


FORTY WORDS FOR LOVE

A black and white line drawing of a young man and a young woman standing on either side of the word 'FOR'. The man is on the left, wearing a hoodie and pants, looking towards the right. The woman is on the right, wearing a patterned shirt and pants, looking towards the left. They are both standing with their feet slightly apart.

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[dedication TK]

Before

one

RAF



The first clear moment Raf recalled from that night was the sound of laughter. Hers.

He'd heard her easy laughter a million times before. But tonight it made his pulse quicken. Picking up his pace, his feet pressed into the packed sand beneath him. He needed to speak to her. Before he lost his nerve.

Faint music from the Moonlight Bay Festival carried over from a distance. He thought he'd glimpsed her slipping away from the celebration. She'd probably grown weary of the crowds. Maybe she'd gone looking for him. How would she react when he finally told her how he felt about her?

The golden leaf on his wrist pulsed against his skin. Raf frowned. This birthmark—the one physical difference between the Golub and the locals—only ever warmed in warning, when they'd strayed too far from home. *The leaf protects you—it does so at all costs.* How many times had Tolki Uncle said this? But right now, he stood mere steps from his forest home.

Raf slowed. All thoughts of his leaf vanished. There she was. Yas. Partially obscured by a grove of palmettos, with her back pressed against a tree. She wore a white sundress. The star-shaped necklace resting against her collarbone glinted in the

moonlight. Her dark hair was loose around her shoulders.

Before he could take a step toward her, Raf realized she was not alone.

Her boarding-school-raised summer neighbor, Moses, heir to the Holler Candy fortune—came into view. Moses drew closer to her. Laughed. His arms encircled her waist. She looked up at him. Their foreheads touched.

Heat flooded Raf's face. His chest constricted as he stepped back. Why hadn't Yas told him? They had been best friends ever since his family fell shivering from the Golub tree over a decade ago. They shared everything with each other. Didn't they?

But this was a mercy, wasn't it? If nothing else, he had his answer. He didn't even have to ask.

A sudden jolt of pain burst from his wrist. Electric currents shot through his body. He doubled over. Tears pricked his eyes. The burning grew sharper by the second. White-hot. As if the sun itself had burrowed within his skin. He bit his lip until he tasted blood.

Panic bubbling, Raf staggered toward the shoreline. Only then did he see the ordinarily sleepy pink-and-lavender sea had transformed. Enormous dark waves rose in the distance before crashing to shore. The color of charcoal. Howling winds whipped through his hair. The chaos around him mirrored the chaos within. What was happening?

Then came the scream. High pitched. Wailing. Clenching his jaw, Raf ran until he found himself before the towering specter of Holler Mansion and saw the image that would never leave him for as long as he lived: five-year-old Sammy Holler lying by the shore. His nanny, Melinda, knelt over his frame, her body wracked with sobs. Sammy lay facedown on the sand. He didn't move.

As though playing a part in a movie, Raf numbly grabbed his phone. Fingers fumbling, he dialed for an ambulance. He wasn't sure when Moses and Yas arrived. When the red and white ambulance lights at last flashed in the distance. A team of paramedics lifted Sammy's limp body onto the stretcher.

One thought ran in a loop in his mind: *This can't be real.* This couldn't happen here. Not in Moonlight Bay. They'd fix Sammy. That's what doctors did. That's how stories like these ended. Sammy couldn't die.

Raf couldn't be sure how he made it back to Willow Forest, to Tolki Uncle's door, practically falling into his arms. He only knew that Uncle would have the answers. He always did. Uncle wrapped Raf's wrist in a soothing compress. He brought him a warm cup of almond tea. A blanket. It was only when the teacup clattered against its saucer that Raf realized he was trembling.

Through ragged breaths, he managed to get the words out: Sammy on the damp beach. The sea churning dark and deadly.

Uncle's expression grew grim. He ran a hand through his hair—pure white, like the snowcapped mountains of Golub they'd left behind.

"What were you doing out there, son?"

"I . . . I was looking for Yas." Raf's shoulders slumped. Raf had to tell him. Of course he did. Uncle needed to know.

"Raf," Uncle said slowly. "Were you going to—"

"I didn't say anything," Raf said quickly. "I saw her and Moses and . . ." He looked at his leaf. Gold and green as ever. "It's not like she feels the same."

Tolki Uncle was quiet, translating Raf's broken words into

meaning. Shame coursed through Raf. His father had died three years earlier, but Tolki was a father figure to all the Golub who ended up within the forest of Moonlight Bay.

“What happened when you saw her?” he finally asked.

“That’s when it began to burn.”

“Had anything been amiss with the water?” Uncle hesitated. “*Before* you saw Moses and Yas?”

“I don’t think so.” Raf’s mouth grew dry. “D-do you think my leaf had something to do with this?”

A moment of tense silence passed.

“This is my fault,” Uncle finally said. “I warned you away from Yas. I had hoped that would be enough.”

“You said I could never be with her because we were returning to Golub soon,” Raf said shakily. “But, Uncle . . . it’s been ten years, and—”

“I didn’t tell you the rest of it,” he interrupted. “Just as leaving the safety perimeter erases one’s leaf, choosing to be with someone who is not of us—that too can have devastating consequences. Though, until now, I hadn’t been certain what sort of consequences they could be.”

Raf thought of the waves. The darkness. What he had almost told her.

“My leaf . . . It couldn’t have done all *that*.” Seeing Uncle’s ashen face, his voice grew smaller. “Could it?”

Uncle didn’t reply, his silence its own answer. Raf felt light-headed. He sank his head into his hands. Had his birthmark disappeared, he’d have lost any ability to return to Golub or to remain with his own family within their forest home. Lost leaves were catching.

Before they could speak more, a fist pounded against the

front door, followed by a shout. “Come quick! The Golub tree is opening! Someone is here!”

Raf froze. New arrivals? The tree hadn’t opened in years. Gripping his cane, Uncle rose. He placed a hand on Raf’s shoulder and leaned close.

“We will speak more on this later, but not a word to anyone, Raf. Ever,” he said gently but firmly. “Do you understand?”

Raf looked at his wrist. The leaf was calm now, a glittering etching on his skin once more.

The leaf protects you—it does so at all costs.

Raf Javan hadn’t said a word to Yas. But a price had been exacted all the same.

After

two
YAS


Yas knew her father wasn't there. She didn't need to see it with her own eyes to know. Still, she stepped onto the salt-rubbed back porch and slipped on the flip-flops she'd left resting on the feathery welcome mat. The clouds looked thinner than they had in months, and wisps of sunlight streamed through their gray pockets, casting spotlights on the sand below.

Glancing at the driveway, she saw that, sure enough, there was nothing but gravel where her father's gray sedan should've been parked. The one with rusted spokes and a cracked leather interior he'd driven cross-country to college. The same car her mother refused to sit in because the seats sagged so much, you felt each unearthed pebble that bounced against the metal as it drove.

It was gone. He was gone—again.

She took the steps down to the near-empty stretch of sand. At first she'd waved away the lit-up VACANCY signs hanging in the hotel windows and the deserted bed-and-breakfasts dotting the beach. Summer was slow because of the forecasters predicting rain, spooking visitors who feared a repeat of the tropical storm that had raged through the year before. The one that battered the Ferris wheel, twisted the pier like

a rag doll, and pummeled the welcome mural framing its entrance. But no storms came. It hadn't so much as rained since late May. Not a drop for the thirsty flower beds around town. Still, no umbrellas dotted the sand. No children raked seashells into buckets or dug sandcastles while parents with wide-brimmed hats looked on. It was the last week of June and no one was here.

Looking at the sea, could she really blame them?

Patty was here, though. At least there was that. She waved to Yas from her spot at the edge of the shore, flashing her bubblegum smile. She'd been coming each summer and renting out a room at the Iguana Motor Lodge since before memories were a thing Yas could grasp. Patty wore a floral slip and reclined on the same green chair under the same canvas umbrella Iguana provided free of charge.

Yas had taken a step toward the shore when something sharp and familiar poked at the bottom of her sandal. Kneeling, she picked up a seashell the size of her palm. It was white like dusted sugar and smooth as polished granite. Blowing off the sand grains, she turned it over, checking for cracks and bruises. There were none to be found. It was perfect. Yas hesitated before slipping it into her pocket.

The murky, swirling gray sea in the distance looked the same as it had every day these past ten months. Yas studied the choppy waves for glimmers of color to surface, a pop of pink or lavender, a promise the pastel waters lingered beneath the surface somewhere. It was a habit, nothing more. As expected, there were no hints of what once was.

The Weepers huddled in the distance, the ocean lapping at their ankles. Every day they came. Their heads bowed. Their

tears dripping into the sea, willing the ocean to feel their pain. To bring back what was.

How they'd decided *this* was the solution remained unclear. Yes, there were legends passed down from previous generations that tears could brighten the sea, but there was just as much lore advising complete stoicism. *All* of it was ridiculous, though. The sea was the *sea*—an inanimate body of water. What did it care for their tears? No one understood why the pink-and-lavender waters had appeared and no one knew why they'd left. Couldn't these Weepers see, nearly one year later, that nothing had changed?

There *were* far fewer of them now. Only Kendall, Mateo, Melinda, and Olive remained. Yas had known them all before. In a town like Moonlight, it was hard to not know everyone. But like everything else, they'd changed. Kendall, who once presided over city council; Mateo, once a renowned artist; Olive, the owner of the now-shuttered bookstore; Melinda, Sammy's nanny—all of them were Weepers now. When would they too stop hoping?

Practically everyone in the high school's graduating class scooted out of town last month, their diplomas still warm in their hands. Some started summer sessions as far away as they could get, and others left for work, like her friend Hisae, a waitress in a nearby town. Soon Raf would leave too. Surrey University was only fifty miles from Moonlight but far enough for him to no longer be an ever-present presence in her life.

Her fingers instinctively trailed her collarbone for the star necklace she'd once worn each day without fail. She and her mother crafted it together when she was fifteen. Of course, now she grazed only skin.

Pulling out the seashell from her pocket, Yas stole a glance toward her home. Her mother's rules for the work they did were immutable. Only shells collected from the sea could be crafted into necklaces to soothe anxious hearts. Every day, people crossed the threshold of their home. They settled into the nook off the guest room. They wept onto carefully curated shells, which would later be sanded and shaped into stars and worn as necklaces to soothe their suffering. There was an alchemy between the sea and the shells that her family had melded into practically a science. Before her mother, the work had been her grandmother's. Before that, her grandmother's mother. Eight generations of Khanani women winding their way down to—one day—Yas.

She'd once eagerly painted each star before it left their home. Delicate birds. Flowers. Yas had loved the work. The art of catching and cutting and sanding and smoothing. It was meant to be her legacy, but now all Yas could think when she saw a customer clasp on a necklace was: Didn't they notice they still ached? Their work was not a religion. She did not worship the sea. But she'd lost her faith all the same.

Yas knew she should toss this shell—her mother claimed to have premonitions about such things—which shells would heal and which didn't—but it was perfect for star making: nearly flat, with just a hint of curve, thick and sturdy. The size of her palm. The sort that were plentiful once. Lately the seafloor was littered with brittle shards, crushed shells that crunched painfully beneath her feet. This one only needed a once-over sanding to smooth it out. How could she *not* hold on to it? Besides, Yas looked at the sea and thought, *Even if I had found this within its depths, it wouldn't have made a dif-*

ference. There were no such thing as premonitions, and certainly no healing properties were within the water's depths anymore, if there ever had been in the first place.

The sound of hammering pierced the morning air. Two workers in cargo pants and plastic helmets lay out blue tarps alongside Holler Mansion next door. Another perched atop the roof, yanking off weathered salmon-colored shingles and flinging them to the ground below. A noisy jackhammer tore into concrete on the back patio.

Since the Holler family left last year, Yas had not seen so much as a cat slink past the property. Raf dared Yas to slip through the crumbled brick gate with him just last month. They'd dangled their legs at the edge of the abyss of the once aqua-blue pool. The bell lights strung overhead on cracking lattices gathered dust on their bulbs. The exterior, once buttercream yellow, faded more and more each month, battered by the salty wind that didn't care if the owners had packed up and moved away.

"Figured out what they're up to yet?" a voice said over the din.

Raf. He walked along the shoreline toward her. Her shoulders unclenched. His stonewashed jeans were rolled just above his ankles. Sand clung to his bare feet. His favorite hoodie covered his head, but his brown curls framed his forehead like they did when they'd first met in first grade, after his family first arrived through the enormous ice-cold Golub tree in Willow Forest. Everyone had gawked at his mop of brown curls and scraped and bruised arms when he stepped into their class. They'd edged away when he approached the circle for morning meeting. Their eyes fixed on the one thing that differentiated him from the others in the room—the beauti-

ful shimmering leaf etched on his inner wrist—delicate and green along the edges. She'd been so mesmerized, she'd immediately pulled out a marker and tried to make her own. Ms. Stein asked Yas to be his buddy. Eleven years later, the assignment had stuck. Raf got Yas the way only someone who knew you before you learned long division could.

"What's the Golub word for 'annoying' again?" She nodded toward the house.

"Lesan." His dimple deepened. "That constant hammering is a lot."

"Any more ideas what they're up to?"

"Someone must've bought it. Fix it up, and who wouldn't want it?"

"Raf. I'm serious."

"Me too," he said. "It'll come back, the water. When it does, they'll have gotten a house with one of the best views in the world for pennies on the dollar. Rich people love getting a good deal."

She fixed her eyes on the sea. *Not this again.* Yes, in the past, the colors of the ocean shifted from time to time from the brilliant pink and purple to dimmer versions for seconds or moments at a time. In the weeks leading up to the tragedy, there'd been a few mornings of gray that'd lasted several hours, but the colors always returned by the afternoon. Never in the two centuries of recorded history of their town was there *any* evidence of their sleepy, warm-watered bay shifting to one with dangerous riptides swirling within. In the early days, she'd combed the town's archives in the damp library on the edge of town. Praying that history would provide hope. A cure. But she'd only found contradictory legends and lore.

Nothing grounded in science. Nothing that could truly help. In the end, her question was one without an answer.

Have faith, Raf always said. Droughts could last for years, why not the ocean losing its spark? This was life. Things ebbed and flowed. The Golub held on to hope like no one else. It was their North Star.

When they first became friends, Yas listened with rapt attention to his tales of Golub. Trees with gold-flecked leaves. Playscapes with slides and climbing structures carved entirely of ice. *We're only here for a little while*, Raf used to tell her. *Until things get safer and we can go home*. But with each passing year, their Golub tree only grew frostier, and Raf didn't talk about leaving as much anymore. By now, he'd lived on this side longer than in Golub. He was headed to university soon.

Yas didn't blame the Golub for hoping, but she had lost her own hope for Moonlight. Yas knew. It was a knowing she felt in her bones. It was why she'd long abandoned the star necklace she once swore by: Hoping for the waters to return was futile.

When she met his gaze, he shrugged.

"The workers are good for business, at least there's that," he said. "We sold out of waffles already. Bura just went on a run to restock the flour."

"You didn't see my father around town, did you?"

"He's gone?"

"He left before I woke up."

Her father used to stick notes on the fridge to let her and her mother know he'd dashed to Jake's to grab milk and eggs for a pancake breakfast. Now he disappeared for hours at a time, casting his job-hunting net farther and farther.

"I'm sorry, Yas. I'm sure he'll find something soon." His hand

grazed her bare arm for the briefest of seconds before pulling away. But not before a jolt of electricity passed through her.

She ignored it, of course, as she always did, but she couldn't help but wonder: Did he feel it too? She studied the brown of his eyes, the set of his jaw. If he did, his face showed no trace of it.

She cleared her throat. "Any word on Kot?"

"Not yet." His expression fell.

A layer of heaviness had settled over Raf since Kot left without explanation. He and his sister, Nara, had the misfortune of arriving to Moonlight Bay the night Sammy died and the ocean grayed.

Gray like their eyes, the townspeople would whisper. Just the thought of it made Yas's blood boil.

This remained the hardest change for Yas to witness. The Golubs had been trading partners with Moonlight Bay for centuries—they once traversed regularly through their enormous tree in the center of Willow Forest. Their spices, minerals, gems, and prized fabrics were coveted in Moonlight and beyond, and they'd always been received as revered guests. Yas thought their town was special to receive visitors from lands beyond their own. Jasmine Cove to the north had portals through carved glaciers for the Dilcut. To the west were the sand dunes and caves for the Minas and the Smus. Moonlight Bay had the Golub tree.

When the weather in Golub turned, eighteen years earlier—homes buckling beneath sheets of ice, frozen freshwater refusing to warm for drink, their gardens unable to grow—the people of Moonlight didn't blink. They offered up the six acres of Willow Forest and promised the Golub they would always be welcome.

Yas now knew not all promises lasted forever.

When Raf left, Yas looked at Holler Mansion. The blue tarp lay dusty on the grassy ground; cracked shingles were tossed into a comfortable-sized heap. Spanish tiles peeked out of brown boxes, waiting patiently in neat rows. Whoever was fixing it up was trying to restore the home to what it'd once been. But *she* couldn't go back in time. Yas was no longer the carefree girl who wore a star necklace. Who kissed a pretty boy home from boarding school on a whim. *That* Yas believed things always worked out. *This* Yas understood sometimes there was no fixing what had broken.

Yas rolled up her sleeves. Pulling out the shell from her pocket, she went to the sea. Kneeling, she coated it with salt and brine. She looked at the Weepers at the ocean's edge, their hands cupped in supplication. Something tough and solid lodged into her throat. Why couldn't they face facts? The water was gone. Sammy was gone. The sweet boy she'd spent hours babysitting on nights his nanny was off had drowned while she stood mere yards away. The Hollers had fled, leaving Moonlight Bay to sink in their wake. *It's over*, thought Yas. *Neither stars nor tears change any of these truths.* She tucked the shell into her pocket and rose. *Accepting this is the only way to survive.*

three
RAF


“Keep up the good work,” Ernie said, clapping Raf on the back as he locked up the diner.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I mean it.” The mayor’s drawl elongated each word as though he had all the time in the world to say what he wanted to say—which, Raf supposed, he did. “This diner is one of the shining examples of what works in this town. Don’t think I don’t remind everyone any chance I get.”

Ernie was the best mayor anyone could ask for. He’d made it his personal mission to get a cup of coffee from the diner every day, without fail. *An act of solidarity*, he told Raf. Raf knew he meant well, and in the early days, when the seas first grayed, they’d *needed* his support. But once upon a time, they hadn’t needed the mayor ordering coffee to drum up business from the townspeople. Once upon a time, deep in summer as they were, there’d be a line of tourists clamoring for a seat at a stool.

Once upon a time.

Raf’s mouth twitched. That was how fairy tales began, didn’t they?

It felt like a fairy tale now, but it *had* been real. Soon after

his family arrived through the Golub tree with teeth chattering, toes white and blue from near frostbite, the locals had welcomed them with baskets of treats and thermoses filled with honey flower tea. Later, they'd parked their trucks packed with lumber, brick, and shingles at the edge of the forest and helped haul the materials down their dirt path, wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow. When the Golub pooled their dwindling reserves of gems and minerals to purchase Seaside diner from Aluna Otieno, who was retiring, the locals were among those celebrating the grand opening.

In the early days, his family's sudden move to Moonlight had been dizzying for Raf. Gone were his family's acres of farmland. Their snow-capped mountains. The frozen waterfalls. It was the kindness of the locals that had made the adjustment easier. As time pressed on, he realized that as different as Moonlight Bay was, there was much that was the same. The lively square—this one located far closer to his house—filled with cafés, theaters, and bookshops. Festivals and playscapes. And Raf was certainly grateful that in all the years in Moonlight Bay, he'd never needed to slip on woolen gloves three layers deep again.

"Feelings can turn like the tide," Uncle had warned, even in the early days. "We are grateful for their generosity. For this land they have lent us. However, we must be mindful. We are not of them and they are not of us. We must take care until we can return home."

But with each passing year, Golub faded more and more into memory. Moonlight Bay with its shimmering pink-and-lavender sea, the gleaming Ferris wheel at the edge of Main Street Park, and Yas—this was what *felt* like home.

Now Raf understood: Uncle had worried with good reason.

“Taking over full-time now that you’ve graduated?” Ernie asked Raf, pulling him to the present.

“That’s the plan.” The unopened financial aid application for Surrey stuffed under his mattress poked out uncomfortably in his mind.

“Glad to hear it.” Ernie thumped his back. “You keep the place running like clockwork.”

Raf watched Ernie’s retreating figure and tucked his keys into his pocket. He walked past a row of boarded-up stores that had once been art galleries, cafés, and boutiques. Oscar’s gas station, which doubled as the post office, and Moonlight Bay Pharmacy, two stores over with peeling shutters, both still had neon OPEN signs blinking above their entrances—the few hanging on. For now.

Raf tried pushing away the thoughts that Ernie’s question dislodged. He’d applied to eight colleges, but Surrey had always been the hope. Professor Sandeep Singh, who summered in town and ate pancakes with coffee in their diner every Tuesday without fail since Raf was ten, taught architecture there. Raf would pepper him with questions about designing houses and creating floor plans. The professor’s eyes always lit up whenever Raf shared stories of Golub—their homes with domed roofs and thermally heated and cooled floors. He was eleven when the professor gave him an architecture textbook. Raf was hooked. This—he’d once thought—was his destiny. He knew a thing or two about constructing homes, having helped his family and others build their dwellings within the forest and then, in recent years, reinforcing and fortifying spaces not created to house them for quite so long. He had

notebooks filled with sketches. Blueprints of buildings. Cities. Combining Golub designs and Moonlight architecture. Now those plans were just papers gathering dust in the back corner of his bedroom closet.

Stop, he told himself. Fixating didn't change things. College had always been a dream—and dreams were never one's birthright.

Raf's phone vibrated in his back pocket. He knew without looking who it would be. It was mostly ever her. Yas.

Dropped some pretzel brownies
off with your mom!

Yas! You're the best.

No arguments there! Movie
night?

What's playing?

Does it matter?

Raf's mood brightened. She was right, it didn't matter. Gil and Finn, who ran the theater, played the same movie for months, but Raf and Yas showed up each week all the same. The buttered popcorn and caramel pretzels were too good to pass up. Raf promised to meet up after dinner.

He stepped onto the beach and trudged through the loose grains of sand until he reached the shoreline, where the ground beneath lay compact and firm. Even after all this time,

the grayness stung. Once upon a time, pink dolphins swam not far from shore. He and Yas would wade out to see the newest calves and swim alongside Mira and Hira—the names they’d given the sweetest two with matching crooked fins.

Once upon a time. There it was again. And the next thought, never far behind: The Golubs fled unimaginable circumstances that slowly—then all at once—became all too imaginable. Here in Moonlight, in just under a year, the waters had gone dark, as had the local sentiment toward his people. What came next?

If his father were still alive, Raf knew what he’d say: There was no use trying to look around corners, for while there could be darkness, there could also be light. It was healthier to hope. Hope that whatever came next would be better.

Turning toward the grassy edge of Willow Forest, Raf saw a wooden rowboat floating in the ocean a short distance away. The man inside held a reed-thin fishing pole; a straw hat obscured his face. When he looked up, his eyes locked onto Raf’s. Then narrowed. Jake.

Tolki Uncle regularly reminded them to make an effort with Jake and others like him. Especially these days. Raf knew he should wave to Jake. Smile. But did these efforts really soften the hearts of those whose feelings had seemingly hardened into concrete against him and the 103 people of Willow Forest? Tall, shaggy-blond-haired Kot had been full of smiles—unfailingly friendly—but something happened to him all the same. Something that made him flee without so much as a farewell to his own sister.

Raf picked up his pace. Slipping into the thicket of trees by the edge of the beach, he winced as his hoodie caught against a thorny branch.

“Why didn’t you make a path to our home from the ocean?” Raf had asked Uncle when he was younger and came home with thorns pierced into his jeans. Pinching at his elbows. There was a longer, mulched path cleared through the forest to the main town square. Tolki Uncle created it himself when he arrived with his daughter eighteen years earlier—the foot traffic kept it maintained.

“It’s safest to have one way in and out,” he replied.

Raf once found these precautions over the top, but today he was grateful for the barrier.

Stepping into the clearing, he shivered. The Golub tree measuring two hundred feet tall stood steps away. It was as wide as a redwood, with a thin layer of frost burrowed within its creases. Its plentiful dewdrop leaves created a crown the color of the inside of a cracked papaya, with the branches toward the bottom bare and icy. The limbs of the simple eastern pines surrounding it were coated with tendrils of orange frost. This tree was their compass. The day it warmed like the others surrounding it was the day they could return home. Would they, though? Raf had his doubts. Uncle said hope was like a flame, it needed regular tending, but each new arrival painted a bleaker picture than the last.

Pulling the drawstring to compress the hoodie tighter, he stepped around the decorated stone pit set beneath the shade of its branches. The annual Hamra gathering was fast approaching. Each year they lit a fire in that very caldron with the precious pebble-shaped minerals they’d brought from the other side. There were already inscribed Golub leaves—filled with people’s longings and grief—strung together by thread, dancing in the wind from the branches of nearby trees. Soon

these leaves would be placed in gold-tendrilled flames to cleanse their hearts and bring peace. Raf looked forward to it this year. Between college and Yas, he had his own matters to let go of.

Earlier today, his leaf flared its warning when their arms accidentally brushed against each other. After what happened last year, Raf was careful around Yas. But he couldn't *not* see her. She was his person. He was hers.

Pressing a hand to the trunk, he watched the golden leaf etched on his inner wrist glow. Before things turned, a touch like this against a warm trunk would have made the trunk glow, ready for egress or ingress. But times were different now. Lately it glowed haphazardly without rhyme or reason. The tree was cool to the touch, but not numbingly so today. He thought of Kot on the other side, navigating his way through the tundra-like lands. *Why* did he go back? Where was he right now? Raf prayed his friend was safe.

Stepping into his home, Raf heard the familiar Golub folk melodies his mother played while cooking. They sounded a bit tinny lately on the portable stereo she'd squeezed in with her belongings when they'd left Golub. She sewed custom curtains for customers around the continent, but she was home early today. Slipping off his shoes, he placed them on the built-in shelf by the door. He'd been so young when they left, but hearing the music in the air—he could close his eyes and be back in Golub. Each of the forty-five identical homes scattered through the six-acre forest also hearkened back to the simple houses of his birthplace. Three bedrooms, a bathroom off the main room. A kitchen with a wooden table that seated six.

Raf couldn't imagine what it was like for people who lived in houses like Yas's. To inhabit a place in existence long before you were. Was it strange to know how many other lives came and went, wept and laughed in the walls you inhabited now? All Raf knew was starting fresh.

Tolki Uncle sat at the kitchen table, chatting with his mother. Raf inhaled the scent of cardamom-infused chicken, pickled beef, eggplant, and steaming saffron rice simmering on the stove. They tried to approximate the spices in Moonlight Bay to their tastes of home, but it was difficult to replicate some—like lak, which turned meals into savory *and* sweet, or min, which gave food an extra thickening. Supplies were scarce nowadays, so their precious herbs and minerals were stored away for special occasions.

Thimba, his cat, nuzzled her head against his leg. He kneeled down to pet her. Before Raf could greet anybody else, his younger brothers lunged for him, nearly tackling him to the ground.

"Raf!" They shouted in unison. Mac was six. Louk, five. Though small in size, they could take down a linebacker without blinking.

"Uncle said my drawing looks just like a *lupta*." Mac thrust his lined notebook toward Raf. "I copied it from that show we watched!"

"It looks like a toilet," Louk countered.

"Stop," Raf chided. "It *does* look like a *lupta*."

"Do you remember them from back home, Raf?" Tolki Uncle asked.

"I do," he said. "We had our own. Their fuzzy ears and black snouts made them look like overgrown rabbits."

"They loved Raf," his mother said. "Always wanted to eat from his hands." She gazed out the window. He knew from her faraway expression that she was looking at a memory.

What happened to their farm animals? Raf hoped they were okay. He remembered his parents leading the *lupta* to their neighbors. The howling winds had whipped against him, straight through his bones, despite the layers his mother had bundled him in. The neighbors promised to look after them. But everyone who came through the tree over the years shared only that things were worsening. What became of the neighbors?

"I want to feed a *lupta*!" Louk exclaimed. "Can't we go to the farm to see them?"

"One day, child," Uncle said. "One day you'll see the *lupta*, the plains and fields, and the mountains for yourself. When the winds calm, and the ice thaws, we will return home."

Mac gasped. "*Return?* I don't want to *live* there!"

Louk pointed to the floor. "*This* is my home."

"Louk. Mac." Raf's mother looked at Uncle, her expression reddening. "I don't know what's gotten into them lately."

But how could anyone blame them? Only Raf and his mother remembered the scent and feel of a world beyond this. His brothers were born here, and Raf's own memories grew dimmer each day. He remembered the cold, though. Iced-over lakes and frozen ponds. Limbless trees and roofs collapsing under sheets of ice that clung like plastic wrap.

"It wasn't always this way," his mother had told him as they'd hurriedly packed their belongings. "The air once warmed just enough in the summers that I'd swim in lakes and sun myself on the shore. Things will return to normal soon enough. We'll be back."

Eleven years later, they continued to wait. When was the last time she'd mentioned going back? Raf couldn't recall. His father would never return. He was buried on the edge of Willow Forest. If they left, they left him too.

"Can we open the door and take a peek? Just a tiny one?" Louk asked. "Maybe a lupta's wandering around just outside?"

"You can't just open the door—*it* decides when to let you in or out!" Mac poked his shoulder. "Remember?"

"Even if we had a measure of control over this, we can't know the conditions on the other side," their mother said. "If there was a wind gust or hailstorm . . . Even a touch could damage Willow Forest irreversibly."

"If it's that dangerous to go through the door . . ." Mac's expression grew solemn. "Is Kot okay?"

Uncle's smile faltered.

"Dena said Kot might not've gone back at all!" Louk told Raf. "He could've wandered too far on this side. But if he strays too far, won't he lose his leaf? And then he can't be with us ever again."

"It would warn him!" Mac smacked his little brother's arm. "He'd know if he went too far, right, Uncle?"

"Boys," his mother said sternly. "Repeating idle gossip helps no one."

Uncle sighed heavily. "It's difficult, but we must hope for the best. Wherever Kot may be, let's pray he's safe."

Uncle had tested the safety limits himself when he first arrived. Raf knew the rules by heart. If they went beyond the forty-mile perimeter, the leaf warmed in warning. It took two hours before it flashed in earnest. Three for the etching to dim. Four before the loss became irreversible.

He'd pored over those details when he'd applied to college. He was among the first raised within the forest. One of the first, it felt like, to wonder about a future set outside of Golub. Surrey University was ten miles outside the radius. He risked his leaf with this dream, but there had to be options. Living on the outskirts close to the perimeter. Commuting. But even then, it hadn't answered *how* he could leave when Uncle relied on him to carry on his father's work running the diner.

When Kot and Nara arrived ten months ago, Raf glimpsed an opportunity. Kot with his infectious smile. His easy demeanor. He'd paid the whisperers no mind. He was twenty years old, but Kot's self-assured style made him seem a decade older to Raf. "They can think what they like," he'd said to Raf with a shrug. "Not my concern." His family had owned a café in Golub, and he needed to work to keep his mind from running in circles. Uncle had worried, of course, but Raf promised Kot would stay in the back. Out of sight. Safe. At the diner, Kot's hands were like magic. His salted caramel cakes were so delicious, the locals ordered extras to take home. Maybe, Raf had hoped at the time, college was possible now.

When Kot showed up at the diner last month looking somber and troubled, but dismissed it as a headache, Raf had believed him. He hadn't pushed. Hadn't pried. The next morning, they found leaves and branches scattered beneath the Golub tree. The telltale signs of an opening. Kot had vanished. His sister was heartbroken, and Raf's dreams for college—a life beyond the forest—were gone.

His mother shooed the boys out of the kitchen. She turned to Raf.

“How was work today?” she asked.

“Packed,” Raf told her. “I told Bura to pick up extra produce.”

“Another busy day. A good sign.” His mother kissed his cheek.

But workers didn’t replace the tourists who had still not arrived. Raf was beginning to understand they weren’t coming at all. They’d need to dip into their pooled reserves at the rate they were going. He needed to consult with Uncle soon. Raf wasn’t going to bring this up now though. He liked seeing his mother smile.

“Did the plumbing patch fix the leak last night?” Raf asked Uncle. “

“Not so much as a drop. Thank you, Raf. You’re a lifesaver.”

A crash sounded from the other room. His mother grimaced. “Mind shooping them to the clearing while I finish up?” She tossed him a rag. “Wipe down the table while you’re there.”

“First one out gets tossed in the air,” Raf called to Mac and Louk.

“I’m too big for that,” Mac said, scowling, but he slipped on his shoes and raced outside with his brother.

Raf grabbed the broom resting on the back wall and the spray bottle from the cabinet beneath the sink. He followed them into the clearing. *This* was also why college had never been practical, Raf reminded himself. His father was gone; his mother needed him more than ever.

The fifteen-foot table with matching benches flanking each side was made of sanded-down oak. There were several such tables scattered throughout the forest for each hamlet to eat communally, as they did back home. Raf swept away the strewn pinecones and sprayed the table as his brothers

piled up fallen leaves before leaping in, their laughter ringing through the forest. A neighbor's daughter joined them as daylight waned between the trees. He lit the first of the kerosene lights. The gas flickered. Raf lit each one until all the lamps strung around the table were aglow. Stepping back, he took in the scene. He had to admit it was a beautiful evening. Even in the midst of so much uncertainty and sadness all around, there were reasons to feel grateful too.

Looking at the house across from him, he saw Nara. She sat on the front stoop. Her white-blond hair was swept up in a knot. She wore jeans and a gray top that matched the gray of her eyes; the crescents beneath them deepened each day. Ever since her brother disappeared, she barely slept. She barely ate.

Seeing Raf, she rose.

"Did you talk to Yas about the stars?" she asked. "Would her mother consider coming here to make me one?"

"Let's go get one made. You know, Kot was thinking about getting one for himself."

"That? He wasn't serious. Kot was only teasing Uncle." Nara smiled a little. "You know how Uncle doesn't believe in any of that."

"You don't have to believe in it. They're pretty necklaces. And you'll get out of here for some fresh air."

"I can't leave the forest," she said. "Look what happened to Kot."

What could he say to this? He thought of Jake's steely expression earlier today. Did *he* accost Kot? Raf tried to remember if he'd noticed a welt on Kot that last morning. Bruises. Despite the growing tensions, no one had ever laid a hand on them. Not even after Jake, Crissy, and others bought a full-page advertisement in the *Moonlight Gazette* days after Sammy's

death, outlining why the Golub were not to be trusted. Someone had pasted a copy of it on their diner window the morning it ran. Yas ripped it off as soon as she laid eyes on it, her face flushed pink with anger.

But removing it from a window didn't remove the sentiments from people's hearts. For Kot to have chosen to do this, what other explanation could there be? Uncle had noticed Kot lingering by the tree in the days before his vanishing, but no one could have imagined why. That he had been waiting for an opening to leave.

"He'll come back," Raf said. "We have to believe he will."

"We barely made it the first time," she said softly. "Our parents died of frost two hours into our journey. To go back?" Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I touched the tree today."

"Nara . . ."

"It's cold, Raf." Her lower lip quivered.

"It's warmer than in days past."

"It's no different. Not really."

After Kot vanished, Raf and his mother had to pry Nara from the tree. Even now, the once-soft skin of her hands was cracked and scabbed from trying to tear open the door. There was no point. The door opened when it wished—and lately, hardly at all.

He patted her arm. "I'm sorry," he told her.

"Yeah, me too." She wiped her eyes. "Need help setting the table?" She nodded toward it. "I'll wipe the seats down while you grab the plates?"

"Thanks, Nara."

Yas often told Raf how bewildering it was that everyone here slipped back and forth from matters that were life and

death to going about their business, but what else were they to do? If they sat and cradled their pain, the enormity of it would destroy them. They had to keep doing and going. Hoping. There was no other way.

“I believe dinner is nearly ready.” Tolki Uncle walked over. He picked up a fallen twig and tapped the copper bell dangling from a tree branch. Just as in Golub, the chime echoed through the trees; in the distance other bells chimed.

Dena and her five-year-old son stepped out of their home alongside her sister, Dar, as the table filled with food. Som and Meed were next; their ten-year-old daughter, Ruhi, hopped over to join Raf’s brothers in the leaves. Then the Samli family and the Jugnus. Soon everyone in their little enclave was gathered.

Tolki Uncle bowed his head. “Thank you to the Sustainer for this meal. Let us pray for Moonlight Bay. For the waters to return. For succor from those who mean us harm. For Dena’s mother. Bura’s father. And let us pray for the missing. For my own daughter, Shar. For Jib and Mah—”

“Let my boys stay gone,” Som said, his expression dark. Uncle moved to speak, but he cut him off. “I mean it—they made their choices.”

Unlike Kot, Som’s twin boys didn’t return to Golub. Five years ago, they’d simply left. Choosing this world over their leaf and thereby cutting off any connections to the people within the forest. Their parents refused to speak of them, but their expressions belied their sorrow.

“I would like for us to pray for Kot as well,” Nara said. “May he return to us.”

Tears slipped down Nara’s face. Raf looked at Uncle’s drawn

expression. He knew more than most what she was going through.

After a moment of silence, Uncle asked, “Would anyone else like to say a prayer?”

“For the locals to stop with the glares,” said Dena.

“Did something happen at the diner?” Uncle asked quickly.

“Same as every day.” Her green eyes flashed. “Wears on you to serve people who think you’re beneath them. Put on a long-sleeve shirt and I dare anyone to tell us apart, but they act as though they’re inherently better.”

Others murmured in agreement.

“They are not better than us. We are not better than them,” said Uncle. “However, we *are* different. The leaf is a small distinction, but one that matters deeply. Our names, our prayers, our way of life—all of these set us apart. And this leaf? One day it will lead us home.”

“But it’s been years. The tree’s still not warm enough for us to return,” Raf blurted out. All eyes turned to him. His face blazed. Why had he shouted that out? Maybe it was just that Uncle said it so calmly each time such matters came up. As though their return was imminent.

“You touched it, didn’t you?” his mother scolded. “As if Nara’s hands aren’t scarred enough? We don’t have unlimited healing herbs.”

“I just . . .” Raf thought of Kot. “I wanted to know.”

“What good is there in that? Doesn’t change what is.”

“The cold means warm will follow,” Tolki Uncle said. “The Sustainer tests us for reasons they know best. We must trust in their wisdom.”

Uncle was the first to come to Moonlight. His daughter left early on, and he’d lived in solitude for two years before the

door parted again, bringing newcomers. He knew better than most how painfully long a test like this was. Raf was young when he blithely asked him why he hadn't gone in search of his daughter when she'd left the perimeter.

"Lost leaves are catching," Uncle had explained. "I have obligations to my community. As much as my heart breaks, I cannot take that chance. I pray every day for her well-being."

Raf longed for Uncle's steadfast patience, but looking at Nara, he also wondered: Why did some lessons have to be this difficult?

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Pulling it out, he saw a message from Yas. Just seeing her name on the screen lightened his mood.

The Golub word for cat is *nafriz*,
right?

She'd sent a photo of a coffee shop with a gaggle of cats.
Raf smiled. Before he could respond, she texted again.

Check out this *nafriz* café
walkable to the College of
Architecture. I might need to
apply now.

Nafriz was one of the dozens of Golub words Yas had integrated into her everyday speech over the course of their friendship. His smile didn't last too long, though. He needed to tell her he wasn't going to Surrey. She'd be disappointed, but he couldn't put off telling her for much longer.

He uploaded a picture of Thimba from this morning, her head poking out from between the folded towels, as though sleuthing for a top-secret mission. He clicked send and watched the three dots as Yas began her reply.

Raf wasn't sure the exact moment this dream of becoming an architect had seeped into his mind. That maybe he could graduate and find work in a nearby town like Mill Creek or Ridgeview, safely within the perimeter of the tree. He could build a home for his mother and brothers. Maybe work at a firm. Open his own. Or teach like Professor Singh. He'd be close enough to the forest. And close enough to Yas so they could see each other as much as they'd like. As he'd gotten older, another dream seeped in—maybe he and Yas could be together.

But it had been asking for too much, hadn't it? College wasn't in the cards for him. He had responsibilities to his people and to his family. He owed them his presence after what happened. What *he* had accidentally done. And his family had already survived a brutal journey out of Golub. Had made a makeshift home for themselves and managed to stay together. These were such huge miracles. He had his family. He had Yas's friendship. What business did he have wanting more?

four
YAS


Her parents' bedroom door was wide open when Yas stepped out of her room. The lights off. The bed perfectly made. She heard the distant sound of hammering. The tinkling of shells from the guest room down the hall. She felt her father's absence. He'd been gone since yesterday.

Her phone buzzed. Yas grabbed it, but it wasn't her father. She clicked on the social media notification from her friend Hisae. A selfie in front of a four-story whitewashed building with blue shutters.

Jessi's moving out September 13th ☹️, Hisae's caption read. Anyone need a roommate? Lowman's Collective is a DREAM!

Lowman's Collective. She knew that name. A quick search revealed why. She scrolled through murals painted on red brick. Goats and chicks wandered about on a grassy lawn. Back when shells were abundant, she and her mother had traveled to the town of Edgewood for Lowman's annual market to sell their star necklaces. She remembered the smell of butter and sugar wafting over from the on-site bakery and the sculptures of marooned spaceships and metallic trees spread throughout the thirty-acre property. Hisae wasn't an artist. Was she?

I didn't know you were at Lowman's, Yas messaged her.

Hisae's reply was swift. I work at their café! It's a ten-minute drive from Surrey. Does Raf need housing this fall?

He's at the dorms, Yas replied. Though, come to think of it—Yas frowned—had he said he was dorming, or did she assume he was? It'd been some time since they'd spoken about Surrey.

The collective's a great place to live, Hisae texted. Even if you're not super artsy.

That's awesome, Yas replied. But Yas didn't feel very awesome. Scrolling through Hisae's posts, a strange feeling passed through her. A twisty sensation in the pit of her stomach. Almost like nausea.

Or envy?

Her phone buzzed again.

You want in? Hisae asked. You'd LOVE this place. It's a painter's dream. I could probably get you a job with me too!

Yas reread the message. Living in an artists' collective? *Of course* she wanted in. She'd pack her belongings and head there now if she could. But her work was here. This was the year she was meant to begin her apprenticeship with her mother. Even if she no longer believed in the sea's powers, even if her own necklace still lay tucked in a drawer untouched since last year, the work was hers to carry on. She wasn't the kind of person who'd walk out on her family.

Besides, thought Yas, could she even call herself a painter if she hadn't touched a paintbrush in nearly a year?

Not for me, Yas managed to reply, but I'll keep an eye out.

Checking her calendar, she blinked. September 13 was exactly one month after the Moonlight Bay Festival, which they celebrated the second Thursday of August every year. It

was marked automatically in perpetuity in her online calendar, even though the festival definitely wasn't happening this year. What was once a yearly celebration was now a death anniversary. No one had called it off—not officially—it was more like they'd all decided to pretend it never existed. Which was just as well.

"Yas?" her mother called from the hallway. "Can you grab your scissors? Mine are going dull."

Yas parted the top drawer of her dresser and pulled out the handmade red scissors gifted to her on her thirteenth birthday. They cut through shells like paper.

Her paintbrushes were also tucked away in there, untouched since last year. Her old sketchbooks were stacked in a row next to them. She pulled one out. This one was from grade school. She flipped through the crude charcoal sketches of dolphins. A water-colored sunset. Yas trailed a hand over her first—and last—attempt at portraiture. Raf. Who else would've given in to a nine-year-old demanding they sit motionless on her bed for hours while she stood at her easel attempting to bring his likeness to paper?

"It's weird being painted," he'd complained.

"I'm *sketching* you, not painting you."

"Still weird."

"You won't be alone. I'm adding myself in later."

"Yeah?" He grinned.

"I'm going to call it . . ." She pursed her lips. "*Together Forever*."

"But we can't be together forever," he'd blurted out. "Uncle told me I can't marry you. It's not allowed because we're going back to Golub soon."

She wrinkled her nose. “Raf, why are you so weird?” She tossed a pillow at him, and that had been the end of that. They’d never spoken of it again, but she still cringed at the memory.

Yas stepped into the hallway. The floorboards creaked beneath her. Cracking open the door of the guest room, where dime-size stars glittered from the ceiling, she handed her mother the scissors and set a basket of newly collected shells on the side table. The shell from yesterday was in there too, the perfect one with rounded edges, plucked from the sand. It was the only promising one among the bunch.

“Don’t turn on the light,” her mother said quickly. She wore a blue skirt and peasant top, her long hair wrapped in a floral bandana. “Outlet’s acting up.”

“We need to get an electrician over,” Yas groaned. “The oven was finicky again this morning.”

“I’ll tell your dad to call Jamal.”

“Dad didn’t come home last night,” Yas said. “He promised he’d give me an update after his interview, and he didn’t call either.”

“He’s driving up tomorrow,” her mother said.

“Where is he?” she asked. “It’s got to be farther out if he’s gone this long. And if he gets this job, then what? Not like we can move. Our work is here.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” Her mother’s eyes remained fixed on the work before her. “No sense worrying now.”

Her father loved Moonlight Bay—but he was a transplant. When the Hollers left without so much as a two weeks’ notice to their longtime loyal employees, her father changed. Gone

was the person who kicked the soccer ball with her on the beach. Strategized with her over chess every Sunday. That man was replaced by a stranger with a cloudy expression. Who was eager to abandon Moonlight as soon as possible. “It’s time to cut our losses,” he urged a few months into their gray new world. He didn’t understand why this was impossible. His DNA didn’t link him forever to this soil like Yas’s and her mother’s did.

Just then, the windows vibrated. The stars strung overhead trembled.

“Jackhammer again.” Her mother grimaced.

“They’re redoing the pool. When will they wrap it up? It’s been forever now.”

“Wish I knew.” She nodded to the cracked stars strewn on the guest bed. “I have to rethread each one twice to make sure more don’t break. Not sure if it’s tied to the vibrations or if this batch of shells is just weaker, but Olive won’t be happy.”

Yas cringed. Olive was once perpetually happy. They’d owned Tilted Tales and never shooed Raf and Yas away, even when the pair parked themselves on the oversize ottoman for half the day, working their way through the comics. Sure, they’d lost some of their spark after their messy divorce two months before the sea turned gray. But never could Yas have imagined this. Olive, a Weeper. Lately, they were either shivering ankle-deep in the sea or here in Yas’s home awaiting a star. Each newly created necklace soothed a different pain. Some customers came yearly. Others monthly. Olive came every week, their attention fixed on their phone while waiting to be called back. Yas stole a peek over Olive’s shoulder last time and instantly regretted it. It was a four-second clip

from last year's Moonlight Bay Festival. Twinkle lights strung around lampposts. The ocean glimmering pink and lavender in the background. The happy cries of children. Again. And again. An endless loop.

Her mother tossed Yas a spool of silk. "Double knot them so they don't sway so much. I'll dust out the guest sheets after."

They still called this a guest bedroom. Pretending her mother hadn't slept here every night for nearly three months. *For whose benefit do we do this?* Yas wondered. She got to work double knotting and hanging up the stars.

"Can you check my phone for any new appointments?" her mother asked once Yas was finished.

Three messages glowed on-screen.

"Lisa wants to come in tomorrow morning. Marie needs to reschedule, and—" Yas winced. "Olive wants to know if they can come by in a little bit."

"Text everyone else yes, but don't reply to Olive. I'll call them."

The jackhammer pulsed again. Dust rose in plumes outside the window.

"Is Ernie making Holler Mansion a tourist stop?" she asked her mother.

"Don't think he got the yes from the council to take it to a public vote."

"I never understood that idea anyway. No one even shows up to vote on anything these days."

"Those town halls are less and less well attended. Crissy barely attends any herself, and she's *on* the council."

"She is? Since when?"

"She took over Kendall's position," her mother replied.

“Can’t blame Ernie for his nostalgia. Holler Candy was a big deal at one time. The biggest candy manufacturer in the region. Each piece coated with our waters. The Hollers used to lead guided factory tours when I was a kid. A tourist stop isn’t going to happen, though. You’d need money to create something like that. Whoever’s fixing it up, they have plenty of it. How was your collecting?” she asked. “Any luck?”

A year ago, her mother never asked this. She didn’t need to. Sturdy shells were as ordinary as leaves strewn in a forest. One year earlier, they could stand calf-deep in the ocean and scoop out perfect shells ready for a quick cut, snip, and smoothing. They had so many shells back then, they set aside extras to sell as trinkets for tourists. It was hard to believe, except it *had* been real. So real she thought it could never change. Now shards of shells littered the seafloor.

“Gray ones are aplenty.” Yas handed her mother the basket. “Raf said they’re no better on the other side of the forest.”

“That’s a shame. They used to be most plentiful out by their beaches.” Her mother sifted through the basket. “How is Raf? Can’t believe he’s leaving soon.”

“Me neither.”

She tried not to dwell on this. She was happy for him—she was! She’d pored over websites with him and read through his application essays. Now, instead of sketching in notebooks or building intricate sandcastles so complex, tourists regularly mistook him for a performer and dropped coins at his feet, he’d be one step closer to what he’d always dreamed of doing. What he was meant to do.

But that doesn’t mean I won’t miss his smile when I step into the diner most mornings. The milkshakes he spins just for me

because he knows how I like them. Yas wasn't ready to process what it would be like to live in Moonlight without him.

"I heard the recent diner boycott plan was a bust," her mother said. "I don't know what Jake and Crissy were thinking. It's the only restaurant left standing."

"Ernie shut that idea down quick," Yas said.

"Good on Ernie." She raked through the basket. "The sooner people can get over blaming the Golub, the better. It's just—" She paused. Her eyes widened. She pulled out the shell. "Yas, am I seeing things?"

Yas fidgeted. She knew her mother took the rules of shell gathering seriously, but it was superstition and nothing more that required their shells be found in the sea. Seeing her mother so happy, smiling like the before times—it made her ache.

"It's very smooth," Yas said. "We won't hardly need to sand it."

"Want to paint this one?" She looked hopefully at Yas. "Too pretty not to, don't you think?"

"Oh." Yas faltered.

"It's like the ones we had." She examined the underside. "Makes you hope . . ." Her voice trailed off. She ran her fingers over the surface. She looked at Yas, searching her face.

"Is this from the ocean?" she finally asked.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it?"

"Yasmine. Did you gather this from the waters?"

"All shells are from the ocean."

"That wasn't my question."

Her smile was gone. Had Yas waited a beat too long before she answered? What gave it away? *There are no such things as premonitions. There aren't.* Yas met her mother's steely gaze.

"I found it on the beach," Yas said, exhaling. "You said yourself this is like the ones we collected. It's perfect."

"But it isn't," her mother said. "Honestly, Yas. Did you think I wouldn't be able to tell?"

"It looks—"

"It's not how it looks! It's how it feels. It's how I sense which shells will heal and which won't . . ." Her mother sighed. "This isn't a game, Yas. This is our lifeblood. It's what keeps a roof over our heads."

"We need *stars* to keep a roof over our heads." Yas's voice rose. "The water's not the way it used to be."

"That means we're *more* careful. Not less."

"I dipped it in the sea. What's the difference?"

"The difference is, one works and the other doesn't." Her mother placed the shell on the nightstand and closed her eyes. "The difference is, I believe in what we do. My daughter doesn't."

Yas hated the look of disappointment on her mother's face. She *wanted* to believe. Nearly a year ago, she did. When her father still played football with his factory friends on week-ends. When Main Street was packed with tourists filtering in and out of Cake Story, Tilted Tales, and Sampson's Deli, which sold sauerkraut sandwiches. She'd watched them shutter like collapsing dominoes, one after the other. Boarded-up windows. Tangled vines snaking through the abandoned mini-golf on the edge of town. The Ferris wheel tilting more and more toward the sea. The candy factory a dusty relic up a hillside in the distance. She'd seen Sammy Holler's body lying limp on the sandy shore. Drowned by those *healing* waters. She'd watched the ocean dim—like a light bulb flickering off.

And she watched her mother press star after star into the palms of their neighbors. But they still wept. The ocean still churned gray. A million shells dipped in all the tears in the world couldn't do a thing to ease the pain of any of it. It was people like her mother, like Olive, the ones waiting and looking over their shoulder at what was, who were going to be left behind.



“What’s the Golub word for ‘this is the best milkshake known to man’?”

“Frimos.”

“Is there really a word for ‘this is the best milkshake known to man’?” Yas laughed.

“*Frimos* means ‘delicious.’”

“*Frimos*,” Yas said with dramatic conviction.

“You like?” Raf leaned on the counter and grinned.

“Always.” She pressed her mouth to the straw and took another sip. “The heat’s intense out there. This feels extra refreshing.”

“Any luck collecting?”

“There were a handful near your forest. Otherwise, the usual shards.”

“Those things are *sharp*. Ernie ought to get city council to put up warnings.”

“Good thing no one goes swimming anymore anyhow. They poke through my boots.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I might scale back to collecting once a week. Not like I’m having much luck lately anyhow.”

“You could use that freed-up time to paint again.”

“Or maybe I’ll just become a barfly here.”

“We sell milkshakes and orange juice.” He laughed.

“You know what I mean!” Her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen and grimaced. “Mom needs me to pick up more thread.”

“I thought you weren’t speaking?”

“Does texting count?” She rose from her stool and slung her bag across her body. “Movie tonight?”

“Yes, please,” he replied.

The wind chimes above the door sounded when the door closed behind her. Raf picked up the wall phone and pressed his ear to it. No luck. The line was still down. They’d tried to switch to online ordering, but the website crashed so often it became more of a hindrance than help. Uncle was trying to get the phone company to come sooner, but they were booked three weeks out at this point. A diner on razor-thin margins without the ability to receive phone orders made tricky times even trickier.

He flipped on the coffee maker and surveyed the diner. Ernie had staked out a booth since they opened three hours ago. He sat across from Bea, Gil, and Ayo, some of the members of city council. Bea doubled as the town plumber, Gil ran the one and only movie theater in town with his husband, Finn, and Ayo managed the Iguana Motor Lodge. They were all in a heated conversation. Ernie punctuated his words with swift jabs in the air every so often, as though conducting a silent orchestra. Raf watched the quartet and smiled.

A handful of locals milled about, finishing up their breakfasts. Kendall—a Weeper—sat at his usual spot in the corner overlooking Main Street Park, nursing the same cup of cof-

fee since morning. Workers from Holler Mansion in paint-splattered smocks finished up their omelets. The diner wasn't empty, but this wasn't how things were supposed to be this deep into summer. Tourist season accounted for half their yearly income, and this was going to be the first year without the crowds the Moonlight Bay Festival drew in. How bad would the shortfall be this year? He'd talk to Uncle tonight. He hoped their reserves would be enough to see them through.

Grabbing the coffee carafe, he walked through the diner and refilled empty mugs.

"Thanks, kid." Kendall gave him a weak smile once Raf topped him off.

Dena swung past Raf. She had on her white diner apron, her ginger hair tied up in a bun. When he returned to the counter, she looked Raf square in the eyes. "We need to discuss Nara."

"Dena—"

"The diner needs the help. She needs the distraction. Staying in the forest day and night this long is bad for her."

"She won't leave. She won't even step foot on the sand."

"We must give her a *reason* to leave," Dena replied. "Speak with Tolki? He listens to you."

"I'll . . . I'll think about it, Dena."

Her eyes flashed with frustration. She brushed past him through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Raf hated upsetting Dena, but he had to protect Nara. He'd already let down Kot.

As difficult as things had been this past year, Kot and Nara's presence had been a balm. They'd packed precious herbs and minerals from Golub with them, replenishing the dwindling stores in Willow Forest. But it was their stories that'd meant

the most to Raf. Kot was a natural storyteller. His tales of hiking icicle-laden waterfalls and attending local festivals held in the hollowed-out mountains made Raf's own hazy memories come into focus. The stories also underscored the reality of the cold. It was deepening.

"Time flows in one direction," Kot would say. "We must follow its current. Pushing back, hoping for what might never come back to us, will only sharpen the pain."

Why, then, did Kot return to Golub?

Raf was stacking menus on the counter when the front door chimed. A man wearing cargo shorts and a pink polo shirt entered, his dark hair neatly parted.

"Professor Singh!" Raf exclaimed.

"Raf! Was hoping you'd be working today." He slid onto the barstool across from him. "You know you can call me Sandeep."

"You're always Professor Singh to me."

Raf smiled. Professor Singh had arrived! Summer was far from over. Perhaps more tourists would also come.

"The usual?" Raf asked.

"You can't possibly remember!"

"Pancakes. Side of decaf. Inch of cream?"

"Impressive. Hash browns too, please. Deciding to live dangerously."

"Is the family sleeping in?" Raf handed him coffee. "I can pack the girls some food to go. Rainbow sprinkles on the whipped cream, right?"

"Oh." Professor Singh studied his mug. "We picked a different beach this year. On account of . . ." His voice trailed off.

Ah. Of course. Travelers still stopped by to grab a meal

before traversing to more northern beachside destinations. He couldn't blame the professor. Who wanted to look out at those choppy charcoal shores? But it was official now: Tourist season was toast.

"I got roped into extracurricular duties, so Monica and the girls went up a week earlier." Sandeep smiled guiltily. "I couldn't miss stopping here on my way up. Best diner on the east coast. Best service too, I might add."

"Thanks, Professor."

"Before I forget." He reached into his canvas bag and pulled out a gold-rimmed text. "I found this at a library sale—it's about nature-based architecture practices. Made me think of you."

Raf eyed the raised lettering and braced for the question that was surely coming next.

"Where'd you end up settling on for college?" The professor took a sip of coffee.

There it was. Raf traced a finger against the counter. "Well—"

"Blankman was a good one, but I hope Surrey was at least a contender. If you wanted a campus job, I'll be in the market for a research assistant for my next textbook. You'd be a perfect fit."

"I got into Surrey," Raf said. "But I decided against college."

He lowered his coffee. "You were so excited."

"College isn't for everyone. Lots of people say it's over-rated."

"It can be," he conceded. "But you'd seemed certain it was for *you*. The sketches of nature-inspired homes you shared last summer were incredible."

“Everything’s been complicated since . . .” Raf gestured out the window. “I can’t leave while we’re figuring it all out.”

“Surrey’s only an hour away,” Professor Singh said. “Less if you drive like I do.”

“It’s too late anyhow. I missed the financial aid window.”

Professor Singh studied Raf for a moment. He smiled. “Well, how’s this for fortuitous timing? I said I needed a research assistant, didn’t I? Job comes with a stipend and tuition waiver.”

“Oh.” Raf blinked.

“Haven’t posted it yet. Say the word, it’s yours.”

“That—that’s so generous.”

“I assure you, this is a very self-serving proposition,” he replied. “I know your work ethic.”

When the professor finished his meal, he grabbed the receipt and flipped it over.

“I don’t mean to pressure you, Raf.” He jotted down his number. “I was planning to post it by August first, but school’s not starting until September, so I can probably push it a bit if you need more time to mull it over.” He pushed the scrap of paper toward him. “Think about it? If you’re in, we’ll make it work.”

Professor Singh took Raf’s number. The bell above the door chimed as the door shut behind him. Raf looked at the receipt.

How many hours had he spent in this diner, dreaming about Surrey? The professor’s offer resurfaced every crushed hope he’d buried. They splintered inside him once again. But this offer changed nothing. What would his father think of him right now? Wanting a future that required leaving his family behind? Crumpling the receipt, Raf tossed it in the

trash. He was tired of wanting what he couldn't have. It made the not-having hurt even more. Professor Singh didn't understand his limitations. He didn't know why the ocean turned gray. No one except himself and Tolki Uncle knew why Raf couldn't afford to take any more risks.