

Forest of Rot

By April May Jay

They said in the forest, even the trees bled. That if you scraped away moss and ferns, you'd find fingernails in the trunks, and when it rained—as it usually did—the knots steamed out real breath.

To the north and south, the Cascades marched on. Dumb, unthinking rocks covered in trees like fur. No ghosts, no magic, no jawbones dug deep into bark. Not like here. Something split the flesh of these woods, and it festered.

Two towns out, they blamed bears for the screams. A few people tossed the word *cult* around hoping a human concept could absorb inhuman malice. Like they would be so lucky.

This story bloomed in roadside diners in the next town. It fell from nervous teenagers' lips with a chuckle and a dare—to go, to see for yourself. Let the forest swallow you, let it nibble through your skin and lick the tendons off your bones. The magic of the forest made these promises to most who neared it—that it would take all who came for it, that it would devour them piecemeal. The dissonance rang through that valley and pushed the locals *away, away, away*. Nobody took up the dare. Nobody went near the forest.

Except for the ones it called.

The forest spoke in blood, and blood responded. It salivated power, and the hungry came. From the farthest seas and the most inhospitable mountains, from beneath every rock where predators dragged their prey, the way flies found flesh to lay their eggs, they

came. For centuries, they had come. Hapless fools caught in a song and necromancers seeking power. The hurricane of death magic that had grown up with the forest before living memory called them in. It nourished them. Whispered justifications to those in its bounds, reasons why the dead should walk, and it showed them how to make that happen if they didn't already know.

How fortunate you are to live here, the forest would say. But only the strong survive. You must bless your mantle with blood.

To gain power was to take it. To take it was to kill. The magic would drive anyone insane, given enough time, but those who felt the call strong enough to make it to the forest were already half there. They wanted the madness. They made it their home.

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Thirteen years ago, the forest called a couple in. It whispered to them of death and blood, and the couple rejoiced. They slit the throats of animals and used the forest's magic to reanimate them, set them to work. When people who lived in the forest tried to take, the couple gave them new purpose in death. They drained the intruders' magic just like those intruders were going to drains theirs. They watered their gardens with bile and bonemeal.

The young daughter they'd brought with them—who wasn't called, who'd only felt the away, away, away when they'd stepped into the forest and every moment after—begged them to stop. She tried to appeal to the version of her parents she'd known the last six years, before the forest called them, warped them, took them. Those parents were gone. There was no outside, no before. Only here, and now, and what they had to do, and what the next collection of skull plates would bring. Every maggot was a butterfly to them.

So she watched. And listened, when she had to, when they forced her to. She absorbed their lessons. And she grew into the most unusual kind of flower in her new home: non-carnivorous.

Her name was Marigold. To the people she loved, it was Mags.

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It went like this:

Mags started her days with a run through the trees, checking the wards she'd placed in rings rippling out from the cabin. Her breath mingled with the early mist as she cut her finger and smeared blood over a fading mark painted on a trunk. She thought of Mom and Dad doing the same thing years ago, before another necromancer killed and drained them. Wondered if she was doing it right, if tonight an undead monstrosity on spindly limbs would sneak through and murder her in her sleep. She wondered this every day.

In the three years since her parents died, Mags had learned predictability was her best defense in the forest. She ran the same paths, worked flesh from bone with the same knife, and traced the same melancholic ideas so deep into her brain, they shaped her dreams. Protect her clearing. Protect her cabin. Protect her little brother. Kill anything and everything that did not align with those missions.

The- forest whispered to her day and night, begging her to take it further, to hunt rather than defend. She wanted to listen desperately.

But her memories reached beyond the forest. She had been a young child, once, showered in affection. She'd watched TV shows in smelly motel rooms while her family traveled across country. Fuzzy puppets giving lessons like *be brave, be honest, be kind*.

Somewhere out there, the world worked that way, she thought. In town, people didn't kill each other. Didn't even think about it, as far as she could tell. She clung to that. She listened to those puppets in her head all day, because it was the only way she knew to block out the forest.

Under the canopy, she built up a sweat. Her scalp itched. She thought of her old braids and mourned their loss, but she couldn't maintain long hair out here, not without her mom's help.

She killed two squirrels and stuffed their corpses in a messenger bag stiff from blood and dirt. An undead raccoon she'd reanimated to keep watch gobbled the smaller squirrel so fast, she had to yank her fingers back to keep from being bit.

She glared into its cloudy eyes. Rotten flesh draped from its bones, consuming more magic than she got in return. A good necromancer could maintain a creature for a decade or more by feeding it flesh and power. This raccoon was barely three and already fading. And it had outlasted everything else she'd roused by far.

She pushed more of herself into it, dropping to her knees from the effort, and the beads of sweat on her forehead coalesced into a downpour. The raccoon skittered away once she finished. "Greedy jerk," she muttered. The last trace of its magic faded into the trees, barely an ember in the darkness when she so desperately needed an inferno.

The wind left stinging welts on her cheeks by the time she made it back to the cabin. The wood held together on misplaced hope and rusted nails alone. She allowed herself this: two breaths out front. *Be brave, be honest, be kind.* A few moments with closed eyes, listening to nothing.

Some days shrieks split the air, signaling a conflict somewhere else. She spent those days shut inside, huddling with Shiloh and telling him it was a game, though he was too old for that now. Twelve, stubborn, and stronger than her by half. After so many hours, his fingers fused to her arm, and hers fused to the knife.

Today, though, it was silent.

For two breaths, she missed her parents. Missed the people they were before the forest called them, and missed the feeling they had given her—that everything would be okay, and that she didn't have to be the one who made that happen.

She opened the door.

Shiloh sat on the bed. She breathed a sigh of relief, just as she did every time she saw him again after leaving. The jeans and flannel she'd nicked from a thrift store a year ago rode up his forearms and legs, no match for his pre-teen growth spurt. He looked pristine, or as pristine as a boy growing up in the forest could be. Very few scars, and Mags wanted to keep it that way. When he put on the one clean outfit she kept stashed in a box for trips to town, he looked like any other Black kid in rural Washington—a little lanky, with close-cropped hair and a geeky smile, eyes so bright when he stepped into the sun, they shone like polished jasper.

Mags was a rough cut in comparison. The left half of her face drooped, craggy where it had been torn to shreds. It gave her words a whispery edge and dragged her smiles towards her throat. Her favorite maroon sweater was unraveling, and her jeans boasted almost as many scars as the legs underneath them. When she rode her bike to the closest

town for supplies, the people there talked to her like she was older. And she nodded along with what they had to say, because in some ways, she was.

Shiloh looked older today, leg bouncing so fast it reminded her of the hummingbirds she sometimes saw in town. Not so much the ones here. By the time the forest called them in, they had only enough energy to die.

“What’s wrong?” Mags asked, her tone flat. She spoke hard when she was scared, like she could pick up the words and use them as a baseball bat if she had to. Shiloh bit his lip, and Mags tried softening. “What is it?”

“The mountain lion,” he said.

Mags fought the urge to clench her jaw. “Did it attack you?”

“No!” he rushed. “No, Mags, it’s dead.”

Her stomach plummeted.

Shiloh led her outside, to the logs piled up along the back of the cabin. The mountain lion had taken to napping on top of the stack—along with the rooftop, the trees, and Mags’s bike—almost as soon as she resurrected it. Today might have been the same. The tattered curtains over its eye sockets stared out into the forest, head nestled on its paws. Where usually she would hear its claws absentmindedly raking bark, though, there was silence. Its spine curved lazily off the edge of the pile, and its pelvis rested on the ground beneath it, only half-attached to mummy-thin hind legs. The smell of rot, normally dampened by magic, wafted from it with every breeze. Shiloh pulled his shirt up over his nose.

Mags didn't let herself dwell on the sight before her. She'd seen more than enough of her spells crap out over the years, including this one, but four times already, she'd managed to get the mountain lion back on its feet.

Death magic appeared as glowing threads before her, wrapping through the cat's corpse, a tangled mess.

She pulled at them. Mom and Dad wove spells so beautifully, so intricately. She'd watched in a daze. Her own grasp on the magic slipped constantly. She overshot, she undershot, she tangled the mess further. The threads themselves were frayed with age and unraveled under her grip, one after another, until she was left holding nothing, seeing nothing but bones and raw leather.

She stared.

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Nearly two years ago, a mountain lion limped into their clearing. Blood unspooled from a wound in its gut. It snarled as Mags drew closer. She'd gripped her knife tight, then, like all the days they'd hidden in their cabin.

She didn't remember attacking it, or even when it shredded her face. Just before, then after—Shiloh pressing a towel over her eye while sobbing, the slow recovery. He sat with her day and night, and she suspected he was using his magic, trying to push off death. It must have worked, since she didn't succumb to infection. The moment she had the strength to walk, she resurrected the lion's corpse and set it to work.

From then on, growls like screams punctuated her days in the cabin. Then actual screams. Blood on the trees, fleshy animal puppets with their strings cut slumping in the

grass. The lion hunted. Monthly or weekly attacks from other necromancers dwindled to only a few times a year. For the first time since their parents died, Mags could finally *breathe*. She focused on raising Shiloh, on teaching him how to survive here while also letting him be a kid. She could be a real girlfriend to Tori, not another corpse tied to her cabin like a guardian under a master's spell.

For the first time ever, she felt like she had a future in the forest. Like all of them did. She had Shiloh and Tori, and everyone knew they had the lion.

That was all they needed.

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But now the lion was gone.

And she was

alone.

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After a minute of stinking quiet, Shiloh prodded, “Mags?”

Her shoulders started to shake. She curled in on herself.

“Maybe I could—” Shiloh trailed off, finishing the question with his face. Her throat worked around a painful lump. She nodded.

Her little brother reached for the creature. Magic poured off him, distorting the air like heat waves in the desert. The bony remains of the mountain lion vibrated. The mandible clicked. Mags's heart fluttered in her chest, but then the corpse went still, and Shiloh grabbed his middle, gulping down air.

She pushed the disappointment down, way down deep where it couldn't hurt him.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped.

“Thanks for trying,” she said.

She’d seen Shiloh do incredible things with his magic. In terms of power, he was a prodigy. But he was still just a kid, still new to using the magic he’d been born into. Bones slipped through his fingers, while flesh jumped to obey him. “It’s so old, there’s hardly any flesh left. If it was newer—”

He’d figure it out in time. Making sure he got that time, that was Mags’s job. “We’ll get another,” she said.

“Do you think we’ll be able to find one?” he asked.

She ripped her gaze away from the lion’s body, took in her brother’s hunched posture. She was taller than he was, but she didn’t have any delusions about it staying that way. She had worked her ass off for exactly what she saw now: the naked fear that meant he was growing up, and the hope and belief in her that meant he was still a kid. She cracked a crooked smile, and if it didn’t quite reach her eyes, she blamed it on her semi-paralyzed face. “Sure we will,” she said. “I’ll just hang up your dirty clothes outside and all sorts of predators will come looking.”

Shiloh frowned, unconvinced, but he played her game anyway. “You’re the one with warts, not me.”

Mags grabbed one of the mountain lion’s legs and used it to knock the rest of the corpse off the log pile. “Calluses, Shi. The more you get, the less you bleed.”

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“We’re screwed,” Mags said. Whispered, because even though Shiloh had distracted himself with the dead beaver Tori’s moose had dragged in from the trees, she didn’t want to risk him overhearing.

Tori’s family lived in a clearing deeper in the forest than Mags liked to go. The people of the forest didn’t use last names, but they did use symbols, and Tori’s family’s was better known than most: a pale stalk with blooms climbing up the sides like a spine. The phantom orchid—a rare, parasitic plant that thrived here. Sitting in the long grass among the blossoms felt more like home than Mags’s own home had felt in a long time, but today they offered little comfort. The heads impaled on pikes on the outskirts of the clearing didn’t help. The smell of rot undercut the flowers’ sweetness.

Tori placed her hand over Mags’, and Mags automatically loosened. Tori looked like the orchids around her, willowy and pale from a lifetime hidden under the canopy. Her light hair almost glowed against the shadows. The first time Mags saw her, she thought she was a ghost. “You’re not screwed,” Tori said.

“We are,” Mags said. “The next time someone comes our way, we’re dead. And even if we’re not, they’re gonna tell others and then we’ll be dead.” Mags put her head in her hands. “I can’t—” she said, and the shaking she’d been fighting off since Shiloh told her about the lion took over. Her arms, her shoulders, her legs. Every piece of her crumbled. When she managed to speak again, her voice came out strangled. “I can’t do it again. I can’t....”

Tori rubbed soothing circles on her back. “Yes, you can. You’re stronger than you think, Maggie.”

“I’m not strong enough for this,” Mags choked.

“Yes, you are.”

Mags took shuddering breaths, trying to center herself. Across the clearing, Shiloh had managed to reanimate the beaver and was feeding it insects he caught in the grass. She didn’t know how long she stared at him, just that the next time she tried to speak, her voice came to her a little more easily. “I think it might be time to go. For him.”

Tori’s hand fell away. Mags didn’t look at her, didn’t want to see the hurt there. “No,” Tori said through a throat of broken glass. “No, you’re not leaving. You belong here. With me.”

Mags didn’t belong here, but she did belong with Tori. If not for her, Mags would’ve taken Shiloh and run as soon as their parents died. Tori got her through the pain. Mags couldn’t pluck her from this soil, but she couldn’t watch a madman kill her brother, either. “I can’t keep him safe here,” Mags said. “My parents chose this life for us, but I don’t want it for him.” She gestured helplessly before her. “All of this? The fighting and the blood and death? The people in town don’t live like this. They’re just...safe. And happy.”

Tori pursed her lips, and Mags marveled at how soft they looked. How soft they were, she knew, even though her own were constantly chapped. “They’re not that happy,” Tori pointed out. “Everyone finds something to be miserable about. At least the life we have here is honest.”

“It could be honest out there,” Mags said, though she couldn’t keep the doubt out of her voice. It had been so long since she’d lived out there. What did she know about it? *Be brave, be honest, be kind.* Was that enough?

Tori wrapped her arms around her knees and stared out into the trees. She was wearing the dark green flannel Mags had given her when they started dating. Every time she'd worn it since, Mags could hardly breathe, she looked so good. It brought out the green in her eyes, like the fragments of forest that weren't trying to kill them—the sunlight shining through broad leaves, outlining their veins. That was Tori. All Mags wanted now was to lean into her side, wrap her arms around her and promise she wasn't going anywhere.

"You won't be able to use magic out there," Tori said.

"My parents did, before. It was just harder."

Tori's voice was a windchime made of bone, hauntingly hollow. "There's nothing out there for us."

"There's safety," Mags said. "There's security. There's a lot of people who aren't actively trying to kill him and would probably actually help him." She felt herself babbling, the plan only starting to congeal as she spoke. Outside the forest, they had diners and gas stations, and they had collection jars there, places where people put their money to help someone else. She'd seen them on her visits to town. They could do that for Shiloh. Buy him clothes and a bed out there, warm meals every night, maybe even put him through school. All outlandish, wild ideas to Mags, but she could dream bigger for him than she could for herself. Tori was the first and last thing she'd allowed herself to want since coming here. Mags didn't have a future beyond those two.

"That's what he needs, Tori," she said. "Not magic, not death. He needs to be *alive*. He should at least get that chance."

“And what about me?” Tori snapped. A flock of chickadees took off from the closest trees, responding to the death magic fizzing and popping around her. Mags hadn’t even noticed their *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* calls, but without them, the clearing fell grave-quiet.

Mags caught Shiloh staring and told him to take the beaver around back. When he left, the shadows in the grass reached for Tori. Black sparks crackled in the air around her, and her hair billowed out like a drowned woman’s.

The first time Mags saw Tori’s magic, it scared her silent. Mags was used to it now, the dark stars and intangible thunder. Tori would never hurt her. Not on purpose.

Mags pushed through the magic, ignoring the way it prickled on her skin, and grabbed Tori’s hands. She wanted to ask Tori to come with them, but knew it would only set her off more. So instead, she ran her thumbs over the backs of Tori’s hands and said, “We’ll figure something out.”

Tori sighed. Her hair settled around her, as did her magic. “I just don’t want to lose you. I’ll never let that happen.”

“You won’t lose me,” Mags promised. It felt like a lie, and Mags couldn’t untangle the threads of it. They dissolved in her fingers like the mountain lion’s spell. The whole inside of her chest dissolved with them.

The two girls waited out the afternoon, palm to palm like it would be enough to carry them through the rest of their lives. Mags ached for her. For both of them. She kissed Tori’s hands and held them against her lips. Tori didn’t recoil when Mags’s scars touched her. She never did.

“You could stay with us,” Tori whispered. Mags lowered their hands. “We have more protection. We could keep you safe.”

Mags bit her lip. The phantom orchid house had been here longer than most others. Undead moose and elk roamed the grounds at every hour. Mags couldn’t even remember them being attacked—they were too strong, too permanent, a boulder at the forest’s heart.

They were also deadly and paranoid. It’s how they’d survived so long.

“Do you think they’d let us?” Mags asked, kind of adoring the way hope turned her voice up at the end, adoring that Tori could bring that out of her.

Tori smiled uncertainly. “We can talk to them together.”

#

When Mags was six, Dad put her hand on a knife and held it steady while they slit a rabbit’s throat together. She watched the light fade from the animal’s eyes, then watched her father put it back. The rabbit licked the blood off her fingers, then tried to bite them.

At seven years old, Mags waited outside the cabin for a long time, listening to her mom scream. Sometime after the screaming stopped, Dad took Mags inside, settled her on the bed, and helped her hold her new little brother. She’d never seen a baby before. He was shriveled, a crying raisin wrapped in blankets, and she loved him more than she knew what to do with.

At ten years old, Mags followed Dad deep into the forest so he could ask a favor from another family. The house they went to huddled in the shadows, darker than the burrows under the trees, and flowers like spines sprung up from the grass. Mags played with a girl

with wild, ghostly hair and eyes like moss. When the girl laughed, it scared the crows into flight. They braided orchids into crowns and shared what they knew about death.

When Mags was fourteen, Shiloh wandered off while they were playing at the phantom orchid house. Tori found him near the edge of their territory, collapsed under a lodgepole pine. Two bear cubs bleated in the branches above him. Blood trickled down from a cut over his eye, and more blood—pints of it, gallons—soaked his clothes and stained the pine needles underneath him. A set of ribs arched over him, disconnected from the other remains scattered about. Tori and Mags didn't speak, didn't dare acknowledge the gore or the waves of death magic filling the clearing, too strong for someone Shiloh's age. Tori cleaned the bones away while Mags took him home and burned his clothes. Neither told their parents.

Later, Mags brought Tori a rag full of salmon berries to say thank you, and they ate them together next to the creek.

At sixteen, Mags's whole world dissolved.

For someone so used to death, she was utterly unprepared for it to touch the people she loved.

While she mourned, Tori stayed at the cabin. She foraged for roots and mushrooms. She sent hawks out to kill rodents and bring them back to roast. She sang lullabies to Shiloh when he woke up screaming, and she massaged Mags's head when she couldn't sleep at all. Tori told Mags it would be okay until Mags...didn't believe it, not deep down, but had to act like she did. Had to try, at least, for him. Her Shiloh.

Her Tori.

At seventeen, Mags kissed Tori by the same creek they ate salmon berries at when they were kids. She laughed into her mouth and called her *hers* for the first time out loud. Tori leaned into her shoulder and sighed, and Mags felt closer to and farther from death than she ever had before. She ran her fingers through that ghostly hair for hours.

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At nineteen, Mags followed Tori into the phantom orchid house. Her tongue coiled like a snake and choked her.

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Despite the darkness of the clearing, the phantom orchid house was a warm place. Fires roared in hearths in every room, and thick candles glowed in corners, ensuring no piece of the house was hidden. Aloe vera and baby rubber plants brought life to tome-covered shelves, and bowls of dried petals gave the air an herbal flourish. None of it made Mags feel safe.

Tori called her mother down from the study and her father inside from the backyard. Mags waited in the den, looking at a half-finished game of Monopoly on the coffee table. She'd met Tori's parents before, but only spent enough time with them to know she didn't want to spend any more than necessary. Those heads in the clearing weren't a warning to attackers—they were trophies.

“Maggie!” Tori's father—a svelte man named Seth with long hair to match his daughter's—greeted her. His voice flooded the room like the heat from the fireplace, too big for his thin frame. He'd always reminded Mags of the rockstars she glimpsed on diner TVs, all noise and casual grunginess, and the mud on his jeans now reinforced that image. He

shook Mags's hand hard. She squeezed just as tight, which sent a wicked edge to his smile.

"Always good to see our girl's girl. How are things at the cabin?"

Tori's mother, Alana, fell in silently beside him. She'd only spoken a few times in the nine years Mags had been coming here, preferring to watch and listen. She dressed in clean jeans and thick wool coats, and in the firelight, her cheeks were rosy.

"They're getting on," Mags said.

"But not great," Tori added. Seth quirked his eyebrows and she said, "Their lion died."

"Already?" Seth frowned. "I thought you'd have gotten at least another year out of him."

Mags gave a weak shrug. "Well, he was in pretty rough shape to begin with. And I'm not a powerhouse."

Seth's grin returned, blue eyes ice-sharp. "If that's the case, you probably don't need it anyway. Sounds like the payoff for killing you isn't worth it. We'll keep that in mind." He tapped his temple and Mags's stomach buckled. Alana placed a hand on her husband's leg, though Mags couldn't tell whether it was in agreement or warning.

All four of them sat, Tori twining her arm around Mags's as they settled. "We were actually talking about the possibility of Mags and Shiloh staying here."

Seth's eyebrows shot up. "As a temporary thing, or...?"

"Permanent," Tori said.

He and Alana exchanged looks, appearing to have some kind of silent conversation. Tori's fingers dug into Mags's arm, and Mags kind of wished they'd put her head on a pike and get it over with. Finally, Seth said, "You two are pretty serious, huh?"

Tori inclined her head. "We are." And Mags felt love and gratitude sock her in the face in the most perfect, painful combo. She suddenly didn't mind if Tori's nervous grip gave her bruises. She'd welcome them.

Seth turned his attention to her expectantly. "Maggie?"

Mags nodded. "I love Tori. And I love my brother, too. I want to do whatever keeps them both safe and happy."

Seth tapped his thighs and gestured around them. "Obviously we've got room. That's not the problem."

Fire ants swarmed Mags's stomach. Tori only tilted her head. "There's a problem?" "Well, no, just that..." Seth glanced at Alana. She nodded, and he went ahead. "We're working hard for you, sweetie. We're building a legacy here, and we want to give that legacy to you." He leaned in, as if telling them a secret. "The way this place is, it's not sustainable. Everyone out for each other's throats. They need a leader. They need goals. We can give them that. But if we want any hope of getting them all on the same page, we're going to have to be stronger than all of them."

"Maggie's strong!" Tori protested.

"I've been keeping us safe for three years," Mags said. "I may not have the strongest magic, but I'm not defenseless."

“We never said you were,” Seth said with the smoothness you’d use with a child. “But defending yourself isn’t going to be enough here.” He touched Tori’s arm, and her grip on Mags’s hand loosened. “We love that you found someone you love, darling. Maggie, you seem like a nice girl. Your parents were that way, too. But being nice isn’t enough for a permanent commitment.”

Tori’s hand withdrew. Mags suddenly felt naked—scared and alone the way she’d felt when Shiloh had gone missing.

“We’ve always hoped our daughter would find someone...proactive,” Seth finished.

“Proactive?” Mags croaked.

“Someone who embraces the spirit of the forest,” he said. “Someone who can help build her legacy with her, not just watch from the sidelines. The cabin is nice enough, but you aren’t becoming more powerful there. You’re stagnant. If you want a place here, you’ll need to set yourself on a path for growth.”

“You want me to kill people and drain their magic,” Mags said.

Alana gave one nod, and Seth said, “We could teach you. Hunting people is easier than running from them.”

Mags looked to Tori, hoping she would jump in, but her girlfriend was marble in the flickering firelight, staring at nothing. It was like Mags was already dead.

Warm fingers touched her cheek, turned her head. “It’s okay, Marigold,” Alana hummed. “It’s not for everyone. But you asked if you could stay, and this is our condition. If you can’t meet it, then the answer is no.”

Everyone Mags knew was a murderer.

Her parents were murderers before they were killed. Seth and Alana were murderers a hundred times over. It was stupid of her to think Tori had never killed anyone, growing up the way she did. Everyone except Shiloh. And herself.

Be brave, be honest, be kind.

She stood at the window, watching Shiloh in the backyard. The recently deceased beaver had chased him up a tree. It slapped its tail against the ground in warning as he poked at it with a stripped branch. She thought of bear cubs in a tree like that, calling for a mother who'd been melted by death magic too strong for a child. A rib cage dripping blood onto a seven-year-old boy.

She had been telling herself Shiloh didn't belong in the forest. He was meant for something better. But he did belong here. When word of his talent got out, people would come for him, and he would melt them the same way he'd melted that bear. He could build a legacy Tori's parents could only dream of.

Mags was the one who didn't belong here. She's the one who stole a bike and rode into town as often as she could, the one who spent hours in thrift stores and libraries, tracing her fingers over books where people like her were the villains. She was never meant to live these stories. She was a tourist in her own birthright.

There was a whole world out there without this hungry magic. A whole world of people living and hardly any of them killing. She knew she'd have to cross that line eventually if she wanted to stay here, but taking that step felt like a brand on her soul, a

mark that would cut her off from the possibility of ever rejoining that world. This whole time, she thought she would do it for Shiloh, to stay where he could use his gift, and for Tori, the girl she loved more than she loved herself.

Now that choice was staring her in the face. There was no more waiting.

“I need to go,” she said.

Tori blinked slowly and looked at her, waking from her thoughts like a dreamer peeling away dreams. “What?”

Mags turned toward her and placed a hand on her arm. “Thank you for trying, really. But I can’t stay here, and I think we both know it.”

“What are you talking about? Of course you’re staying,” Tori said.

The corner of Mags’s mouth twitched up in a sad half-smile even as her scars pulled the other half down. “You heard them.”

Tori threw her hands up, and the coldness she’d been giving off since the talk with her parents evaporated in a flash of steam. “What’s the big deal?! People have been trying to kill you your whole life, who cares if you return the favor? It’s not fucking Cinderella’s castle in here. If you feel so goddamn guilty about it, just bring them back afterwards. No one said they have to stay dead forever. You’re getting hung up on *nothing*.”

Mags stepped back, unprepared for the shift. Tori glared, all poison green and bone white. Dark spots danced across Mags’s vision, and magic crackled on her skin. “It’s not *nothing*,” she choked out.

“It is!” Tori snapped. “My parents were wrong, you’re not weak. I’ve seen weak. We put weak’s heads on sticks, and we’re stronger because of it.”

Mags took another step back, feeling like she was standing in quicksand, like everything around her was rising up while she kept getting smaller and smaller. “Tori...” she said.

With one word, Tori’s expression thawed, and Mags breathed a sigh of relief. Tori cupped Mags’s face in her hands, warm and solid and real. The sinking stopped.

“I just don’t want to lose you,” Tori said again.

And again, Mags said, “You won’t.”

Be honest.

Tori leaned forward until their foreheads touched. They breathed each other’s air. “I know it’s not you,” Tori whispered. “You are kind of a princess.”

Mags laughed, short and surprised. “Fucked up looking princess.”

Tori pulled back just enough to kiss Mags’s nose. “No,” she breathed. “Gorgeous.”

Tori kissed her, and Mags’s hands automatically went to her waist, pulled her into it.

Tori smelled like the forest and dried petals in bowls. She felt like all the soft things Mags barely got to experience in her life, luxury and comfort in every curve, every angle. Her popping magic spoke to the dead parts of Mags and brought them back to life.

They held each other for a long time, swaying like intertwined trees in a breeze. “We’ll just go back to the way things were,” Tori whispered. “We’ll go back to the cabin. I’ll help keep you safe. I’m not going to lose you.”

It felt like killing someone, to agree. Like it would land the same mark on her soul, cut her off from any hope of a better future. But what future did she want besides Tori, really? What else was out there, what could she want more than her phantom orchid? Tori’s

face took up her whole world. Her hair tangled Mags in knots and poured down her throat every moment of the day. She choked on Tori. She drowned in her. So Mags—who was a coward, who was not brave or honest or kind—said, “Okay.”

And the word

broke

her.

#

It went like this:

Mags started her days with a run through the trees, checking the wards she'd placed in rings rippling out from the cabin. Tori stayed behind to keep an eye on Shiloh. By the time Mags finished her rounds, the fragile sunlight filtering through the trees burned away the mist, and they waited.

They rarely left the cabin, barely dared to go down to the creek for water. Tori had stolen some canned goods from her family when she left, but those, too, dwindled. The three of them danced around each other, unwilling to admit how precarious their situation was, always arm-length apart and plastered in insincere smiles.

“I’ve been seeing tracks,” Tori said. “If we can find that deer, we can make it ours.”

“What good would a deer do?” Mags asked.

Tori winked. She’d always been optimistic, but she’d been laying it on thicker since they got to the cabin, trying to shovel joy onto Mags and Shiloh like it could erase the fear they were mired in. “Better than a raccoon,” she said.

Later that day, Tori went into the forest alone. Shiloh and Mags waited on the doorstep for her to return. Shiloh sharpened a stick. Mags rested her hands on her knees.

“You don’t have to protect me, you know,” he said while stripping the bark. “I’m not a little kid anymore. I can help.”

“I’ll always protect you, Shi,” Mags said roughly.

“Then who protects you?”

“Tori.” *Be honest.*

Shiloh eyed her warily for a long moment, then went back to the bark.

Sometime after dusk, Tori returned, planting a weary kiss on Mags’s forehead.

“Maybe next time,” she said.

She never found the deer.

#

The first time Seth came, Mags was staring at the bones of the mountain lion. Not trying to revive it, just...looking at it. The mummified skin hanging over its eye sockets. The sparse tufts of fur framing its yellowed fangs. She counted all its bones, wondered how close they were to hers, if she would look like this a year from now. She already felt like it.

She didn’t notice Seth at first, not until Shiloh tapped her on the shoulder and pointed him out. He stood at the edge of the clearing, arms crossed, arguing with Tori in hushed tones. Mags told Shiloh to wait inside. After a while, Tori stomped back across the clearing, leaving her father in the trees.

When Mags asked later, Tori said it was fine. Not important.

When Seth came back for his daughter in the coming days, the three of them hid in the cabin, and eventually he left.

#

They said in the forest, even the trees bled. That if you scraped away moss and ferns, you'd find fingernails in the trunks, and when it rained—as it usually did—the knots steamed out real breath.

The longer Mags stayed, the more she felt like she would become one of those trees. She could feel the bark growing already, spreading from invisible scabs. Roots grew out of her eyes, and when she spoke, her tongue dropped thorns.

This was what it was to live in the forest. This was what it was to die.

#

Shiloh hunted in their little clearing, since Mags didn't allow him to venture into the trees with Tori. He brought back squirrels, gripping a pair of bloodied corpses by their tails. "I think we could use them," he said. He looked more grown up than she'd ever seen him. Worry had thinned his face and punched circles under his eyes. The hem of his jeans settled above his ankles, and though Mags knew she should go to town and get him a pair that fit, she couldn't summon the motivation. If she left, she didn't know if she'd be able to force herself to come back. "What if we combined them with the mountain lion? Built it back up, piece by piece?" he said.

"That's pretty advanced," Mags said. Possible, maybe, but not for her. Here, in her home, Shiloh and Tori looked to her for leadership. But Shiloh was stronger, and Tori was more skilled. Mags was...just Mags. And right now, Just Mags wasn't cutting it.

“What else are we supposed to do?” Shiloh asked, jasper eyes shining in the low light. Mags didn’t answer, and he pushed. “You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t want to scare you,” she said.

“What’s wrong with you? What can I do?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Maggie.” His voice broke on her name, and something inside her broke with it. But that was layers and layers deep. The bark was thick. Shiloh knelt on the wood floor of the cabin. Tears traced ruts in the dirt on his face and her mouth steamed out real breath.

“Please don’t give up. I need you. I can’t do this without you.”

“You’re stronger than me, Shi-Shi,” she said emptily. Dust swirled near the window.

A magpie crowed outside.

“I’m not,” he said. “I’m just a kid.”

The functioning half of her face twitched up. “Not for long.”

She didn’t want to do this to him, didn’t want to hurt her dear Shiloh. But something split the flesh of these woods, and it festered.

#

A crash snapped Mags awake. She blinked, her heart racing, and listened. The blankets next to her shifted, and she could feel Tori’s eyes on her, could practically hear her heart like it was her own.

The crash came again, a thud against the cabin’s door. The others sprang up, Mags half a beat behind them. She grabbed her hunting knife and crept toward the window, staying low to keep from being seen. Outside, a half-moon spun silvery edges on the

clouds. Nothing sang in the night, no crickets, no owls, no distant screams of conflict, just her own breath scraping as it came out.

A shape threw itself against the door. She tensed. Several heartbeats passed before the figure lunged again. She raised herself a bit—slowly, so slowly—until the slice of the sky gave way to silhouetted trees and empty grass.

She crept back to the others and whispered over the crashes. “There’s just one out front. Human. Its master must be close, but I didn’t see anyone else. They might be in the trees.”

Shiloh inched closer to her, gripping a crowbar in both hands. He looked unbalanced holding it. He’d used it before, but never against anything bigger than rabbits. The blackish stains on the end looked pitifully small. “What do we do?” he asked.

The cabin didn’t have another exit. The only door strained against the corpse trying to batter it down. “We can break a window,” Mags said.

Tori shook her head. She’d armed herself with a machete, and even though they were probably going to die soon, Mags still had to spare a thought for how hot she looked holding it. “No shot,” Tori said. “It’ll take that thing two seconds to walk around the house and get you.” She sucked on her lip, thinking. Mags wanted to kiss her. She felt more awake than she had since the lion died. Tori tapped her fingers on the machete’s handle and said, “Open the door. I’ll take care of the puppet while you two head for the trees. Try to make it to my parents’ house. They might not like me right now, but they’re not gonna turn you away in an emergency.”

“What about you?” Mags asked.

Tori cracked a wicked smile. "I'm gonna hit something."

Then Mags did kiss her, fast and hard, too desperate to savor the moment, too scared to wonder if she'd get the chance again. Tori kissed her back, gave her arm a reassuring squeeze after they pulled away. To Shiloh, she said, "Keep my girl safe."

Shiloh nodded, and they took their positions—Mags with her hand on the door handle, knife sheathed on her hip; Shiloh behind her; Tori braced with machete raised. The creature thudded against the wood again. Tori lifted her chin, and just as the creature ran forward for another hit, Mags opened the door.

The figure spilled into the cabin, slamming to the floor with a squelch. Except for the proportions of its wiry body, it hardly looked human. Skin peeled away from muscle in slick layers. The flesh of its face was melted, doused in acid before death so the spellcaster wouldn't have to look at a swollen tongue or glassy eyes. Or hear it scream; the only sound came from its fingernails scrabbling on the wood floor as it tried to right itself.

Before it could get purchase, Tori surged, bringing her machete down on its shoulder with wet crunch.

Shiloh froze. Mags pushed him out the door, already searching the tree line for unfamiliar shadows.

A second creature slammed into Shiloh. They rolled in the grass, dark skin and skinless limbs, a cry half-caught in her brother's throat.

Mags tackled them both, threw her weight wherever she could to pin the creature. A knee on its arm, a hand on its head. Shiloh stared with the widest eyes she'd ever seen, unable to move without freeing the monster. His chest rose and fell dangerously fast. Mags

tightened her grip on the creature's skull, blood welling up where fingers met flesh. Air ripped from the creature's throat in the ghost of a scream.

She plunged her knife into its eye socket. The thin orbital bone snapped; the blade sank to the handle.

The creature bucked underneath them, nearly throwing her off. She adjusted herself, tightened her thighs around the creature's torso, and brought her knife down again. Then again, mirroring the *thwack! thwack! thwack!* of Tori chopping away in the cabin. The creature shuddered. Black blood bubbled out of its eyes, and a second later, the smell of rot accompanied it. The creature went still.

Mags rolled off of it, breathing heavily into the night sky. A single break in the canopy let through a patch of stars. In her dazed state, they seemed farther away than they usually did, like they'd seen what Mags and Shiloh had gone through in the clearing and looked away. Shiloh shoved the creature off of him and brushed his hands on his pajama pants, smearing blood into grass stains.

Mags shot upright, suddenly aware of the clearing's silence. "Shit! Tori!" She pulled her knife free and made a break for the cabin. When she drew closer, she heard noises from the back. She circled around to the wood pile, the mountain lion's bones still jumbled beside it.

Tori pressed a man against the wall of the cabin with her machete. The air around them crackled and popped with magic, and dark spots danced across Mags's vision so erratically, she struggled to keep her feet under her. She put a hand out to the side, signaling Shiloh to stop while she crept forward.

“—more of you,” Tori was hissing at the man, so close he probably got a whiff of the stale sweat that had replaced her dried petal smell since coming to the cabin. “—because if there are, and you don’t tell me, I’m going to bring all of you back to keep killing each other until you forget you were ever alive.”

The man’s eyes whipped around, searching for help. He didn’t try to fight. Mags had never seen him before, but could pick out his magic, paler and more diluted than Tori’s. He trembled under Tori’s gaze.

“No one,” he said. “It’s just me, I swear.” His eyes flicked to Mags, and he lowered his voice. “Please, Miss Victoria, I didn’t come for you. I know my place, I would never. It’s just the others.”

Tori’s gaze narrowed. She pressed harder, and a line of blood beaded where the machete touched his throat. “What do you want with them?”

“Your parents sent me,” he said. “I’m only doing what they ask. They said these people have...kidnapped you?” He looked between them warily. “It seems there’s been some misunderstanding. If we go talk to your parents, I’m sure we can sort all of this out.”

Tori’s blade dipped a fraction of an inch before shooting back up. “My parents?” she asked.

“Yes!” he said, relieved. “Your parents. Please, let’s talk to them. This was all just a mista—”

Tori slashed his neck.

Red fell in a curtain. The man blinked. Opened his mouth, but like his creatures, only a raspy breath came out. Then he collapsed.

Tori screamed and sunk her machete into the side of the cabin, leaving it in the wood to rust. “I can’t believe them!” she raged. Her magic frenzied around her, so strong it felt like the dark sparks crackling off of her would ignite the grass. Her hair billowed behind her, whipped up into a hurricane of whitish blonde. “They want to kill you, and then what? I’ll just come running back? They’re treating me like a child!” She turned back to the machete. Mags made eye contact with her in the blade’s reflection, watched moss harden into malachite.

“You’re not a toy they can take away,” Tori seethed, pulling the machete free. “They’re going to see. They want me to have a legacy? Fine. They’re not going to like how they fit into it.”

Mags took a step towards her, but froze, unwilling to step over the man’s body to get closer. The knife felt foreign and heavy in her hand. “Tori...” she warned.

Tori smiled then. Her features twisted in odd shapes, eyes too wide, mouth too crooked, the phantom of mania seeping through. When she spoke, Mags swore the whole forest was speaking with her, through her, its magic warping her voice and being warped in turn. “I’m going to make it safe for us,” she said. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? That big house, all our guardians. Nobody will go after you or Shiloh. We’re going to do great there. I’m going to fix this for us.”

“You can’t go after them,” Mags said, her brain struggling to wrap around the idea even as she said it. Ever since they met, Tori had told her the horror stories of the forest, the families who turned on each other. Mags never considered the possibility they’d live one someday.

"They won't hurt me," Tori said gently. "I'm their legacy."

Mags glanced back at her brother. His gaze was locked on the weapon in Tori's hands, her fingers trailing absentmindedly over the blade like she was petting a cat. Mags inched to the side, positioning herself between them. "Tori, this is crazy. Do you hear yourself? You can't kill your parents!"

"Why not?" Tori asked. "They tried to kill you. They want me to choose—I'm choosing us."

"But they're your parents!"

Tori lifted a shoulder. "And if I miss them enough, I'll bring them back."

Mags stared at her girlfriend. Really stared, for the first time in a long time. Like when they started dating and she had to drink in every inch of her, couldn't get enough of those pale eyelashes in the sun or the strip of skin where her shirt would ride up. In the dark of night under the canopy, Mags couldn't remember what the sun looked like. She looked at Tori, and she saw a ghost. She didn't even know if she'd been alive to begin with.

Shiloh, on the other hand, was very much alive. Hands out to his sides like he needed to grab something, but didn't know what. Feet pointed away from the body, head towards Mags. Still shorter than her, but not for long. Still not a killer, but standing near one, maybe hours away from tipping over that edge himself if Tori got her way. And Tori *always* got her way.

"No," Mags said.

Tori's fingers stilled on the machete. "What?"

“No,” Mags repeated, slipping her knife into its sheath. “This is over. Right now. We’re done. Shiloh and I are leaving. We should’ve left a long time ago.”

Tori’s eyebrows pulled together. “You can’t go,” she said, like go was the dirtiest word she knew, like it would jump out and bite them in the next sentence.

Mags grabbed Shiloh’s hand. “We are. You can come with us.” Then, more softly, “Please come with us.”

Tori looked between them. “No,” she said. “You’re not going. We talked about this, Mags. The forest is our home. You can’t let my parents scare you away. They won’t even be a problem by tomorrow.”

“Your parents aren’t the ones scaring me,” Mags said.

Mags pulled Shiloh backwards. She didn’t dare go inside to get their things. Yesterday she trusted Tori with her life; now she didn’t want to turn away from her. Tori dropped the machete, stepped over the cooling body. “You can’t! Maggie, please.” She reached out to grab Mags’s arm, but Mags pulled away, and her fingers dropped into empty air. “It’s you and me, remember? Us and Shiloh. We take care of each other. You can’t leave me here.”

Mags shook her head. Pressure built behind her eyes, and when she tried to speak, her throat ached. “I’m sorry,” she said. Tears brimmed over, traced down her cheeks. “I have to go. I don’t belong here. I’m so sorry.”

Maybe she didn’t belong out there, either, in that world where people were brave, honest, kind. Maybe she would never belong anywhere. Maybe happiness was never in the cards for her and she was doomed to a life of reaching for the light even though she’d

already been warped by darkness. But she had to try. She deserved to try, and Shiloh deserved that, too.

“Mags!” Tori called, but Mags kept creeping backwards across the clearing, grass brushing her ankles. Shiloh matched her stride. His hand squeezed hers so hard, she thought the bones would fuse.

“Maggie!” Tori’s voice ripped from her throat, raw like the wounds left after the mountain lion tore Mags’s face. She called to Mags again, and again, and again. *Maggie. Wait, Maggie, please.*

“We’re really going?” Shiloh whispered. Mags nodded, and he said, “What about her?”

“Just get to the edge of the forest,” Mags said. “We’ll figure it out.”

Tori stopped screaming. Watched them for a moment, a pillar of salt in the shadows, then turned away.

“She gave up?” Shiloh asked.

Tori’s pale silhouette knelt over the corpse. Night thickened around her, and across the clearing, Mags felt a crackle.

“Shit!” She jerked Shiloh around and dragged him into the trees just as the first ribbons of death magic coalesced around her girlfriend.

Mags leapt over roots, ducked under fallen logs. Shiloh ran in front, mostly discernible by the crash of sneakers in the darkness. Ferns lashed them as they ran, the air so thick with the smells of rotting foliage, it felt like breathing oil.

Mags didn't look back, didn't allow herself to think of Tori huddling behind the cabin or a glimpse of trembling flesh before she left the clearing behind. Only forward, forward, and out. Out of the forest, out to the road, and after that—well, she just hoped she made it that far.

Shiloh ran clumsily in the forest, slipping on leaves every other footfall. He didn't have her years of checking the wards in the pre-dawn hours and every night before they slept. She'd allowed him to stay a kid a little longer. She hoped she hadn't killed him.

More noises behind her. She pushed harder, urged Shiloh to hurry, but the noises grew. Softer than her own footfalls, and faster. Much faster. A shard of ice shot through her heart and into her stomach.

Without turning to look, she knew.

Tori had brought back the mountain lion.

Mags grabbed Shiloh's shirt and yanked him hard to the side, clamping her hand over his mouth and pulling them into a thicket in one motion. His panicked eyes searched for her, breaths hot on her hand. She shook her head, put a finger to her lips.

She'd seen the mountain lion hunt many times in the last two years, always on her behalf. It could run nearly as fast as a car. It attacked from behind, latching onto its prey's neck before taking them down. Then it suffocated them. She thought she stood a decent chance of outrunning the man's corpse, but even at its slowest, she stood no chance against the lion.

She breathed as quietly as she could, willed her heart to go silent in her chest, to borrow a little of the death she lived with and hide them. But even if that sort of thing were

possible with magic, she just wasn't that good of a necromancer. Her own body felt thunder-loud.

The lion's footsteps slowed as it drew nearer. Mags peered out through a break in the thicket, caught sight of a tail thrashing. Red drops splattered against nearby trunks at the ends of its arcs. Twists of human skin were still visible in the meat, a pair of lips on a hind leg, a wrinkled elbow on its spine. The lion wore the man like a scarf.

Her grip on Shiloh tightened. He froze beneath her, a sculpture made of boy. The lion's hips disappeared from view, then the thrashing tail. Still, they waited, listening to the sounds of its half-borrowed feet taking it further and further away from their hiding spot.

Mags relaxed her hand on Shiloh's mouth. Shiloh hugged her, and she held him.

When she was certain the lion was gone, she led her brother out of the thicket, taking them on a path perpendicular to their original one. Overhead, the first gray reaches of dawn hovered in the canopy. Cold air dried the sweat and tears on her face. She picked her steps carefully to avoid making noise, and Shiloh squinted at the forest floor, following her movements the best he could.

By the time chickadees started calling *chicka-dee-dee-dee* in the treetops, the forest had begun to thin. The air was lighter, the gaps between trees less hungry, and the few animal skeletons they passed were dead-dead, no trace of lingering magic to mark something that had once been brought back. Soon the last branches would part and they would stumble onto the road. Mags walked faster, her tired heart picking up the pace for one last push. She started to jog.

Something knocked into her side, sent her crashing down on her shoulder. Pain shot through her. She gasped, tried to prop herself up to see. Shiloh shouted for her, but she barely heard him over the other noises, the press of rotten pads against earth, skinless flesh shifting against itself. Damp soaked her shirt where she was hit. Blood. Not hers—the man's. The mountain lion's.

“Mags!” Shiloh shouted again, and he was there, helping her sit up. Every time she moved, the bones in her shoulder screamed, barbed wire tightening and tightening. She grunted, tried to breathe. The lion stalked nearby, never drawing closer, but never taking its fur-curtained eye sockets off of them.

“Maggie,” a voice said, and it was so soft, like the blankets and pillows on her bed back home, the kind that swallow you up like a little kid. In the dizziness of pain, Mags wanted to sink into it.

“Stay back!” Shiloh said, voice deeper and harder than Mags had ever heard it. Barely a kid anymore.

Then who protects you?

Nobody. Mags protected everyone else. Her parents left her to do that. Seeing Shiloh try, seeing him stand above her with his jaw set, it ripped her open and twisted her inside out. Her whole world dissolved in her fingers. She was never strong enough to keep the magic going.

“Mags,” Tori said again, ignoring him. “It’s going to be okay. I know it’s scary. It doesn’t have to be scary.”

“Stay...back...” Mags echoed, grunting with the effort. She pushed herself to sit up more, gripping her shoulder like it would fall off.

“It’s just because you’re weak,” Tori said gently. In Mags’s blurry vision, she almost glowed, a moon goddess descending from the heavens to free her. The scrapes on her face, the dirt, the blood under her fingernails barely registered. “It’s not the worst thing in the world,” Tori continued, stepping closer. Mags tensed. “You’re soft. I love that about you. But you’re so scared, baby. You’re scared of everything. Scared of death. You can’t live like that, not here. You just need to be a little stronger. I can help you with that.”

Mags was suddenly aware of Shiloh’s fingers digging into her arm. She followed his gaze to where the lion had frozen mid-step. Then she felt it—the pressure of Shiloh’s magic, subtler than Tori’s, a heat wave distortion to her void. The blood that dripped from the lion’s borrowed body came faster, then faster, turning into rivulets feeding the grass. Its flesh paled. Its jaw opened and closed, fangs clicked against each other. And Shiloh held her tighter, jasper eyes and old pajamas. Her Shiloh.

“Stop it!” Tori screamed.

The air erupted with her death magic. Mags’s vision went spotty. Shiloh yelped, like the magic had struck him. The rivulets of blood reversed, feeding back into the lion.

It leapt.

Mags barely had time to yell before the lion crashed into them. Shiloh thrashed against it, but the creature met him with claws, slicing ribbons into the arm he threw up to defend himself. And he screamed. Her brother screamed the way their parents did that night, when an antler pierced a throat and a jaw ripped limbs away from a torso. He

screamed red and dying and dark, the kind of noise that could singlehandedly catch every rumor about the forest and make them true. He screamed fingernails and bark, festering putrid beneath the ferns. He screamed rot.

“You’ll come back stronger,” Tori said softly, like the whole world wasn’t burning around them, like *Mags*’s whole world wasn’t burning. “I’ll take care of you. When you come back, you won’t be afraid anymore. Then you’ll see what I see—that you belong here. That you belong with *me*. It’s going to be okay, love. It’ll just take a second.”

The lion pinned Shiloh, dripped blood on his face. He’d stopped screaming. *Mags* couldn’t breathe, couldn’t stop staring at his shadowed form in the leaves and pine needles. The birds were silent.

“Maggie,” Tori said again, and she was close now. If *Mags*’s shoulder weren’t completely wrecked, she could’ve touched the hem of the sweatpants Tori wore as pajamas.

Mags’s lip trembled. She wrapped her arms around her abdomen, desperate to hold herself together even through the pain. Her fingers brushed something hard at her hip. The lion’s tail whipped back and forth, back and forth.

Tori smiled, and she was everything. A cloth full of salmonberries, a comforting hand amongst nightmares. *Mags* wanted to give her the world. Her life felt so small compared to that. And she was so tired. “It won’t hurt?” she asked.

Tori’s smile softened. She was gorgeous. Even now, after all of this, *Mags* thought she was beautiful. Her phantom orchid. Her love. “Not even a little,” Tori promised.

Mags nodded. Tori knelt next to her, touched her injured shoulder light as a dream. The lion left Shiloh, following an unspoken command. Some tired pocket of Mags's mind wondered if it would rip her head off or just bite her jugular and let her bleed until she slept. Fall asleep to a moon goddess and wake up to different shades of morning.

The forest settled around them, hungry for the death it sensed coming. Mags had fed it before, squirrels and little things, and a whole mountain lion. Oh, yes, she did that. She'd never been weak at all, had she? Just her magic.

She was not brave or honest or kind. But she would be soon, when this was over. She could do that for Shiloh. She could be that for herself.

Tori's face filled Mags's world, erasing the trees, the blood, the rot. Her smile was the opposite of her magic, dazzling light, dancing stars. All for Mags.

"I love you," Mags breathed, unable to keep her voice from shaking. And she meant it, she'd never meant anything more. She wanted to sew their spirits together.

"I love you, too," Tori whispered back. "Forever." She pulled Mags into a hug, her ghostly hair falling around Mags's face, the scent of her stronger than all the madness in the forest.

"Forever," Mags agreed. And she unsheathed her knife.

And she slipped it into Tori's abdomen.

It went in easily, natural as a flower falling into a pool of water.

Her phantom orchid. Her love.

Tori made a startled sound in her throat. She tried to pull away, but Mags held her tight, like the wind would spin her away in the next gust, like Mags was the only thing keeping her tied to this realm, even as she sent her away from it.

Warmth and wetness bloomed against Mags's fingers.

"Maggie," Tori breathed. Bubbles rose through the words. Somewhere beneath the sternum, blood filled her lungs. A drowning woman, just like Mags. They were made for each other.

"I love you," Mags repeated.

She maneuvered the knife upwards, felt it tear. Muscles and organs and bones separated in its path, curtains opening on a brand new show. The stage flooded red.

Somewhere in the depths, death came. It came quietly, and it left quickly. A chickadee settled on Tori's chest. Moss eyes went liquid and still. The chickadee flew away, and in Mags's unbalanced state, she swore it took Tori with it.

Yards away, Shiloh's chest rose and fell. Mags wrapped his arm the best she could with one hand and his pajama shirt. Then she dragged him in the direction the magic felt thinnest, then out, then beyond, until she could sit with him on asphalt and wait.

The forest watched them go.