawkbill. She nudged the blade out carefully until its crescent back was pressed against one palm, then wedged it between the cables on her wrists. The last part was the trickiest, but once she had it in place she started sawing. Narcissa’s knife was clean and sharp and perfect for this, even if Tierney had practically no leverage to work with.

“The circle represents our world,” he near yelled over the machine and its reverberation, “the serpent will strike first and fill it with poison. The wolf will devour what remains.”

“Just looks like a bunch of shapes to me.” She was looking at a full scale rendering of the design on the nearest wall done in metallic spray paint. On a second glance the curve at the top looked a lot more serpentine, and she could imagine the jagged V at the bottom as a big dog’s jaws.

“That’s what visions are for.”

“You have visions?”

“No, but Slate and River’s dad did. He’s the one that started all this.” The lurid symbol was surrounded by the old carvings it was aping. The petroglyphs were miniscule by the comparison and much easier to interpret. Vortexes. Fires. Animals. People. “New boss has them too.”

“Real family operation you have going,” Tierney said, thinking of Zeke and Zelda. It made her feel sick somehow.

“Oh sure,” he looked up for just a second, and Tierney caught a wistful look in his eyes, “Lot of people come in through family. Not me, though. Left a pretty bad scene back in the Bible Belt when I came out here.”

“My Dad has a story a little bit like that.”

“It’s a classic. Especially in these parts.”

She could picture it. Runaways were easy prey. The cables were starting to give under the talon’s jerky strokes. Her rotator cuff twinged every now and then, but the small pain was lost under the hot drag of the needle on her arm.

“It’s pure luck,” he was saying, “that I had my kit today. Just a few kids who couldn’t decide where they wanted it.” He chuckled, then, almost conspiratorial. “They’ll have their tongues cut open on a whim, but for this they can’t pick between ankle or hip bone.”

“What’s the game there?”

“You’ll have to ask them,” his tone told Tierney what she’d already started thinking, that the mods were a generational thing. “I hear it’s got something to do with evolution.”

“Evolution,” she repeated. She could probably pop the ties now if she pulled hard enough. Instead she worked the serrations near the base of the knife against the faltering cable.

Gonna do something, do it right and so on.

“Yeah, like. Getting ready for the new world.”

Snap. She was free.

“That’s real interesting.”

She didn’t move for a minute. The burn in her skin and the hum in her ears were familiar. Grounding. They made her feel like she was already in control. She closed her eyes, focused on the sensation, and steeled herself.

When Tierney jerked away, it was hard enough to break his hold. The first thing she did was swing her good arm in an arc, gripping the knife so it'd dig in like an animal's claw. She'd gone for the neck, but he'd already startled away so she got his arm. The seersucker shirt tore like tissue. She didn't get a very good swipe, but when she yanked the blade came back with a dime-sized chunk of flesh.

He howled. She jumped to her feet with the chair between them as distance. He swung for the side of her head with the back of the machine. The iron yokes were just about to smack her temple when she ducked. In the second before he regained his balance, she caught his wrist and grabbed at the machine as if it were a real gun. He let go in favor of shoving her off. The knife was on the floor somewhere. She transferred the machine to her good hand. The brass molded to her palm, warm and right. It was still whirring, the needle twitching like a live thing.

He lunged; she hesitated for an instant, uncertain. He was upon her then, and she could see her reflection in his eye, small and dark. When she struck, she used that reflection like a bullseye to jam the spasming needle in. She'd put all the force she could manage into the plunge, so she shouldn't have been surprised by how deep it sunk. Everything was soft like jello, until something hard and thin cracked.

Then it was soft again.

Tierney's favorite game as a kid was the watermelon game. Each of the girls would get an overripe watermelon, and Dad would put the toolbox between them. Tierney always won because she always smashed up her watermelon the worst, the fastest, and the messiest. She'd be covered in juice and pulp by the end, and it would feel great. Sometimes when she was worked up with no one to blame she'd play it by herself.

This was nothing like the watermelon game. For one, the tube on the machine was smaller and finer than the screwdrivers, claw hammers, and carpet knives she tore into the fruit with. For another, the dull vibration in her hand distanced her even further from the gelatinous *squish* of impact.

They were on the floor, now. She was over him, bearing down. There was blood, but not much—a little pool bubbling and collecting at the corners of the eye like discolored tears. The bucking and the squirming wasn't too bad to begin with, and it was getting less every second. At some point the circuit cut out, and there was nothing to distract Tierney from the noises he was making. She drove the machine up and down, up and down until the it was submerged to the base and everything was quiet. She didn't know how many times, she just knew when to stop.

Then it was over.

She jumped away like a startled cottontail and stood in the corner, dry-heaving for a ten count. When nothing expressed any interest in coming up, she spat on the ground and straightened. The machine stayed where she'd stuck it. Her hand barely shook as she wiped the blood and excess ink from her new tattoo. He'd just about finished it, and the linework shined darkly up at her. Tierney decided not to let it bother her. It could be the start of something new.

*Something more **me**.*

She made sure not to look back when she left. She knew it'd be trouble if she did.

Eye in the Sky - Slang for video surveillance cameras used by casinos, usually placed on the ceiling above the gaming area

Tierney knew who the woman was the second she laid eyes on her. She knew because the woman was an older version of Narcissa, if Narcissa could tan. Same blade-sharp cheekbones. Same indigo tinge around irises so dark they blended into the pupils. The woman wore an impeccable fringed white leather jacket and a green tie-dye skirt. Two brown suede belts crisscrossed her waist, and one of them cradled a golden Desert Eagle. The kind Dad favored. The geometric tattoo was on her ankle, faded and a little scarred but instantly recognizable. *Fuck*. Tierney's gut seized with the final, unavoidable realization that none of this was accidental.

"I know you," Lena said, "I'd know you anywhere." Her sloe eyes pinned Tierney like a butterfly to a board. "That sexy red mess of hair. Those smoky quartz eyes."

Tierney had the talon out, looking ready to strike even if all she felt was an inexplicable urge to cover herself, to hide. Lena stood with her hip cocked against one wall, unconcerned. The tunnels had felt too empty, too easy. Tierney'd wanted to get to higher ground, so she found some steps and took them as high as they went. She didn't stumble upon an exit, just the penthouse suite.

"One thing you don't got," Lena carried on, "is her figure. Jasmine had curves like a backroad."

Tierney'd eaten about two and a half bites of lemon poppy muffin today, and every one of them threatened to come back up now. "Fuck you," she said, like someone who'd already lost.

Lena smile was very sweet and it had more menace in it than any of Narcissa's savage sneers. "It's funny. I didn't see you coming." The worms here were dense as Sacramento fog, the

walls fluorescent with their absinthe glow. Light collected strangely around Lena, without shadow or interruption. Like it came from inside her. “You slipped through.”

“Maybe your mojo ain’t what you think it is.” Tierney hoped the flatness of her voice made her sound sure instead of tired, like she was starting to feel.

Lena radiated blitheness. “It’s the other world I see, mostly. When I look. You’re not in it.”

“Once I ate peyote at a rodeo and saw the rapture happen in real time. Don’t make me a prophet.”

Fresh pain erupted in Tierney’s arm, reducing everything else to white noise. For a second she swore Lena had shot her even as the Desert Eagle sat untouched in its holster. She gaped, then followed Lena’s gaze and turned around. She glimpsed the long, slim tube of aluminum sticking out of her bicep, just inches from her new ink. She turned a little further, and there was Sammy smirking with Lex’s crossbow in her hands.

“God,” she said, even though her mouth felt numb and the pain was expanding inside her like a mushroom cloud.

“Gods,” Lena corrected gently. She seemed to grow taller by the second, but then Tierney realized that her knees had just collapsed.

“Figure of speech,” She managed a laugh, “but sure. Them too.”

Tierney’s shoulder was out again, and a few seconds later so was she.

Down to the Felt - Totally out of money, broke

In the end, the bolt wound wasn't the worst Tierney'd ever had. She'd broken her leg racing dirt bikes with friends in Jawbone Canyon, and she could think of at least one bar fight that smashed her up harder. This was her first time passing out, but she couldn't complain; unconsciousness was a nice break from the day's events. Waking up was the nasty part.

Her throat felt dry and cracked as Badwater Basin, as old bones bleaching in the sun. Her eyes and her ears throbbed like the ache in her skull was trying to push its way out of them. Her whole arm might have been flayed for how much it hurt, but the upshot was she'd missed the amateur surgery that must have taken place. Someone had set and wrapped her arm, which Tierney guessed she should be thankful for. A scratchy, aztec-print blanket itched the backs of her thighs.

She could tell by the air that she was above ground. A pale ceiling undulated above her, and she realized she was in a tent. More like a sheet fort, really. An amorphous mass of walls stirred and reformed itself, while the desert beyond flickered like an illusion. The light coming in through the gauze was molten with that late tinge of red. She'd been propped against the base of a stunted Joshua tree, and the arm that wasn't stunted and slung was tied to the lowest branch with a hot pink stretch of bungee cord. Everything reeked of sweat, sex, and predation.

The forms that fluttered around her were monster-faced and iridescent. It took Tierney a minute to remember that they were people. Unfamiliar girls in shimmering slips and glitter paint. One of them put a coronet of claret cups and evening primrose around her head. They all giggled when she tried to shake it off. Their dresses and skins were a rainbow of pastels and jewel-tones, their movements kaleidoscopic. Tierney didn't know if they were initiating her or taking

advantage of an opportunity to play dress up. They'd put her in charmeuse with fragile trimmings of lace. All white.

How else will anyone know that I'm the sacrifice?

She wanted to laugh, but she didn't think her throat could take it. The lace at the neckline made it look like some ghostly butterfly had settled between her breasts. A girl in green started pulling at Tierney's boots. She kicked.

"Leave'em. They're my favorites."

The girl in green fell onto her back laughing. A girl in pink came towards her with a glass jar of scarlet, scintillating liquid.

"What's that?" Tierney asked. The girl's face was stretched tight over silicon raised cheekbones, dragging the corners of her smile up grotesquely high.

"Distilled brain-melt."

"Is there snake venom in there, too?" Tierney glared, but the girl's eyes stayed bovine and unfocused in their slanted sockets, "donkey spit? Bobcat piss?"

"None of that," she said, "just some coyote musk."

"Explains the stink."

There was nowhere to back up to, so Tierney made like any other trapped animal and bared her teeth. Instead of pressing in closer, the girl in pink cried "catch!" and doused her. Skunky glitter juice dripped down her face and neck. The laughter was deafening. Tierney lost it then. She thrashed, screamed, gnashed her teeth. It was pointless, but some part of her relished the fit. It kept them all off her for a while, anyway.

Whatever they'd splashed her with kicked like a mule.

Brain-melt, the girl in pink had said, but it was the world that started melting. Colors peeled away from each other like layers descending down into some impossibly bright core. Tierney felt her body melt, too. Skin, muscles, bone, and blood dissolving together and pooling pinkly on the floor.

There was no fixing that. She had to leave it all behind for a while.

x

Sinclair did Burning Man every year, and by extension so did Narcissa. Tierney went with them once, not long after turning eighteen and finishing out high school. Talk about apocalyptic. Black Rock City wasn't really her scene, but after a hit of acid and a few rolls of molly from her sisters' stash she was enjoying it ok. Clair and Cissa had already fucked off with some friends Tierney didn't know, so she was going it alone. She wandered for a while, marveling at all the technicolor freaks in their furs and feathers, body paint and pasties. Didn't mind feeling invisible by comparison.

She had a canteen of water slung over one shoulder and a canteen of whiskey over the other, and she'd found a band that she liked. The sunset rolled over the playa like neon pink smoke, and with it came Mari.

"Saint Quiteria," she said, "nice."

"Huh?"

"The patron saint of girl gangs."

"Really?"

"Sorta. Lemme guess, old flame?"

“Sorta,” Tierney smiled a hazy version of her off-kilter grin, “You some kind of con artist?”

“Howdoya figure?”

“People talkin’ like that always are.” The two of them were already dancing together in the bleeding light.

“Nah babe,” Mari beamed and touched one finger to her temple, “I just tune into other stations sometimes.”

“This one’s fine for me,” Tierney said. At the time Mari’s face appeared to her as a fractured gestalt of geometric shapes and supersaturated color, but Tierney knew she was beautiful. “Almost always something good on.”

Mari laughed at that, and the sound was so musical that it got caught in Tierney’s head. It hovered in the air and rolled around her on loop, but every repetition felt distorted and further away. Tierney wanted to hear the real thing again.

“Can you tell me the winning lotto numbers?” The joke was funnier in her head.

“No, smarty,” Mari’s eyes twinkled so hard they seemed to float out of her body. Lightning bugs. “But I can tell you what you need right now.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You need to watch something beautiful burn.”

The night fell blue-black, and a waxing moon the shade and shape of a ripe mango was rising in the west. Mari took her by the hand to the conclave, and they watched the blaze together.

“Wow,” Tierney said, eloquent as she’d ever been, “that’s a lot of fire.”

“Yeah,” Mari said. Her eyes were on Tierney and they were the warmest brown imaginable, ringed brilliant citrine topaz near the pupils, “It sure is.”

Tierney kissed her long and deep, and they hadn't come up for air any sooner than they were up and running. Flames still danced under Tierney's skin and smoldered hotly in her gut. When they made it back to Mari's tent, neither of them were in much of a mood to talk. Still, Mari said “It's not a bad thing, you know. Having a saint in your corner.”

“I guess not,” Tierney decided, “I just can't figure what I did to deserve it.”

“World's weird like that,” was Mari's only explanation.

They rode out their respective highs together, and the next morning Tierney joked that she might really believe in magic now. The fact that Mari could stand Tierney's sense of humor was a big part of why she wanted to keep seeing her after the festival. When Tierney said she wanted pancakes for breakfast, Mari tracked down someone with a griddle and supplies. That was the other part.

Mariposa de los Santos had an apartment in downtown Tucson. She took classes at the University of Arizona, worked at a crystal shop called The Jeweled Jackalope, and sold her own spells, charms, potions, and readings on the side. When Mari's mother was pregnant with her, the air was thick with migrating Monarchs. They alighted on her belly in tiger-striped droves. Mari herself was visited often by Black Witch moths, and Tierney saw more of the dark, downy things when they were dating than she had in her whole life.

“Call me Mariposa de la Muerte,” she said one night, wrapped dramatically in moonlight and black fringe. A moth the size of a silk fan was nestled in the crook of her neck, looking for all the world like it was about to whisper in her ear.

“More like Posy,” Tierney smirked, “cause you're so sweet they think you're a flower.”

At the peak of their relationship, she stayed with Mari every weekend. They designed Tierney's sleeve together and sketched out a design for Mari—an enormous Black Witch spreading its dark lace wings across her shoulder blades. Tierney never got to compose that twilight mosaic on its intended canvas because things started going sour about a year in. It happened because the two of them didn't have many interests in common except being tangled up together. It happened because Tierney never could stop arguing and Mari always refused to start.

“Can't you ever say anything to my face?” Tierney would ask whenever some disagreement or another tensed and trembled in the air between them.

“I've already forgotten about it,” Mari would insist, “why can't you?”

They drove each other crazy like that for a while. One day Mari told her to grow up. There was more sadness in her voice than malice, but it was another arbitrary tipping point. The thud of blood in Tierney's ears obscured her own voice from her, but that was the end of them.

The whole time they were together, Tierney didn't tease Mari about her hocus pocus. At least, not any more than Mari teased Tierney about her temper.

She never did ask what was on the other stations.

Showdown - In poker, after the last betting round, the players who remain in the pot must show their hands to determine the winner

Tierney came back to herself in an unfamiliar vale, a big bowl carved out of the canyon. The air was beginning to cool, and sunset turned every inch of towering quartz into rose gold. The drug still sang through her, but it was fading fast. A short, wild ride. Tierney already resented the likelihood that she was going to die sober.

Her left arm was tumescent with sensation, but her pain receptors were still on the fritz, her senses still jumbled up in each other. It felt how radio static sounded, how 90 proof whisky tasted, how racing stripes looked. *Let's keep it that way.*

The part of her that had been drifting free was already absorbed, disappeared into some obscure corner of Tierney's mind. Reclaiming those memories was like grasping at the loose threads of dreams, only to have them unravel in her hands. The part of her that was present during the trip recalled monster girls setting in on her like green bottles on roadkill. Tierney didn't probe further. She didn't doubt that the memories of Mari that flooded in were sweeter, even if they still carried a saltwater sting.

The tent was gone, but Tierney could tell by the tree and the bungee cord that she hadn't moved. Her boots were on and fairly dry. She contorted her body like a possessed thing but didn't come close to reaching the knife that bulged there. A crowd of hundreds milled through the valley, all with their matching tattoos and most in glitter paint, but otherwise varied. Tierney felt like she was looking through the glass of an aquarium, picking out different schools of similarly colored and shaped bodies. A lot of them were dancing, drinking, fucking.

Zeke wasn't kidding when he said it would be a big party. She couldn't look at the shifting mass too long, or it would spin and blur. Instead she focused on the dense growth of cacti and scrub bush that encircled the vale, their blossoms tightening and disappearing as evening settled.

In the gloaming, every storm cloud was a dense and corrugated chunk of amethyst, shining now and then with flash bulbs of lightning. Thunder rattled in Tierney's every nerve ending, so she couldn't pick out the exact moment that the ground started to tremble. The earthquake didn't put an end to any festivities, just turned everything jerky and violent. The shaking ratcheted up as a sanguine moon peeked out over the edge of the canyon. Tierney bolted to her feet, gasping at the force of the tremor.

She felt clear-eyed and shaky, insubstantial and exhilarated. Every part of her was still liquid and brand new, especially her eyes. A cold sweat had settled over her skin like a morning dew. In patches around the clouds, stars throbbed huge and close. Between them and the lightning Tierney might've been watching a laser show.

Thunder crashed and the whole canyon shook.

The vale's perimeter exploded, all at once, with white starbursts of Night-blooming cereus. She recognized them straight away because Jasmine kept hers in The Star's night garden and threw big parties for their once-a-year bloom. Queen of the Night. Alien-looking pinwheels oozing gold dust filaments from desiccated thorny brush. Tierney also recognized the rich smell of vanilla, thick enough here to choke on.

The crowd parted then. With the rocking earth, the floral eruption, the cloying scent came Lena. She rose like a mist from a hole in the ground at the tapered convergence of walls. She clapped her hands and said, "Showtime!"

Everyone cheered like she'd just bought them all free drinks.

Behind her came River and Slate hauling twin bundles wrapped in bright silk cloths and rope. The bundles were human sized, patchwork mummies or enormous cocoons. The brothers propped their bundles up on either side of the entrance.

Lena drifted through the crowd, shouting about serpents and wolves, poison and devourment as she went. The world was going to crack apart and the gods would break through and they were going to live forever in the world of the divine. She was playing it up, waving her arms like some combination doomsday preacher-stage magician.

Tierney caught sight of Sammy near the front of the crush, just feet away. She wasn't looking as frenzied as everyone else, but her almond-shaped eyes were pinned fast to Lena, fever-bright with adulation. There was a faint resemblance between the two of them. Tierney spat at her, but it didn't land.

When Lena made it to the tree, she came up behind Tierney and murmured "Do you know what my favorite thing was, back when I was a little girl in Virginia?" And lord if having her that close didn't make Tierney's skin crawl.

"Might've heard through the grapevine that you liked horseback riding," Tierney hazarded.

"Close," Lena said, almost affectionately. Silver flashed at the edge of Tierney's vision and something hot and wet poured down her cheek. "My favorite was the fox hunts."

"Go figure." There was no pain, still, just a distant, pins-and-needles numbness. Lena coated a hand in Tierney's blood and leaned forward to smear it over Sammy's face. The way they smiled at each other was pure Hallmark.

Then Lena straightened up to face the throng. She had two hands around the jeweled hilt of a ritual dagger, and she thrust it in the air with the point to the sky. The bloodied blade shone like patent leather under the florid moon.

“Who will you be at the end of the world?”

It was a rallying cry, answered by a mad roar.

“Let’s find out.”

With one fierce thrust, Lena sunk her dagger hilt-deep in the parched earth. Some part of Tierney must’ve bought Lena’s act, because she half-expected the tiny gash to widen into a ground-splitting rift.

It didn’t.

Tierney was ready to start laughing, even if it tore her throat in two, but nobody was looking at Lena anymore. The crowd was silent and turned towards the mummies. Tierney saw Lena pull back her knife. Daintily. As if she were plucking a flower.

The bundles had started shaking. Tierney was reminded, absurdly, of the jiggling moth eggs they sold in souvenir shops. That only lasted a second or two. The silk tore, the ropes bulged and snapped.

What came out was a hell of a lot bigger than whatever had gone in.

x

One had scales of gold, sapphire, garnet, and tourmaline--most every color Tierney could imagine and some she couldn’t, even when she was staring straight at them. They formed diamonds, lattices, swirls, and ladders that rearranged themselves with every sinuous shift of

muscle. The mouth widened in a cavernous gape, and its throat was the same lush pink as a pitcher plant. There was a long, tremulous tongue vibrating between two fangs. Wickedly curved scimitars set in rosy gums. Pearls of poison dripped from the translucent points, sparkling and smelling of peach schnapps, florida water, strawberry lip gloss, and lazy morning sex.

The other had a pelt darker than the gaps between stars. There were two blackhole eyes and one damp, quivering snout. The mouth was soaked with sulphurous drool and lined with jagged teeth, yellow serrations that receded in rows as far back as Tierney could see. Its growls came from everywhere and nowhere, like late August thunder. Each graceful paw was as silent as sleep or death.

One slithered, the other stalked.

One stank of a bordello, the other of an abattoir.

One hissed like static over a favorite song while the other howled like an echo lost inside itself.

Of course Tierney knew who they were the second she saw them.

Of course.

x

Lena called them gods, but they didn't look like anything that could have crawled out of heaven. Hell neither, for that matter. They were the kind of things you'd picture prowling around you in the dark. Back when you were a kid and your imagination hadn't learned to control itself, back when you heard noises by the window, paralyzed and sweating in your sheets despite the hum of an air conditioner and a light switch just an arm's length away.

Creatures half real, half dream—flesh enough to tear you apart, but only just. Familiar and impossible at the same time, like they'd leaked through some crack in reality just half a world over.

A monster ain't all-knowing or all-powerful, but it's got sharp enough teeth to make up for that.

And the earth didn't open up, not like an egg or like any other thing. It just shook and burned and closed itself around the new things prowling through it.

x

They're going to do it, was all Tierney could think as the chimeras closed in, my bitch sisters are going to eat me.

The cable at her wrist popped, and she was looking into Lena's vortex pupils.

"Prey's meant to run."

x

Tierney was the fish of the family when it came to cards. Dad passed on his talent for bluffing to Sinclair and taught Narcissa how to count cards, but Tierney didn't take to any of it. All she could do was pick a strategy, sink her teeth in, and hold on tight for the rest of the game.

Sometimes it payed out and sometimes it didn't, but she never folded.

Now Tierney stood with her cheap, borrowed pocket knife out in front of a couple monsters. She was tensed to fight and ready to dash—whichever had a better shot at saving her

skin. If she slashed at those slitted sapphire pupils, she thought she might buy some time to run. If she was fast enough, she could go to ground and escape the whole nightmare.

It'd be a gamble, she told herself, but in the end it wasn't even in the playbook. Tierney tried to call up the old resentment, the anger that always felt so deep in her blood. It wasn't there.

Well, shit.

She lowered her arm and closed her eyes. She didn't know whether to pray to a god or a devil or to St. Quiteria, so Tierney put a big IOU out to the universe and let it ride.

After a breathless second, she felt a brush like a moth's wing on her cheek, then a wet nudge at her wrist. When she looked, two sets of otherworldly eyes stared back. She blinked, they didn't. Tierney got it then, and swung her dull blade behind her in a counterclockwise spiral.

She made contact. One bright jet of blood made a miniature Rorschach on the translucence of her slip. A lean, brown hand fumbled at the Desert Eagle and dropped it for Tierney to catch. Lena's eyes were too much like Narcissa's, so Tierney couldn't aim for the head. In the end, she put a golden bullet straight through the hollow of Lena's throat. Blood pooled there like syrup on flapjacks.

The presences were long gone from Tierney's back, so she turned to face the vale. It didn't look like such a party anymore.

The carnage might've been a sea, for how wet and ubiquitous it was. Tierney pushed her way through waves of red with the .44 Magnum gleaming hot in her hand, but the damage she could do with that was nothing compared to what her sisters wrought with their teeth.

At one point, Tierney caught Sammy scrambling into the foxhole. It was hard to aim amidst the frenzy of limbs, but Tierney got her through the arm. That seemed fair.

Amazing how quick a bash like that can empty out, Tierney thought when the only sounds in the canyon were thunder and the squish of her boots through puddles of gore.

She found her sisters curled up and naked in a pink nest of entrails.

“That’s a good look,” she told them.

“Not as good as that scared look on your face before,” Narcissa said without missing a beat. Her head was in the crook of Sinclair’s neck; her smile was brilliant and mean.

“I wasn’t scared,” Tierney snapped instantly, face warming beneath its crinkling mask of dried blood.

“You damn near pissed yourself.”

“Only cause I thought you were enough of a cunt to kill me.”

“Come on, Cherry,” Sinclair said softly, “kind knows kind.”

The three of them looted corpses for clothes under the Queen of the Night’s gilded eyes. Sinclair found some daisy dukes to replace her lost pair and a pink shawl to tie around her chest. Narcissa tossed on some girl’s black nylon slip and Lena’s jacket. The white leather wasn’t so impeccable anymore, but it could probably be wiped clean. Tierney just bunched up her stained charmeuse over a pair of Levis and called it a night. She slotted Lena’s gun in the waistband and Gia’s knife in a back pocket.

“You good?” Cissa asked Clair. Tierney steadied her oldest sister when she started to sway.

“Not feeling so hot, babes,” Sinclair said, eyes blue and bleary.

“I feel *great*,” Narcissa declared.

Sinclair belched, and the smell was like a slaughterhouse mid-heat wave. “Scuse me,” she squeaked, then doubled over laughing. She laughed until tears leaked out of her eyes and her sisters had to pick her up off the ground.

“Come on, Clair,” Narcissa said when Clair’s giggles started sounding more like sobs.

“I had an itch,” Sinclair got out between convulsions, “to visit the park today. Isn’t that funny?”

“Kinda,” Tierney said at length, “but I’m not ready to laugh about it yet.”

Three of a Kind - Three cards of the same rank

They followed trails of blood through the caverns until they came upon a third opening. On the surface there were cars, and Sinclair pulled herself together enough to hotwire the prettiest thing they could find. The convertible Stingray was white with red velvet upholstery, and it ran real nice. Narcissa rifled through the glove box to find a little orange bottle of oxycontin, some flavored Burnett's, a desiccated human hand, and a few loose rounds of .44 caliber bullets.

She handed the pills back to Tierney without comment. None of them had to wonder whose car they were stealing. Sinclair left the top down and peeled away as night fell in earnest. The quakes were still rattling along, but the dry storm had eased up. There were strange darting lights in the sky too big and red to be stars.

"Y'all really think the world is ending?" Sinclair near whispered, like it wasn't just the three of them alone in the dark.

Narcissa shrugged. Tierney pointed out that Lena's track record for soothsaying was pretty mixed. A few minutes later, Clair had to angle the Stingray around a boulder that sat burning like brushfire in the middle of the road. She turned on the radio.

For a long time, they just drove. Aimlessly, it seemed, even after they'd found themselves on the map. Sinclair was taking the Corvette for all it was worth, swinging curves at 140 and almost making it feel smooth. She cranked music loud enough to compete with the wind and hummed along, giggling to herself at random intervals. Narcissa was leaning out as far as she could, head canting this way and that as she drank in her fill of scenic destruction.

Tierney kept expecting to get edgy, to ask Sinclair to take them home already. She waited for some feeling to overwhelm her, even if it was just exhaustion. It never did. She felt calm and pleasantly empty. Her bolt wound began to bleed through its bandage, but she'd live. The wind pushed at her hair, and the night air tasted like cool water despite the streaks of fire piercing through. The seats were plush and sweet on the skin, so Tierney sprawled out and tipped her head back.

The colors that made up earth and sky were hyperreal. Stars glistened weaker than before in their depths. Rhinestones rather than diamonds, flickering like old streetlights.

“Should we talk about it?” Sinclair asked at one point. Tierney couldn't think of anything she'd like to do less, but she didn't wanna be the one to say that.

“Why bother?” Narcissa said eventually, “We were all there when it happened.”

It didn't occur to anyone to go back for Sinclair's Jeep. They just drove in exhilarated stasis until they looped around to a familiar route.

“This is horrible,” Tierney said when she couldn't help it anymore, “but I'm *starving*.”

The silence felt like the chastisement it ought to have been. That was until Narcissa said, “I could eat.”

x

The old doo-wop sign rose up from a ghost town gloom. Looping bubblegum script announced *Pinky's—24 Hour Diner—Breakfast All Day*, but half the flashbulbs were shattered.

Inside, the joint was lit up and barren. A hunk of rock the size of a mule deer was smoldering in a handicap spot, and the plate glass window nearest to it was cracked open.

“World must be ending,” Sinclair said, “if Pinky’s is closed.”

She turned in anyway and parked a space over from the big rock. Tierney had never thought about what a shooting star would look like up close, but now it was fifteen feet away and hard to ignore. Ugly charred lump shot through with veins glowing the lushest red imaginable, shading off hypnotic purple deeper down.

“Sign reads open,” Narcissa said.

They got out. Tierney turned to Clair. “I owe you a sundae.”

“What about me, huh?” Cissa’s teeth were radiant in the moonlight, same as her translucent skin and the leather of her new jacket between the streaks of gore.

“I owe you jack shit.”

Narcissa’s laugh was short and loud. She clapped Tierney’s back with rare energy. Sinclair was smiling.

It was eerie inside because it was mostly unchanged. Anything that wasn’t attached to something bigger had gotten knocked around in the quakes, but otherwise the diner was just quiet. Lifeless. The girls stepped around smashed plates, overturned ketchup bottles, and puddles of spilled coffee to a clean booth. Sinclair sat down right away, then leaned out and vomited an entire pool of carnage onto the checkered floor.

Tierney stepped a ways back since her good red cowboy boots had already been through a lot today, but she could see every shade of death from raw pink to mauve quivering on the linoleum.

“Ate too fast,” Sinclair said flatly, then another hysterical giggle rattled out of her, “I feel better now.”

This time Tierney and Narcissa laughed along, but not too long or hard or easily.

“Gotta take a shit,” Narcissa announced. Then, as she was already wandering off, “huge one, probably.”

Since Cissa was gone, Tierney stayed and got the table jukebox going. She played the kind of stuff Clair loved, ‘50s mush about crushes and turning sixteen and comparing girls to candy.

Later they sniffed around the kitchen, and Tierney worked on putting a sundae together one-handed. Sinclair offered her help, but Tierney steadfastly refused cause that wasn’t the deal. Not like anyone was here to give her shit about spilling some chocolate sauce on the floor. Narcissa managed to fire up the grill and sculpted a huge, misshapen mess of egg scramble. Clair asked Cissa if she’d washed her hands in the bathroom and sprayed her with a canister of whipped cream when the answer was no. Narcissa asked what she was really contributing to the experience anyway, so Sinclair did a little Betty boop dance to the music and put on a fresh pot of coffee.

Alone in their booth, the girls tore into their food and spoke in rushed emphatic bursts about how good it all was. Except for the sky falling down outside the plate glass, it felt like any other late night diner run.

“I could use a drink,” Tierney said after thinking that, “a real one.”

Sinclair, despite being the only one that could stomach the Burnett’s, smiled indulgently. “That can be arranged.” She ate the cherry on her sundae last and tied the stem up with her tongue.

Then they left.

x

The destruction didn't get any worse down the road, but the desolation remained complete. Besides the irregular bursts of fire, the sky had turned a viscous black. The air smelled smoky and the stars were tucked away in darkness.

A clear night is the most perfect map ever made, Leo sometimes said when he was feeling poetic.

The familiar constellations of color and light on Route 66 were half intact—out here, smashed up there, and flickering more than usual, but just as often untouched. Tierney had a creeping paranoia that the three of them were the only people left in the world, but then an Elvis impersonator scuttled out of the Lazuli Lounge like a bejeweled crab from a shipwreck.

“Figures that dump would come out of this fine,” Sinclair huffed. She was upset that The Salamander was smashed up, but Tierney was on the black book there so she didn't much mind.

She wondered if the stars would be in their proper places when the dust all settled. It seemed to Tierney that they could rearrange themselves now if they wanted or drop from the sky altogether. She was just wondering how the stars would fall—all at once like pearls from a broken string or one by one like baby teeth—when they came upon it.

The grinning, pie-eyed serpent in the ten-gallon hat.

END OF THE WORLD PARTY, said a hand-drawn sign in the window, *MECHANICAL BULL CHAMPIONSHIP — ALL DRINKS \$3 — BUY 1 HEART ATTACK BURGER GET 1 FREE*

Inside, the jukebox was blaring something loud and honky-tonk. The ladies from the Singing Sands club down the street must've been let out of work early because the whole lot of'em were here. Some were still birds of paradise in their burlesque finery and others had changed into jeans or sweats, their faces still done up like dark and glittering sphinxes.

Besides them, Tierney clocked a lot of leather jackets with a spectrum of poison bright markings on their backs, a few RV-loads of college age roadtrippers, a handful of truckers, and the usual crowd of barflies and loyal old diners. Everyone was having a good time, dancing on tables and pouring each other shots and alternating cigarette drags with messy bites of overloaded burgers.

Ray was wearing his best cowboy hat, the one with the embroidery. He hugged them each, not minding the blood.

"Aren't y'all a sight for sore eyes," he said, sounding concerned but unsurprised beneath all the joviality. Then he shook his head. "Your Daddy's been bothering me. I'm gonna get him on the horn and let'im know you're alright."

"Thanks, Ray," they said as one.

"How'd y'all like the shine?" He asked offhand.

"It was dynamite," Narcissa deadpanned at the same time Tierney said they hadn't tried it. Sinclair crumbled in on herself laughing.

"Never a dull moment," he sighed.

As he sauntered off, Tierney reminded herself that somewhere in the fire-torn void of blue-black night and empty highway, The Wandering Star was glowing like an angler fish's lure. She thought about how somewhere inside that neon fairyland Leo and Jasmine were dancing and

drinking and cheering for the bloody flares of falling stars the same as they would fireworks on the fourth of July.

The sun would probably come up tomorrow, and the casino's glossy walls would shine like rose gold if it did. Tierney would probably wake up sore in more places than she could count and crackling with dry blood on the top of a picnic table. Her half-sisters would be curled up behind the bar with a checked tablecloth for a blanket and a bottle of Gypsum Gin cradled between them. They'd hug Ray goodbye and take some plastic-wrapped snack cakes and a jar of Buck Moon Blackberry shine for the road. They'd cruise up to The Star in their stolen car and wash off all the glitter and gore in the diamond-shaped pool until chlorine seared their eyes.

Then they'd sit down with Jasmine and Leo, cause the five of them had a lot to talk about.

In the present, Jasmine and Leo were miles away and the sisters were splitting off in different directions. When Sinclair gravitated towards the mechanical bull and Narcissa sniffed out a promising card game, Tierney headed for the makeshift bar. She was deciding whether or not to go for a one-armed game of pool when the guy next to her got an eyeful. He was old, grizzled, and half in the bag, but he nearly fell off his stool.

"Fuck happened to you?"

"Weird day, wild night." Tierney said. She could feel her ichor-encrusted face turn ghoulish under the twist of an especially off-kilter grin. "And I'm still working on that last part."