

LAKESEDGE

LYNDALL CLIPSTONE



SQUARE
FISH

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
New York

To SKC
I promise all the plants at
Lakesedge are endemic species.



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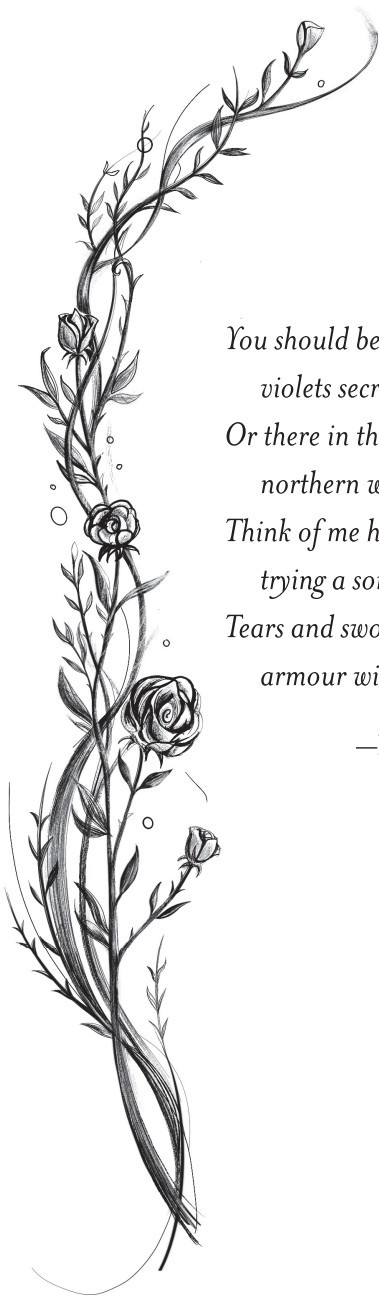
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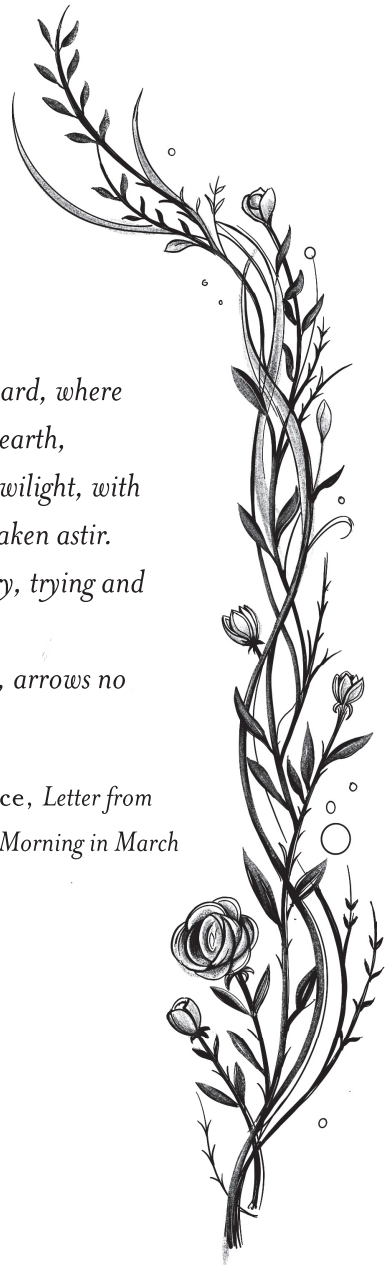
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*You should be out by the orchard, where
violets secretly darken the earth,
Or there in the woods of the twilight, with
northern wind—flowers shaken astir.
Think of me here in the library, trying and
trying a song that is worth
Tears and swords to my heart, arrows no
armour will turn or deter.*

—D. H. Lawrence, *Letter from
Town: On a Grey Morning in March*





Chapter One

There are monsters in the world.
There are monsters in the woods.
They slip inside at night. Crawl through the walls of our cottage. They find their way into my brother's dreams.

It's been weeks, longer, since Arien's last nightmare, but I knew they would come tonight. All day it's followed me, that familiar heaviness in the air. I can feel them coming even before he does.

I'm still awake. Curled up on my narrow bed in the small, plain room we share. Watching him. Waiting. It's past midnight. A hot night, airless, even with our window wide open.

"Violeta?"

He calls my name and reaches out as the darkness rises through him. Shadows spill from his hands like unfurled ribbons, shrouding the floor with an inky mist. He looks at me

with eyes gone solid black; they change when he dreams, and those blank eyes in his frightened face are so *wrong*. Arien is gentle and sweet. This darkness shouldn't be in him. It shouldn't *be* him, and yet—

I move toward him as the shadows cloud over us, filling the room. At first they're smoke, a haze that thickens. Then they build and build, until all the light is gone, and there's only me and Arien and the gathering dark.

"Leta?" He calls for me again, sounding frightened. Then his voice changes to a drawn-out snarl. "Leta, *Leta*."

I take his hand, starting to tremble, hating myself for it but unable to stop. Darkness pours through our clasped fingers, blotting out the moonlight. The shadows are like midwinter frost against my skin, a cold that *burns*.

I cling tight to Arien, whispering to him, "I'm here, I'm here," not letting go even when he growls viciously and starts to claw me. He scrapes my face, my throat, my arms. I bite back a cry at the pain, grabbing his other hand before he makes the scratches worse.

He'll hurt me more than this. I push the thought away, swallow it down until my mouth tastes of copper and salt. He's my brother. He would never, he won't—

More shadows come, faster now, violent, and I hold Arien close against me as they wreath us, winding tighter and tighter. They're like vines, like thorns. I feel the darkness all over me, feel it slip and slither inside my skin. Panic knots my stomach and there's a scream caught in my throat. I take a deep breath and try to speak calmly.

“Arien, my love, you’re safe, you’re safe.” The same words I’ve spoken over countless nights. Ever since the dreams began. Ever since we came to live here.

This is my seventeenth summer, Arien’s thirteenth. Mother found us on the road beside the Vair Woods. Arien was a baby, and I was old enough to tell her our names—Arien and Violeta Graceling—and that our parents were dead, but little else. Whatever happened to send us into the forest at midwinter . . . I don’t let those thoughts in too closely.

Fire to burn out the infection. Sparks that cut through the night sky. The scent of ash. Trees outlined against the moonlight. A whisper through the branches.

I still remember the way Mother’s hand cupped my cheek for the first time, her fingers streaked with paint from the icons she made. The way the winter sun gleamed over her corn-silk hair as she bent toward me. The smell of linseed oil.

She picked up Arien and took my hand and brought us back to her cottage.

The Lady sent you to me, Mother told us once. At first it didn’t sound like a threat. But we have spent our entire lives here, almost. Things are different now.

Now all I know is that I can’t let my brother be overtaken by this terrible darkness. No matter how much it frightens me, I have to protect him. “It’s a dream, Arien.”

“You can’t make it stop, Leta. You can’t—”

He spits the words between bared teeth. I want to flinch away, but I force myself to be still. Arien’s voice, the way he fights me . . . it’s not him. It can’t be him. I have to help him

through this. He has to come back. I won't let him stay lost in the dark.

"It's a dream, Arien. This isn't real."

"You can't make it stop."

Shadows fill my mouth and lungs, tasting of smoke and ash. I wrap my arms tighter around my brother and cling to him. I shove aside my fear and imagine we are somewhere else, outside in our small garden. I think of sun and flowers. My hands sunk into the earth. The baskets of Summerbloom cherries I've harvested all week. I hold the picture vivid in my mind.

There's a single, insistent pull from deep in my chest. Like there's a string tied to me, the other end anchored to Arien. Warmth begins to hum beneath my skin. I think of gardens and sunlight. Not darkness, not shadows, not my brother with those blank, inhuman eyes.

Slowly, slowly, the shadows stop coming from his hands. The darkness settles and softens into the corners of the room. I hold my breath until the final traces clear, then sink against Arien with a heavy sigh.

He touches my wrist, quickly pulling back when he feels the raised welts. "Did I hurt you again?"

I close my hand over the marks. "You didn't. I'm fine."

Outside the window, the moon is low, pocketed between the thickened clouds. It glows dimly across the collection of stones I keep on the sill. I trail my finger over the one with a ripple that looks like gold, the one so smooth and heavy it fits perfectly into the curve of my palm.

I force myself to breathe steadily, willing my still-racing heartbeat to slow. “You didn’t hurt me,” I say again, trying to reassure Arien, trying to reassure myself. “It’s over, my love. You’re safe now.”

He starts to cry. Loud, angry sobs that echo through the room, through the house. “I’m sorry, Leta.”

I put my arms around him. “You have nothing to be sorry for.” Then, knowing I have to say it: “But you have to be quiet.”

He buries his head against me, trying to muffle the sound of his tears. His hair, red like mine, falls across his face. I brush it back from his cheek.

He swallows down a sob as I murmur gently into his ear. “Please, Arien, you have to stop. She’ll hear you. Mother will hear you. Please—”

I cut off sharply as he grabs my hand, his fingers crushing mine. We both fall silent as footsteps echo from the hallway and our door is shoved open, so hard it bangs against the wall. Mother storms into the room.

Lit by the lantern flame, she’s fair and golden, skin dusted with pale freckles, hair that glints as it catches the light. But it’s a cut-glass prettiness, all hard edges. Whatever softness was in her when she first saw us—two lost children in the road—it’s long vanished. Ever since the shadows began.

She snatches Arien’s wrist, wrenches open his fingers. His hands are stained black. The shadows have clung to his skin, the way they always do. The marks are slow to fade, darkening again whenever he dreams. They can’t be scrubbed away, though Mother has made him try countless times.

“Arien.” With her other hand, she catches his chin, holds it tight until he looks into her eyes. There’s a flicker across her face that might be sadness; then the light shifts, and she’s cold. “Not again.”

He twists against her grasp as she drags him forward, out of the room. I rush after them. “Let him go! He can’t help it, you know he can’t!”

“Go back to bed, Violeta,” Mother snaps at me over her shoulder.

She tightens her grip on Arien’s arm, pulling him through the hall as he struggles against her. I’m right behind them. When we reach the kitchen, his eyes dart frantically between the cellar and the outside door. Last time this happened, she forced him down beneath the house. The time before, she locked him out and made him spend the whole night in the orchard.

She thinks if she keeps him in the dark, the shadows will go—as if one darkness will cancel the other. She’s tried so many ways to scour him clean, but none have ever worked. She’s convinced his shadows are evidence of dark alchemy.

But all I know of dark alchemy—that it’s dangerous and poisonous and wrong—doesn’t fit with Arien. He’s not the sinister gloom deep in the forest, or the creeping poison in a blighted field. He’s my brother, and I’ll go with Arien wherever she takes him. I’ll go into the dark with him beneath the house; I’ll go out to the moonlit orchard. I’ll stay with him and keep him safe.

But instead of reaching for the door or the cellar, Mother

drags Arien over to the altar of the Lady. She twists his arm until he kneels, then sets a spotlight to the candles on the shelf. They flare bright, one by one.

The Lady made the world. She *is* the world. In all of Mother's paintings, she looks the same: golden and brilliant, with bronze skin and long, flowing hair. This icon shows the Lady with her fingers pressed against the earth, dissolving into the light that flows through all existence. The scene is beautiful, but as Arien falls down beneath the icon, a shadow crosses the painting and for a moment, the Lady's golden fingers seem like claws. The edges of her smile turn sharp.

Mother forces Arien's stained fingers over the candles. I grab her arm, trying to pull her back. "Stop! You can't do this!"

Everything happens fast, like a spark on a wick. She turns on me, her face tensed, and slaps me. The sound fractures the air, and the world turns white from sudden pain. I fall against the table, my hand pressed to my throbbing cheek.

As I try to shake the ringing from my ears, Mother shows me the blackened marks on Arien's skin. "You know what this darkness is, Violeta. The Lord Under will claim him."

"He won't. He *won't*."

The candle flares. She shoves Arien forward. He bites back a cry as his fingertips glow bright, haloed by flames.

Mother thinks the darkness in him belongs to the Lord Under—the lord of the dead. That the shadows will call him to us the way he'd be drawn to a dying soul. But Arien is kind and *good*. The shadows are only dreams. He isn't the same as the darkness of the Lord Under, or the magic in the world Below.

I grab her arm again. “He’s not some blighted field to be burned down!”

“Leta,” Arien whispers, quiet and desperate. “Leta, don’t.”

But I ignore him. Let Mother hurt me—I don’t care; at least then she’ll leave Arien alone. I brace myself, ready to be struck again, almost *hoping* for it, but instead she shakes me off and pushes Arien’s hands back over the flames. He scrunches his eyes closed, hisses a breath through his teeth. I stare at them, feeling so powerless, so angry.

I have to do something. She’s going to burn him until his hands are clean. She’ll keep hurting him, unless I make her stop.

On the table is a glass idol, a candle burning at the center. I snatch it up and throw it—hard—onto the floor. It shatters into a jagged star. The sound stills the air.

Mother goes pale and her mouth draws into a sharp, furious line. Incandescent anger sparks through her eyes as she steps over the glass and grabs my wrist. Her fingers bite into my arm, marking fresh bruises over ones left from the last time she hurt me. I let the pain wash over me, glad for it, glad that it’s me and not Arien.

She wrenches me toward the floor. “Kneel down.”

“What—?”

“Kneel. Down.”

I look at the jagged glass, the splattered wax, the smoke from the ruined candle. Arien shakes his head, his expression helpless and furious all at once. There are tears on his cheeks, and his burned fingers are tucked into a twist of his sleeve.

“Mother, stop!” He falters, eyeing the candles, steeling himself to reach back into the flames again. “I’ll do it, I’ll do it.”

How can Mother think that hurting him, hurting me, will keep us safe? At this moment, if there’s anything we need to be saved from it’s not the Lord Under. Not the dark. It’s *her*.

I feel as fractured and ruined as the shattered glass beneath our feet. But I keep my gaze fixed on Mother’s face. Before she can speak again, before Arien can move, I kneel down. One knee, then the other.

The first cut is a bright shock. I put my hands on the floor, trying not to make a sound as I hover above the shards.

I can’t do this.

I have to.

The glass pierces my knees with a hideous pain that stings all over: my fingertips, my scalp, the soles of my feet. I flinch, but some scrap of pride holds me still. Arien is safe—safe from the candles, from being locked in the dark, from everything. For now.

Mother’s hurt us before, but never like this.

She crouches down and cups her hand against my cheek, her palm incongruously gentle over the place where she hit me. “I’m trying to protect him, Violeta. I’m trying to protect you.”

Her expression and her voice are soft, as though she’s truly sorry to see me like this. And there’s a horrible, treacherous part of me that *wants* to lean against her hand, to let her comfort me. Tears prickle my eyes, but I blink them away. I stare at Mother, clench my teeth and let more of the glass cut deeper into my knees.

She watches me, unmoving, then she stands up and brushes her hands over her skirts. She crosses the kitchen, and her steps go hollowly along the hall, back to her room. The latch scrapes as she locks the door closed.

Once we're alone, Arien extinguishes the altar candles with a swift breath. Smoke wisps the air. He helps me move away from the shards, and I curl up on the floor near the hearth with my back against the wall. The room smells bittersweet from the pot on the stove, full of the cherry preserves I've made. On the shelf above are empty jars, ready to be filled once the preserves cool, our contribution for the village tithe tomorrow.

Arien crouches beside me. He's uncertain, like he wants to touch me but he's afraid. The dark has faded from his eyes now. They're the same silver gray as my own. "Leta, I'm sorry," he says in a rush. "I should have stopped her. I should—"

I fold back the hem of my nightdress. "Can you get me a cloth?"

While he's gone, I bend forward to see the cuts. I take a breath and begin to pick out the splinters embedded in my skin. I put the shards one by one onto the floor. Through the blood, the glass shines, a grim mirror to my collection of polished stones.

Arien brings me some scraps of linen. He takes the kettle from the back of the stove and fills a bowl with warm water and salt. He dampens a cloth and presses it to my knee. It quickly turns crimson and his forehead creases with a worried frown. He rinses the cloth, folds it over to cover the stain, and presses it down again.

I sit very still as he wipes away the blood. Outside the kitchen window, the leaves of the apple tree shift and shiver like splotches of paint against the gloomy night sky, black over black. I feel so cold, even though it's hot beside the stove, with warmth radiating from the banked embers.

A thought tugs, unwelcome. I wish for something stronger than me, strong enough to take away all my fear and my hurt. Something immovable, like an enormous tree that will scratch my cheek with rough bark as I lean against its trunk.

I want my mother. I want my father.

I remember my father's large hand, warm around mine. His fingers, careful, as they swept my hair back from my forehead. My mother humming to Arien as he slept in his cradle.

I miss them with a terrible ache.

But now there is only me, numb and sad and scoured clear, like the windswept mud after a storm. And if I'm not strong enough to protect Arien, then nobody will.

Arien starts to wrap two longer strips of cloth around my knees, bandaging the cuts.


"Don't fight her again." His voice is small in the quiet of the room. "It only makes things worse."

I take his hand and gently inspect his fingers. They're blistered with raised, pale welts. I blow a soft breath over his skin and he manages a faint smile. "I'll not let her hurt you, Arien. Not like this. Not at all. It doesn't matter what she does to me."

"Please, Leta."

I put my arms around him. "I'll try."

He rests his cheek against my shoulder and sighs, despondent.

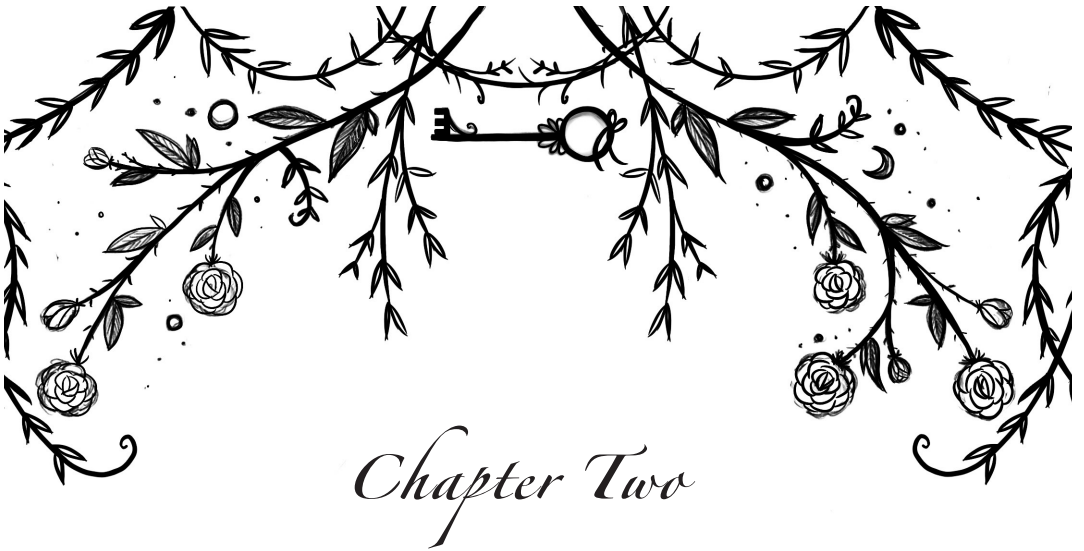


Until tonight, I knew how to protect him from Mother's anger. Now the nights ahead are full of dreams and shadows and flames. I try to think of a way out, somewhere we could go to escape this. But there's our cottage and Mother, and there's the world—vast and unknown, and no safer than here. Here, at least, I can learn the new shape of our lives.

I close my eyes and try to map how things will be from this point onward, picturing a hallway full of locked doors, the walls lined with endless altars where candles burn and burn and burn. Me at the center, my arms outspread, as Arien stands behind me.

I will take everything—Mother's fear, her anger, the fire, and the blood. Let it all come down on me. No matter what I have to do, I'll never let Arien be hurt like this again.

"I'm going to keep you safe," I tell him. "I promise."



Chapter Two

Greymere on tithe day hums like a hive. The air is pollen bright. The townspeople's voices are as loud as a chanted litany. Arien and I walk through the crowd toward the village square. Everyone waits, their arms laden heavily with sacks of grain, baskets of fruit, bolts of neat-hemmed linen cloth.

We take our place at the end of the line, and I bend to set our basket onto the ground beside my feet. When I straighten, my knees give a sharp, fierce ache. I hiss between my teeth, and Arien looks at me, concerned.

"It's fine." I stare down into the basket at the jars of preserves. "I'm fine."

The cuts still seeped fresh blood this morning. There were so many pieces of glass, and they went so deep that I don't

know if I've picked out all the splinters. I rewrapped my knees, then put on my thickest wool stockings to hide the bandages.

I notice Mother on the opposite side of the square. She and the village keeper are beside the altar. A canvas cloth is spread on the ground with all her paints and brushes set out neatly. She runs her hands over the icon, her touch reverent, as she checks for wear. She'll work the whole day to repair it, a chore she does every season. Add more color, then smooth and varnish the wooden frame.

Later, when the sun is lower, we'll all gather in a circle at the altar with our hands pressed to the earth to make observance to the Lady.

Arien touches my arm, drawing my attention back to him. "Leta? I—I've been thinking." He leans in and softens his voice. "What if, after the tithe, we didn't go home? What if we didn't go back, *ever*? You know Mother wouldn't stop us."

He rubs at his blistered fingers, then his gaze drops to my covered knees. I force a smile. "Should we build a house in the tallest tree of the forest? I'll make us a quilt from dandelions and cook toadstool stew for our dinner. The birds can comb our hair."

Arien scrunches his nose, the way he always does when I tease him. "I'm serious."

"Where would we go, if we did leave?" The word feels strange in my mouth. It's the first time either of us has spoken it aloud.

"We could stay here. We could stay in the village."

The thought is vivid, threaded with gold. I look at the

buildings surrounding the square. The healer's thatch-roofed cottage with flower beds beneath the front windows. The store with barrels of flour and bolts of cloth. We could work in the store. I'd weigh sugar while Arien measured lengths of cloth. Or help in the healer's garden. Tend her flowers, gather the petals and leaves she turns to medicine.

When I think of how I felt last night as I watched Arien's hands in the flames, I want to stay in the village. I do. But everyone here already treats us suspiciously. They know how Mother took us in, how our lives have been brushed by death. *Once marked, the Lord Under knows your name.* That's what people believe. And if they found out about Arien, about the shadows . . .

Arien's dreams aren't like the magic worked by alchemists, who draw on the golden power the Lady has threaded through the world. Their magic is light. His nightmares, full of shadows that come alive, are more like the power that comes from the Lord Under. Arien is not like that, not dark and *wrong* and terrible . . . But as soon as someone heard his cries, or saw his eyes turn black, they'd think he was. They'd call him corrupted. They'd fear him.

"I promised to keep you safe." I stare down at my boots, scuffed by dust. I can't look at Arien, at the tentative hope in his eyes. "I don't know if you'd be safe in the village."

"Then we'll go somewhere else, somewhere far away."

"I don't know. Maybe."

Arien sighs, frustrated. The line starts to move, and I bend down to pick up the basket as we shift forward.

Across the square, a woman steps out of her cottage. Her eyes flicker over the crowd—and us—before narrowing at the ground. She takes something from a jar. A handful of salt. She throws it heavily into the street, then draws her salt-crumbed fingers across her chest. Two fingers, left to right, a line across her heart. The symbol of the Lady: a protection against darkness.

“Why did she do that?” Arien asks warily.

I look more closely at the crowd. But they aren’t focused on us, or anything that I can see. There’s just a vague, nervous crackle of restlessness, like the air before a storm.

Everyone is dressed in their nicest clothes. Polished boots, crisp linen shirts, pinned-up braids, delicately embroidered dresses. We’ve gathered like this is a celebration. And it is. At least, it should be. But in the line where we wait with our tithes, people murmur to one another anxiously. Around the square, more doors open. More villagers scatter salt over their thresholds. The healer has strung garlands of rosemary and sage across her windows.

“Have you heard?” A girl comes along the line, a pen and square of parchment in her hands. She has oak-brown skin and a cloud of beautiful curled hair, which she pushes out of her face before she scans the nearby people, unsettled. Her voice dampens to a whisper. “Lord Sylvanan is here. He’s come to claim the tithe.”

“Lord Sylvanan?” A nervous shudder runs through me. “Here? He never comes to tithe days.”

It was six years ago that we last gathered in Greymere, when

it was our turn to pay the tithe to the Sylvanans, who own all the land in the valley. Then, there was nothing to fear.

The lord who came to the tithe day was older than Mother. He was tall and handsome, and wore his dark hair tied neatly back. He helped the villagers pack the wagon he'd brought to take everything back to his estate. Afterward he walked slowly through the square and looked appreciatively at the village. His eyes crinkled up when he smiled at Arien and me, running past amid a tangle of children.

But there's a new lord now. His son. Because just after our last tithe day, the whole Sylvanan family died. All except for him, the new lord.

Because he murdered them.

His parents, his brother, his whole family. He drowned them one by one in the lake behind their estate.

They said his father was found laid out on the shore, white and still, as though all his blood had been drained. That his mother's throat was snared in sedge grass, drawn so tight it cut her skin.

"Yes, he might already be here." The girl pauses and scans the crowd around us, then drags her fingers across her chest. "My village is next to his estate. We have a name for him there."

"Calathea?" A man comes through the crowd, crossing the distance in an easy stride. He has the same oak-brown skin and features, though he's pulled his curls back into a knot, without even a single strand escaping. "Thea, what did I tell you?"

"Mark off the list. Don't get distracted." Thea ducks her head,

chagrined. She peers into our basket and quickly scratches a few lines on the parchment with her pen. "Sorry, Father. They were the last ones."

He sighs heavily. "You should have been finished already instead of wasting time. We still have to prepare all the tithes for transport back to Lakesedge." He takes hold of her arm and draws her closer, his voice lowering. "I don't want to be here any longer than necessary, not with *him* around."

"I didn't mean to take so long. I'll help you load the baskets when they're ready."

"No. You can stay over there, out of trouble." Her father starts to direct Thea away from us, toward a wagon.

"Wait," I call after her as she leaves. "The name they have for Lord Sylvanan in your village, what is it?"

Thea turns back to us. "The Monster of Lakesedge."

The sun is still high above the tree line. Sweat has beaded on the back of my neck, and there's a stripe of sunburn across my nose. I'm hot and itchy, prickled by my woolen stockings. But when I hear that name, I start to shiver.

"Thea. Enough." Her father mutters a warning in her ear, his expression tense. She walks over to the wagon with her eyes downcast, but when she settles herself in the seat, he pats her knee, comforting her.

A strange, sore ache fills my chest as I watch Thea and her father, remembering *my* father. His strong hands, weathered from work in the garden, but still gentle when he touched me. If he were here, he would keep us safe.

“The Monster of Lakesedge.” I say it softly, only a whisper, but the words taste like smoke and darkness.

Arien steps closer to me. “Can you see him?”

I stand on tiptoe to see past the people ahead. There’s a table set up near the altar, shaded by two tall pine trees, where the tithe goods will be laid out. A woman in a long, embroidered dress stands behind it. Her silvery hair is swept back from her tanned face in a braid that loosens to waves, cascading down her back.

“He isn’t waiting for the tithes.”

“Maybe he’s like a woods wolf.” Arien points at the forest, where the shadows are thick between the trees. “And he can’t come out in the daylight.”

“Those aren’t real. That was just a story I made up.”

But what happened at Lakesedge Estate sounds like a story, too. A house locked up and almost empty. A whole family murdered.

There’s a knot in my stomach. It tightens with each moment that passes. I can’t stop searching the crowd. As the sun dips, shadows from the pine trees at the edges of the square lengthen over the ground. Every shift of light and shade makes me jump. I expect to turn and see the monster right there, as if I summoned him when I spoke his name.

Beside me, Arien has stayed still and quiet. His face has started to turn pale.

“What’s wrong? Are you worried about Lord Sylvanan? I can’t see him. Maybe he’s not even here.”

“No.” He wraps his arms around himself. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

His skin looks bloodless, almost completely white. “Arien. What’s the matter?”

“I—I don’t—” He shakes his head, then turns and walks swiftly away without another word.

I blink, stunned. It only takes me a moment to gather myself, to follow. But when I step out into the square, I’ve already lost sight of him.

I slip between a row of buildings. Heat radiates against my face from afternoon sun baked into the rough stone walls. I rush past the store. Past the healer’s cottage. There are footprints in the dust, about the size of Arien’s boots. Smudged and smeared, like he was running. The noise of the crowd dwindles away, smaller and smaller. I’m outside the village now, in a flower field. Bees circle a white line of hives. Trees rise up beyond.

The woods. Arien has gone into the woods.

The Vair Woods stretch from Greymere all the way to our cottage. I know these woods. I see them every day. But I’ve never liked to go inside. Not far from here is where Mother found us all those years ago.

When I step past the border of the forest, my boots sink into the dense undergrowth. Air drifts through the leaves like a whispered voice.

“Arien?” I look ahead but there are only trees, then more trees, then dark. The afternoon sun is blocked out by thickly woven branches. “Arien, are you here?”

Finally my eyes adjust, and I see him—pale skin,

flame-bright hair—in the distance, past a line of close-set cedar trees. He's wide eyed and white, stilled by a wordless terror.

The shadows have already begun to curl at his palms.

I run toward him. Branches snag my skirts and scratch my cheeks. Darkness creeps across his eyes, and his pupils widen. His gaze turns to solid black.

"Leta?"

I grasp his hands. They're already so cold. I don't understand. Never before have the shadows come like this. It's always at night. Not at the center of the village in the Summerbloom daylight, all brightness and green leaves. Not like this.

Terror sweeps over me. *Not now, not here. He can't, he can't.* It doesn't take much to picture what would happen if someone saw us right now. His blank, dark eyes. The shadows. They would think he's a monster.

I take hold of his wrist, and he flinches. I've gripped him too hard, in the same place where Mother bruised him last night. I quickly loosen my fingers but don't let go.

I thought I'd mapped the limits of this thing that haunts my brother. It had borders of time and space: only at night, only in our room. But now everything has changed. This is all new. This is all *wrong*.

The shadows rise and wrap around us. The darkened forest turns darker still. I try to think of warm things. Sunlight. Bees in the wisteria vines. How it feels to make observance, when we put our hands into the earth and feel the golden light that weaves through the whole world. But it's too cold, too dark.

It's only a dream—but it's not, it's not. We're in the woods, in the day, and the shadows are all around us.

"Arien!" I dig my fingers into his arm. He makes a sharp, hurt sound. "Arien, call them back, you have to call them back."

It's the first time I've spoken this terrible thought aloud: that the shadows might be something he can *control*. I've kept it locked away and pushed far down for such a long time. But now it's spilled out.

I feel the tendons in his wrist go taut. The shadows wash across my face and into my mouth. My throat burns with the taste of them. I'm so cold it aches; I'm lost in the darkness. There's only the sound of our breathing. The steady throb of pain from my cut knees. A damp heat where fresh blood has seeped through the bandages.

Slowly, I uncurl my fingers from Arien's wrists. I take his face in my hands. I try to think of something to say to reassure him, but I can't. So I just hold him. I picture the sunlight in the clearing. I breathe in the baked-earth scent that drifts from the overgrown grass beside the forest. Smooth my thumbs across his cheeks.

"Call them back, Arien," I whisper. "Make them stop."

He goes very still. After a long while the shadows soften; he flexes his hands as the last wisps dissolve. The darkness fades from his eyes, and they turn gray again. We step apart. He tips his head back and lets out a shaky breath.

Everything feels wrong and fractured. Like the ground is about to crack apart beneath me. "What was that? Arien, why did it happen *now*?"

“I don’t know.” He kicks at the ground, scattering leaves. Then he pushes past me, headed for the path. “Come on. It will be our turn for the tithe soon.”

We walk back to the village in silence. When we reach the square, the line of people has cleared away. Everyone else has given their tithes. I take our basket from the ground where I left it and go quickly toward the table. The silver-haired woman has gone. Arien and I are here alone.

The pines that flank the table are dark, with burnished light behind them. Then a shadow peels away from beneath the trees. It takes on the shape of a man. Stripes of variegated shade cut him—gray, black, gray, black—as he crosses the distance between us. I recognize him instantly.

Monster. My mouth shapes the word, but I don’t make a sound. He’s not a woods wolf. Not one of the fierce and terrible creatures from my stories, with claws and fangs and too many eyes.

The Monster of Lakesedge is a boy with long dark hair and a sharp, beautiful face. And somehow that makes all of this so much worse.

He’s young—older than me, but not by much. His hair is past his shoulders. The waves are swept back loosely, the top half tied up into a knot with a length of black cord. Even with the summer heat, he wears a heavy cloak draped across one shoulder. There are scars on his face. A scatter of jagged marks from his brow to his jaw.

He looks me up and down, his expression unreadable. “What do you offer?”

I feel his words like midwinter, cold and sharp. The light

flickers, and for just a heartbeat, there's something *there* at the corner of my vision.

I remember a long-ago voice in a frost-laden forest. The question it whispered close against my ear.

What will you offer me?

I bite my lip, hard, and pull myself back to the present. "Nothing. I—I don't—"

Arien takes the basket from me and puts it onto the table. "Sour cherries. That's our offering. And the altar, mended."

The monster looks over to where Mother is packing away her paints. The wooden altar frame is glossed with new varnish. On the shelf below, the candles have been lit, bathing the icon in light.

I take hold of Arien's arm, about to lead him away.

"Wait." The monster's boots crush against the ground. He steps closer. "Stay a moment."

I move in front of Arien. Damp, tense sweat is slick on my palms, but I square my shoulders and meet the monster's dark gaze evenly. "We don't have anything else for you."

"Oh?" There's something feral in the way he moves, like a fox stalking a hare. "Oh, I think you do."

"No, we don't."

The monster holds out his hands. He's wearing black gloves, and the cuffs of his shirt are laced tightly all the way down his wrists. He motions to Arien, then waits expectantly. "Go on, show me."

Arien lifts his own hands in an echo of the monster's

gesture. My brother's fingers, burned clean last night by the altar candles, are now stained dark.

The monster flicks me a glance. "That isn't quite *nothing*, is it?"

"It's—"

He turns back to Arien, and the feral look on his face intensifies. "Tell me: How did you get those marks?"

Arien looks at me helplessly. This is all my fault. I promised to protect him.

Fear and fury rise through me in a hot, wavery rush. I shove my way between them until I'm right up against the monster, the scuffed toes of my boots against his polished ones. "Our mother is a painter. They're stains from the paint."

He stares coldly down at me. He's beautiful, but wrongness clings to him. It's as cloying as the bittersweet scent of sugar in the kitchen last night. Between the laces of his shirt collar, I catch a glimpse of something dark on his throat. I watch, horrified, as all the veins along his neck turn vivid, like streaks of ink drawn under the surface of his skin.

Then I blink, and whatever I saw—whatever I *thought* I saw—is gone.

The monster's mouth curves into a faint smile.

"I'm sorry." He doesn't sound sorry at all. "Clearly I was mistaken."

All I want to do is grab Arien and run away, but I force myself to be still. I scrunch my fingers into the edges of my skirts. "You were."

He takes off his gloves roughly and throws them onto the ground at Arien's feet. "Keep them."

He walks away without sparing either of us another glance, his newly bared hands shoved deep into the pockets of his cloak.

Arien bends down to pick up the gloves. He pulls them on quickly. No matter how hard I stare at him, he won't look at me. Together, we go across the square to join the crowd that's gathered at the altar. We kneel down and put our hands against the earth.

"Arien," I murmur. "Before, in the forest—"

"Please forget about it. About the forest. About leaving." He turns his face toward the icon, the bank of golden candles. "About everything."

We start to chant the summer litany. I close my eyes and press my fingers into the dirt. As the light washes over me, I try to lose myself in warmth and song. But all I can think is there might be nowhere in this world, now, where I can keep my brother safe.