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## Dreams of Paradise

### **Prologue**

Before the reign of Heaven, there was Earth and only Earth. Soil, stone, water, life. Life. Earth squirmed with life. Every creature possessed movement, sound, and animation. Let it be known that it was the vivacious, the curious, the joyful that inherited this paradise. From the swooning magnolia to the creeping lynx, they all breathed in the same energy. And all was good. There, see the hummingbird kiss the sweet lupine nectar in the dust of a galloping doe. Watch as the bark beetle burrowed into wood rot just to be plucked out by a perching woodpecker. See the woolly cubs rough and tumble in the day lilies as their mother watches, shaking the sleep out of her thick brown fur. From above, a yellow-eyed falcon sees all, the tips of her silver wings shadowing the dawn. Cupped in this valley all life flourished. And all was good.

Back then, the world was hued with vintage beauty, endless and eternal, which clung to every surface, gracing the ordinary with an ethereal glow. Gorgeous bursts of pink and orange light misted the land in radiance and the dreamy Earth smiled in its warm wash. The stone face of the mountains turned to dripping gold, its glitter trickling down to meet the lush forest that crept up the mountainside. From their sides, the wistful mountains wept in serenity, their mirthful falls fainting into the river below. The churning river waters held more light than the sun, beaming a smile of blush and tangerine. Its patient caress had long since engraved its course through the lush valley. Up until the misty horizon did the waters hold together, for after, young distributaries split four ways, eager to explore the lands of gold and onyx.

Along the river, lush stains of green leaped across the valley in verdant swirls, clinging closely to the curvaceous terrain. In the earthly soil, viridescent evergreens huddled, whispering with one another, their needles gilded by the morning light. The pines' great height was a splendid gift, for they were the first to feel the early breeze and to catch the warbler's arpeggio. Needles fell from their maternal bough and, like fallen wishes, their delicate lashes softened the forest floor. Spirits and nymphs raced breathlessly through this enchanted wood, their figures silhouetted in the misty rose of dawn.

Beyond dreams was Earth, like the hidden beauty of a rosebud, its burgeoning exceeds imagination. Between tranquility and vigor, dawn and shadow, this paradise was born. No artistic hand could sculpt such a fine creation, nature's daydream. From the earth this place was born and

timeless it stands. Every being, every motion, every thought crawled out of the same soil. And all was good.

## Chapter 1

With the dawn came the monsoon. Dark clouds turned the once golden valley grey with shadows. The heavy rains rapped on every surface, bruising the soil in a constant barrage. The rivers swelled into marshes; the earth churned into mud. The rains needled the hardest on a lone tree, waving in the strong winds. In the center of the land, this tree stood for she was the beating heart of this paradise. An ancient guardian, she was the first life to spring from the earth. Everything she saw, from the tiger's first crawl to the decay and regrowth of the forest. Every memory was etched into her fine wood. She appeared like nothing else in the land. Two stories tall her base stood, her many branching trunks twisted and woven together like a bonsai. From her arms, dense green plumage, now soaked with water, umbrellaed and was ornamented with the cardinal swell of pomegranates.

As the rains fell, the tree quivered, her body shaking as though in fever. She sweated from her leaves, droplets dripping from the rich fruits hanging heavy from her bough. A sharp wind whistled through her branches, its screams rivaling a vixen's cry. The downpour soaked her, making her rich trunk swell and contract. Every vesicle pumped and pulsed under her drenched bark.

The rain stirred the earth beneath her, eroding the soil at her feet. Below the dirt, caked in grime, two creatures lay buried, nestled safely in her roots. As the sky poured the bodies were washed free of the earth that embedded them. Their hips and limbs and faces were polished, strange figures, curled and tangled in the tree's roots.

Forcefully, a deep rumble rocked the earth as sharp winds clawed the air. The storm tugged the tree back and forth. Thunder split from above. And from below, the earth groaned its low moan. Strong winds gusted, the tree swelled, lungs expanding as she inhaled the very breath of life. And what she took in, the creatures breathed out.

*Hhhhhhhhh*. Crisp and sharp. One of the creatures gasped, choking on its first breath. Its lungs ballooned in saturation, vessels throbbing and pulsing in dilation. The air burned and knotted, forcing itself out of the creature's throat. The creature spewed and coughed, squirming in the shock of the sudden cold. Desperately, it reached around its heaving body and yanked at the roots that held it, ripping itself free from its maternal cord. It flailed, dragging itself out of the muck. An inch it moved, maybe another, groping for the base of the tree. The bark bit into its nails as it tried to pull itself up. Slip. Mud splattered around it. The creature panted on all fours and reached for the tree again. It trembled as it crawled up. Its legs were feeble and weak. It pulled itself close to the tree for support, fiercely the creature hugged, pressing its cheek hard against the musty bark. The creature shivered as its legs fumbled below it. It tightened its grip.

The creature was breath and clinging hands and shaking legs. The muscles of its face tightened as it squeezed its eyes shut. Above the piercing wail of the rain, it could hear its own hyperventilating whimpers. And something else it could hear. The cries of another, the cries of something near. The other's cries were high in pitch and came out as thick, choking sobs. The creature whined louder, pressing itself harder against the bark. From the other side of the tree, a hand reached for it, muddy and wet as its own. It laced its fingers through and squeezed. The hand squeezed back. They held each other tightly, even as their muscles cramped, even after the winds tucked out, even after the rains passed, leaving behind a drizzling, wet fog. It could have been hours or even days that they stood like that.

The tree still held its moisture, hoarding pearls of rain as though they were jewels. Fat droplets loosened from the tree's leaves, falling upon the creature, slithering down its forehead, smoothing its face like a massage. The water's touch soothed the tension on its face and continued down its body. Each muscle slowly relaxed like the deliberate turn of tumblers. In its new placid state, the creature finally felt its body steady and its legs hold firm.

The creature, for the first time, opened its curious eyes and breathed in the world. Between the languid shutter of its eyelids, it saw the misty lilac air flooding through the leaves of the low hanging branches. For a moment, the world seemed utterly still. Then from above the liquid flute of the wood thrush trilled and once again life awoke.

Animation returned to the creature's body. Its curious eyes traced the tangle of the leaves, following the web up into the branches of the tree and down along the twisting trunk. It pulled its hand free from the other's, momentarily forgetting it was there. Slow and deliberately, it stroked the trunk, fingering the grooves in the bark. The twisting wood softly scrubbed the pads of its fingers. The creature stretched its arm up the trunk and strummed its fingers along the delicate twisting branchlets. It flattened its palms and let the tips of the leaves graze its hands. A breeze gently rocked the underbrush, droplets fell upon its skin. Arms still lifted high above its head, the creature watched the droplet's sinuous descent down its forearm and drip off of its elbows, into the mud below.

The creature turned its attention back to its hand, which burned brightly against the shade of the foliage. In the underbrush, the colors blushed deeply. The emerald leaves were sooted almost black. And then there were the curious fruits, deepened by shadows to velvet. A soft humming seemed to play from the strange fruit, enchanting the creature. Slowly, it curled its fingers around one, the succulent stone hung heavy in the creature's hand. It tilted up towards it, one leg gliding behind it for support when- jump!

The creature's head jerked, gawking at the wet grass that had tickled its foot. It craned its neck, looking closer at its muddy toes tapping against the wisps of green.

Something brushed its elbow. It gasped, blinking in time with the metallic fluttering of butterfly wings. The elegant beast stayed but for a moment before rejoining the wind. The creature's eyes rolled, tracking the twirling movement of the butterfly, following it out from beneath the brush. It brushed the foliage aside with its arm and-

It stumbled back.

Its jaw falling limp as the world rolled out before it. Suddenly, it was like seeing in color. Textures and color and deep earthy smells and sounds swirled around the creature, stunning it with awe. There was the shaking grass. The swooping birds. The leaves, turning in the wind. Its legs nearly buckled, overwhelmed by the immeasurability of it all. The richness of the world spun around the creature, shaking its senses until it felt an explosion.

Standing in the heart of it all, the creature forgot its body. Its being blended into the world like the hazy hues of a watercolor. It was everything at once. It was the water that raced down the jutting mountainside. It was the wind that stirred the grass about its ankles. It was the gentle caress of the valley. When a breeze stirred, the creature stirred with it. Its body was this world and the world was made from its body. An eternal osmosis permeating back and forth between what it was and what it was a part of.

The air carried with it a charge. That energy sparkled down through its spine and exploded in its belly and it felt itself again. The creature's hands trembled with power. It lifted its hands to its face, turning them over, looking at them as though for the first time. In the new light, it could see its skin, crafted from diamonds, glitter. It looked from its hands to its legs and up its body. It touched its own flesh and curves. In its touch, the creature felt the strength of itself surge from its heels upwards. It pulsed with life and power. It felt its own autonomy and knew itself at once.

It was Woman.

From behind she heard a sound. She glanced over her shoulder and for the first time saw the other. From their great distance, they stared intently at each other. Was she the first to move? She couldn't tell but somehow they were closer. Their gait was cautious, deliberate. They stood now with a foot between them.

At first, they could only look. He looked so much like herself. His legs, his arms, his face were all positioned like hers. And his skin was like hers. It was crafted together from diamonds. She could see scrapes of herself glittering off of him. Not exactly a reflection but tiny bursts of colors and shapes danced off of his body like the sparks of a kaleidoscope. She, too, had those colors, had those shapes.

One raised their hand, the other followed. Slowly, each brought a hand in front of themselves and they pressed their palms together. Why did this feel so familiar? Had she touched him like this before? Before? She could hardly remember.

Slowly, she let her hand travel over the top of his arm and move across his chest to face. She touched his chin and then touched her own. Rough hairs pricked from beneath his skin but her chin was smooth. She cupped the side of his face and gently turned his head from side to side. She lifted a thick lock of his hair, turning this way and that. She traced the line of his collarbone with the flat part of her knuckle. And he reached out and stroked her cheek, pulled on her ear lobe, squeezed her bicep. They lost themselves in exploration.

Then, from the far end of the field, a deer burst from the tree line. The Woman's head jerked. She watched, squirming with eagerness, as another deer jumped from the forest and another. In a line, they hopped over the muddied ground in graceful bounds. As she watched

them move, she felt her own legs itch. She looked back at the Man. She saw his height, his stance, his face, all stiffened by the stillness of wonder. How she wanted to see him move. To run. Creatures like them were not meant to stand still. She fixed her dilated eyes onto his, her breaths beginning to quicken, and a sly smile began to creep onto his lips. Had he been thinking the same?

Across the field, another deer leaped. Its elegant arched body sailed along with the breeze as it weaved out and through the shadowing forest. She couldn't hold back the excitement that pounded in her chest. She gripped the Man's hands and yanked him across the field. Giggling, tripping up, she held him tightly as they bounded across the wet earth, their rhythm synchronized. Together they laughed and smiled, breathing heavily, filling their lungs with the pure taste of freedom. How their long muscles rejoiced, cocked and stretched, to pant with use.

They sped up, bursting through the forest without thought. Unstoppable, their feet were. They raced through the trees and clinging ferns, long since forgetting the deer they had bounded after. They fell in awe of their own rhythm, their shared glee, and powerful bodies. With no path, no horizon, and no legs they would still run just for the feeling momentum alone offers.

They darted and weaved, circling the trees and each other as they chased. All the while, their laughter broke through the peace of the forest. From their holes, the chipmunks and foxes and wood nymphs peered, never before had they seen creatures quite like these. Their movements were chaotic, wild. They were agile by accident and their noise was deafening. Yet, there was beauty in their wildness, something pure in their laughter. The forest watched with longing, if only they could slow this moment, the way the wind carried her hair, or the fall of his head as laughter sprang from his open throat. Every new creature has that laugh. Would that they could keep them young.

The Woman laughed and taunted, hiding behind a tree only to have the Man burst from behind to surprise her. She squealed and took off, leaping over roots, looking over her shoulder to see him pursuing. She sang out a hearty laugh, the ground moving beneath her. They sprang and jolted and wove, sustained by their movement.

The Woman's heart pounded like thunder, iron began to taint her throat. She panted, stumbling to a tree for support. She rested her forearm against the trunk, the other hand on her hip, and panted.

She groaned, sliding her hand from her waist to her belly. Sharp pain churned inside of the pits of her stomach, nauseating acids corroded her from the inside. She turned miserably to the Man and saw he held his belly too.

They both crunched their belly, clawing through the leaves to find something to satisfy the ravenous churn of their stomachs. They stopped, finding raspberry bushes. Two nights before, a deer had slept in that exact spot, making a bed out of the ferns. She had been spooked away by a bear, who had gaily gorged on the fruits that these new creates had now spotted. The Woman approached the bush and picked a berry. She held it close to her face, turning it over to see its bulky form from every angle. She rolled it between her fingers and jumped when its cold juices burst all over her hand. She flicked out her tongue, hesitating before licking the juices

from her fingers. Her eyebrows jumped up and she tucked her chin into her neck. The glands under her ears tensed with the sudden tartness. She let out a small giggle and reached for another. The Man put one in his mouth and she laughed to see the surprised look on his face.

They sat, crossed-legged, across from each other, cupping handfuls of berries, squeezing the juice into their mouths. The Man tossed a berry into the air and caught it in his mouth. The Woman stuck them in her front teeth and grinned. The Man tried to balance one on his nose. The Woman applauded his trick before smooshing the berry onto his face, laughing as she painted him with the sticky juice. They laughed and wrestled and played and ate and then rolled onto their backs to look at the treetops.

Black against the setting sun, silhouettes of birds darkened the sky. Some flew in V formations, heading towards the far mountains. Another called out a song, rich and deep, circling the treetops before finding a perch. It sang out its song again, rejoicing to find the thing it had been calling for.

"Aiiirrrr daaaa,, airr daa," it called out. It sang its tune again. The Woman listened intently. The song bounced between her ears, surrounding her.

"Erde," she said aloud and the Man glanced in her direction.

She rolled over onto her side and said to him: "Erde. That is what I want you to call me."

The Man thought for a moment. "Okay," he said. "I will call you Erde." He was silent a moment before saying, "Tieren. That is the name I want for myself."

"Tieren," she hummed. "Why?"

"It's what I am," he said.

She rolled onto her back again and looked to the purple sky. "Tieren?"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember what it felt like to be born?" She listened to his long exhale, her eyes fixed on a spider, spinning a web among the branches above her.

"Hardly." He pinched his brow together. "It feels like such a long time ago. I remember moisture and warmth. I think... I think I held on to you. But then it was suddenly very cold and bright and confusing. I was frightened. I don't like feeling so alone."

Erde's face twisted. She remembered the warmth. And the cold, too. But it wasn't scary.

"I thought it was invigorating," she said, turning to him. She thought back to the sudden cold. The rain. The must. The colors and the high. She faintly recalled turning to see a figure, his figure. "I didn't feel lonely. I felt alive. I wish to always feel this way. Tell me, Tieren. Tell me we will always feel this way."

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. "I promise."

Satisfied, she nestled in beside him. And together they laid, looking up at the gossamer streaks of dusk hanging in the treetops.

## Chapter 2

Beneath the trees, Erde lay, her belly in the dirt. Her toes, which pulled at the grass, were speckled with soil. Her fingers, too. Red scrapes cracked the skin of her knees and left elbow. A scratch was congealing under her chin, from when she stumbled over a root the day before. She rocked forward, dried leaves crunching under her frame as tried to get a better view of the ant, which crawled along her forearm. She widened and squinted her eyes until the bug began to take shape in her vision. A strand of hair loosened, falling into her face. She blew it away, slowly pulling her arm closer to her face. Gently, she lifted a finger to touch the ant but as soon as her shadow touched it, it ran in a frenzy.

Her eyes shifted back and forth trying to follow its sporadic movements as it ran from her. She lifted her chest off the ground, her eyes combing over leaves and soil to find where it had gone. Above, a robin chirred. Erde turned to her side and lifted a handful of leaves. She dropped it absentmindedly and reached for another. Then, she caught sight of a movement. A colony of ants poured out of their hill, climbing atop of one another as they circled a jutting root. Erde followed their parade, watching as they surfed up and down the trunk of a spruce. Some carried crumbs on their backs. One flicked a bead of sap with its antennae.

The robin chirred again, this time louder. Erde looked through the branches and saw the bird hopping around a tangle of straw. Erde stood, squinting her eyes to get a better look. What was the bird so excited about?

She forgot the ants and pressed her foot into the trunk, heaving as she kicked upward, groping for the lowest branch. Her hand slapped the branch. She curled her finger, trying to grip it, and hissed as a piece of bark jutted under her nail. She fell to the ground. She tried again, this time with a running start. Her hand wrapped around the branch and she pulled herself up, grunting.

Higher up the trunk, the branches were denser, forming a ladder. Erde climbed up effortlessly, following the sound of the robin's cry. When she neared the nest, she slowed her movements. Carefully, she parted the branches to spy on the scene unfolding before her.

The robin hopped, stopped, and hopped again, chirping at something in its nest. Erde strained her neck to peak past the robin's frame. Inside its nest were three large blue stones. Erde squinted to see them better. One stone was chipped. Probably, Erde thought, from a fall. But then the stone moved. The crack widened until the stone split in half completely. Pulsing between the two broken halves was a pink mucus, which shook and quivered. Erde's eyes widened. She shifted a near branch, pinning it down with her elbow. She scooted forward, jaw slack.

From the pink came an arm, bent and twisted. Erde gasped. The thing shook and flailed and then stopped, panting, only to struggle again to free itself from the stone. Out came another arm and then a leg. Erde's eyes widened as its shape became familiar to her. She eagerly looked around tapping the tree in excitement. The baby bird continued to wiggle, trying to free its head. It would struggle and then stop to pant. Struggle and then stop to pant. Erde began to pant. Quickly, she crawled down from the tree and sprinted out of the trees.

"Tieren! Tierennn," she called. She stumbled to the riverside where he lay, his arms bent behind his head. "Tieren!"

He scrambled to his feet. "What is it?"

She came to him, panting. "Come here, come here," she gestured.

"Come where?" he said, standing up.

She giggled. "Come on," she grabbed his hand and dragged him back into the forest.

"Where are we going?"

"Ummm." Erde looked amongst the trees, tapping her chin, trying to remember the one she came from. "Oh, no, I don't want to miss it. Which one, which one?"

"Which one?"

Then she heard the robin's cry. "There!" She pulled forward, kicking over leaves, jumping over a fallen log until they reached the tree. "Help me up?" He held his hands open and she stepped into them, holding his shoulder for support.

When they were in the branches, she held her fingers to her lips and waved him up. When the robin's voice grew nearer, she parted the branches and pointed, mouthing "Look."

Tieren turned his gaze and she watched his eyebrows jump and his head tilt forward. She grinned when his wide eyes turned back to hers.

In the nest, the chick had shaken itself completely free, though its body still squirmed. Its head was enormous compared to its scrawny frame, and its eyes, unopened, bruised most of its face. A second stone was beginning to crack. Erde bounced slightly, squeezing Tieren's hand. They both exchanged a look, grins stricken across their faces.

They waited until the second chick had freed itself to climb out of the tree.

"That was incredible," Tieren said, as they walked through the forest.

Erde giggled. "It was kind of freaky, too."

"Yeah, who knew that's what birds look like under all their feathers. It was so strange to see it move. It was like it was wearing something else's skin."

Erde shuddered. "Wait, what if it was," she said. She squeezed Tieren's bicep, her teeth grazing her bottom lip as the idea began to take form. "What if something burst out of the skin, too. Something that wasn't a bird."

Tieren cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Erde tapped her chin. "Hmmm. Wait, I know, what if it was ants. Hundreds of ants all moving together." She tapped Tieren's arm. "I saw ants move like that today. They were all moving as one up and down a tree. And what if they were moving like that and wearing a bird suit like a disguise."

"Why would ants need a disguise?"

"So they don't get eaten by other birds."

Tieren shook his head. "I don't like to think about that. It's too freaky."

"Those birds looked freaky."

"Yeah." Tieren scrunched his nose. "I wonder if we looked that freaky when we were born." He chuckled but his words stopped Erde. The wheels in her mind began to crank in another direction. When they were born? Did they, too, start as pink goo? Tieren's hand fell from hers.



"What is it?" he asked. She glanced back towards the tree. Somehow, her thumb found its way to her mouth because she was chewing on her nail. "What are you thinking?"

She shook her head. "Oh, nothing," she said after a minute. She looked back at him and smiled. What did they look like when they were born? What about the trees? What did they look like? Or a deer? How were things born?

They walked back to the riverside, where Tieren returned to his recline. He closed his eyes to the sun and let the sky warm him. Erde dangled her feet in the river, turning a stone over in her hand again and again. What does a rock have to do with birth? She bit her nail, trying to uncrack the code.

She tested the rock: she dropped it, held it to the light, chipped it. Then, it hit her.

"Tieren," she called. She crawled over to where we lay and tapped his chest. "Tieren, I figured it out."

He opened an eye. "Figured what out?"

She held the stone in front of his face. He propped himself on his elbows, taking it from her and turning it over. "That's the answer."

"To what."

"To life." She spread her arms in dramatic declaration.

Tieren straightened himself. "What do you mean?"

She leaned back on her hands and shook her head, exuberant. "I just couldn't believe it," she began. "One second they were stones and in the next baby birds were squirming trying to get out of them. What does a bird have to do with a rock?"

Tieren leaned in. "I don't know."

"Everything."

"Really?"

"Of course," Erde explained. "Think about it. If those birds come from stones then all birds must come from rocks. And if all birds come from rocks, everything that flies must come from stones. So bats, dragonflies, bumblebees. All of them. But what else do birds do besides fly?"

"Eat?"

"No. Well, yes. But they also build nests. Nests to keep the stones safe. What else builds nests? Deer have nests, bears have nests, all animals have some kind of nest or at least a place to themselves. So, all animals must come from a stone. And what about trees? What do they come from?"

"Seeds?"

"And what are seeds?"

"Umm, I don't know."

"Just tinier stones. Don't you see? Everything is connected by the stones. All life comes from rocks."

"Really?"

"Yes, doesn't it all make perfect sense."

Tieren nodded, seriously. "Does that mean that this rock has life in it?" he asked, holding out the rock he had taken from her.

Erde nodded. "But don't worry. They don't break from the outside, I tried. They must be softer on the inside."

Tieren scratched his head. "I can't believe it. This whole time, I never thought much of rocks." After a moment he asked, "Erde, where do rocks come from?"

"Hmmm." She bit her nail. "I know!" She brightened, jumping to her feet. "Follow me."

She skipped to the river's edge, dropping herself onto her belly, hovering over the water's surface. The water was freckled with flecks of white sun. She circled her hands over her eyes and peered down deeply into the stream. Past the surface's gloss, past the brown flick of trout, she could just make out the river bottom. Flutters of murkiness would cloud up in corners where crabs scuttled but otherwise the bottom was left untouched. Red and white and grey pebbled textured the river bottom. Tieren's leg tickled Erde's as he fell beside her.

"Do you see all of those stones?" Erde asked. "They all have a life inside of them."

"And that's how the fish are born?"

"It has to be. I have never seen more stones than I have in the river. So, that must be where they come from. And do you know another wild thing I thought?"

"What?"

"Well, little birds come from little stones. That must mean bigger stones have bigger things in them. Think of what enormous life must be hidden in the mountains? And look at the world. It is so big. It must have hatched out of one big rock."

Tieren thought for a second. "Well, what if the stones don't come out of the river but fall from the mountains?"

Erde ripped her gaze from the water, staring at Tieren with a wild grin, which wrinkled her nose. "I like that story better." She rolled onto her heels, bouncing. "Because then it is like the mountains are these giant stones that have all of the world tucked inside of them. And we all get a little bit. A pebble chips away and we get a bird, a boulder and we get a lion."

"Then, where do the mountains come from?"

"Why, they grew out of the soil."

Erde's head fell to one side, musing. Dreamily, she saw the mountainside crumble and tiny creatures break free from their stone shells, wet and viscus. And the mountains would grow smaller as parts of it scattered, like the soft white seeds of a wishing flower when breath touches it. Erde's eyebrows pulled down.

"Well, maybe that's not what happens," she said, glancing back at the water. "It makes a good story but I don't know if I believe it. Because if the mountains give up a part of themselves every time something is born then one day the mountains will only be crumbs with nothing else to give. Then life will be finished. And life doesn't finish. And life doesn't take from life, it grows from it. But it is a good story."

Tieren rolled onto his back. "Maybe life doesn't come from stones then. Maybe it comes from something else." He rolled onto his back. "Maybe it comes from the clouds."

“Clouds?”

“Where do you think the clouds run off to at night?”

"The clouds?"

"Mmm."

"Well," Erde began, looking up at the sky. In the monochrome of blue, the clouds stretched and ballooned like the chilled puffs of breath in the dawn. "They look sleepy to me. They must stretch and rest all day and run somewhere at night. Somewhere beyond the valley."

"There isn't anything beyond the valley."

"Probably not."

"And I see clouds at night."

"Hmm, that's true. What do you think they are?"

"I don't know. I haven't given much thought to it. I just like to see them." Tieren reached his arms back around under his head and watched the sky.

Erde followed his line of vision. She saw the blue and the pull of cotton clouds. She never wondered much after the clouds. Surely, the sky was beautiful but it held no spark. Long blades of grass unconsciously twirled around her finger. Her eyes dropped to her hand, to the braid of grass and dirt-smearred fingers. She smiled to herself, musing. In this touch, she felt a spark, felt something secret and electric in the ions of soil. She could not remember a time when the touch of the earth did not excite her. She had told Tieren about it before. She had asked him if he felt it too. He had knelt and buried his hand into the dirt along with her. He said he felt it but she didn't quite believe him. His breathing had not slowed when he had touched it, the muscles in his face did not relax. But Erde suspected Tieren did not care so much for the earth and soil. She always caught him daydreaming in the clouds. It did not bother her, though. Let him have the clouds, she thought, if that's where his heart turned. But she knew that if she ever needed answers, all she needed to do was look down. Life from the clouds? What a thought!

From the corner of her eye, Erde saw a flutter of white. Her head tilted, watching a moth jump against the reeds before disappearing in the glare of the sun. How delicate its wings were. Like petals. Erde rose, her face and chest tilting up to the sun. She stretched her arms above her and then held them out from her sides. Her shoulder blades tensed and her deltoids pulled as she reached out from herself. She let her arms fall and wandered back towards the treeline where the forest edge puffed with blackberry bushes. She plucked at it. This part of the world used to be only grass. In the early days, she and Tieren had come here, curious and eager. Back before they had known flavor, sound, and texture as they did now, their clumsy hands pawed through the forest, nervous and pleased by exploration. They had been eating blackberries when they had first come to this part of the river. When they had bitten into their handfuls of berries, the juices dribbled down their chins and the seeds fell to the ground. When they had next returned, blackberry bushes had sprung up where there was once only field. Now, the shrubbery guarded the whole tree line.

Erde nuzzled a berry now and thought about how she wished to taste something sweeter. She had long since forgotten how the area used to look.

“Tieren,” she called, “come search for figs with me.”

He rolled over, looking at her. From the distance, she could not see his face but she knew him. She knew him like she knew the taste of water. She could sense his grin. *Come search*, she had said but they knew it to be code. *Come on an adventure*, she meant. *Come, explore with me, play with me, run with me*.

She bounced from one foot to the other waiting for him to jog to her. As he drew closer, she could feel the excitement build up in her legs.

“Catch me,” she hollered and took off into the trees. She glanced over her shoulder and giggled as he chased. He caught her and she squealed and they wrestled until they remembered why they were in the woods, to begin with.

As they spun through the dense trees they chattered away, stopping to listen and imitate the call of the warblers and blue jays. Between the rich trees, ferns grew waist-high, shielding sleeping tigers and rabbits from the crumbs of light that drifted from the forest canopy. Now and then, they would stop and touch the waxy leaves of an ash tree or close their eyes to the harmony of grasshoppers and tree frogs.

They stopped before a skunk’s borough and Erde asked, “What do skunks eat?”

Afterward, the two crawled on all fours, searching for foliage and berries to leave before the den, so that when the skunks rose to the dawning moon, breakfast would already be laid before them.

They squatted behind a bush, spying on a family of gibbons, who were lazily grooming each other. A mother gibbon wearily plucked at her squirming child, who was quick to try and escape but too eager to be successful. The young ape would stay very still and then leap away only to be scooped back into its mother's arms. It would wriggle and then be very still and then leap away again. And then its mother would sigh and pull her baby back towards her chest. Erde’s eyes glowed as she watched. How everything in this world held so much humor and simplicity.

They walked on until they came to a tree, whose trunk seemed to melt in the jungle humidity like the stalk of a candle.

“Hoist me up.”

Tieren splayed his hands and, on three, hoisted Erde. She quickly grabbed a branch before her balance tittered. The bark scratched her arms as she pulled herself up. She reached down for Tieren, who grabbed hold of her wrist. She bit into the tip of her tongue, grunting as she pulled him up. Tieren swung his leg over and they faced each other, straddling the thick branch.

From their vantage, the ground seemed so far down. Erde stretched her toes, paddling her legs through the open air.

“Which one?” Tieren asked, reaching above him to grab one of the plump fruits, which dressed today in deep violet.

“Hmmm, that one.”

Tieren brought down the fruit, tearing it open. Its thick syrup splashed down his wrists along with the meaty pulp of seed. He passed Erde a half and she slowly cradled it to her mouth, taking a loud slurp.

“Mmmmm.” Such bliss. She shut her eyes and let her head fall back, suspended in pleasure as sweetness burst across her tongue. Tieren laughed. She opened one eye to peek at him.

“You have red all over your face,” he grinned.

Erde giggled, the sugar hardened the smile on her face. “So do you.”

Tieren flicked a finger over his cheek and looked at the red with a smile. He dipped his hand into his fruit and drew a red line down his nose and chin like war paint. “I’m a baboon,” he said, bending his arms. “Ooo ooo ooo ooo.”

Erde grabbed her belly and laughed, holding the branch for balance as Tieren tickled at her knees and side.

“Ooo ooo ooo ooo.”

“Stoop,” she squealed, flailing her legs. “Stop.” She swung at him.

“Oww,” he laughed, wincing. “You slapped me in the eye.”

“That’s what you get,” she teased.

“Wait.” Tieren froze. “Do you hear that?”

Erde leaned towards him, her eyes flicking around. She heard the birds and the buzz of insects. “Hear what?” she whispered.

A grin flicked on Tieren’s lips. Suddenly, she felt a cold fig squish into the side of her neck.

“Oh, you trickster!” she laughed, wiping the juices away with her cheek. “Now, you’ve done it.” She lunged for him. He put his hands up and they pressed into each other’s palms shaking each other atop the branch. His nose crinkled and she giggled.

Erde flushed with joy, watching the rhythm of his laughter move his face. She saw the twinkle of admiration in his eye and warmed. She loved it when Tieren looked at her this way. And wow, did she love how his silly grin wrinkled his nose and how syrup blushed across his cheeks.

Perhaps the best part of paradise was the other. There was little the two did not share.

It might be that they would be sitting along the riverside, Tieren braiding flowers into Erde’s hair, and he would ask, “Do you see those squirrels?” She would squint against the light’s glare to see the two creates sprint in circles around a tree down and up and up and down again.

“Why are they chasing?” Erde would ask.

“The first stole the other’s acorn,” Tieren would say.

Erde would chuckle deep in her throat. “What a jokester. If you were an animal, you’d be a squirrel,” she would say.

Or maybe they would be silhouetted against the rosy dawn, whispering to one another about the dreams that had shaken them awake.

“I dreamt I was drowning. I reached but all I could grab at was the sun,” Erde would tell him.

“I’m always searching in my dreams,” Tieren would say. “I am a bird or a tree or a horse and I am always wandering.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Or perhaps they would make a discovery. Erde would notice how the night phlox opened only in the moonlight and Tieren would beg her for an explanation as to why. An Erde would come up with a long narrative as to why. She called these narratives stories and every phenomenon had six or seven stories explaining them.

Tieren would ask, “How can the stars be both fairy lanterns and jewels? Which one is the right answer?”

And she would say, “It is all of those things. Maybe tonight it is fairy lanterns because I want to feel safe and guarded and tomorrow they are jewels because the world feels beautiful. It is better that things are more than one thing. Once you know what something is it ceases to be able to be anything else.”

“But you like to know things and explain them. Don’t you want to know what things really are?”

She would smile. “I already know that everything can be everything. There isn’t just one answer. A peach to us is sweet but to a wild dog is poison. If a peach can be both sweet and poison can’t the stars be lanterns and jewels?”

And of course, there were the games. Countless, endless games of chance and dare and wonder.

“Climb up to the top of that branch.”

“Let’s see who can hold their breath the longest.”

“Tieren, help me stand on my hands.”

“If you could only eat one thing forever, what would it be?”

“Would you rather be a tree or an ant?”

“Ant.”

“Why?”

“So, there could be more world for me to explore. You?”

“A tree.”

“Why Tieren?”

“So, I could better see everything below.”

And at night, they would collapse in the moss or by the river bed or under the trees and they would twist their legs together and Erde would whisper,

“Tell me a story. To help me fall asleep.”

She would snuggle into Tieren’s chest, riding the gentle waves of his breath as he spun myths and memories. Erde never heard his words, instead, she drifted off to the lulling baritone of his voice, always steady and sure.

Each day fell around them like autumn leaves. Some days they remembered but most they forgot. Their memories blended like a painting left in the rain, the shapes washed away giving way to only color. One continuous moment of leisure and life and joy. There was no need to worry about the past or the future, the two only knew sustained presence . And in that presence, they thrived.

### **Chapter 3**

"I had this thought," Erde whispered. Between her fingers, she rolled the stem of a flower- forward and back, forward and back- over the still surface of the forest pool. The wet stones that lined the water's edge chilled her belly. She glanced at the flower to see if the woman was watching. As always, just as Erde stared into the pool the nymph was there, patient and quiet. It made Erde smile, and the nymph smiled back. Erde lifted her chest, resting her head on her elbow, seeing deeper into the water. From below the surface, the nymph did the same.

To her left, a waterfall plunged into the pool, but it did not bring with it the frigid waters of the mountains. In its long stretch from its headwaters, the water became almost warm as it entered the pool. If Erde placed her palm on its surface, she could feel the clamminess of the nymph's hand. The water seemed to make the air warm. Or maybe, Erde thought, it was the other way around. Nowhere else had such humidity. The air here was thick and steamed, carrying with it a drowsing, almost psychedelic, effect. The heaviness of it stilled Erde's impatient muscles and forced them to relax. Every fiber of her body could be felt. More than anywhere else, it was here that she felt most in her body, in herself. The air made her mind too slow to run away from her as it often did.

She looked into the water in deep contemplation. The nymph stared back, eyes focused, nodding slightly in anticipation for Erde's words.

This whole place was a secret, hidden by the branches of the circling cypresses, which hung heavy with vines. They enclosed the rich, verdant swell of the moss, which framed the waterfall's descent; the blush of the canna and myrtle and orchids, which grew in clusters below the shadow of the birches; the heavy air, which formed over the area like a dome. The worn path leading to it knew only Erde's footsteps. For as long as she had memory, she had known this place and knew it to be hers alone.

"In my thoughts," Erde began, turning her head to fix her eyes on the bent neck of an orchid, "I fell. I had this thought while swinging on a branch. My hand slipped and I caught myself but for an instant, I felt fear. I thought I might fall. And then I thought, well, what if I did fall? What if I fell and cracked my body like a split egg. Then, of course, I couldn't help but picture myself split and twisted like the gnarled branch I hung from. I thought, what if my body had turned monstrous and that was my reflection? I would be terrified to see myself like that. But why would I be scared? Would I not be the same person beneath the twists and splits? Is that person, the one beneath, that scary? When a rose goes from a bud to a flower is it not still a rose? Just because I looked like a monster wouldn't mean I became one. What changes on the outside

doesn't always change on the inside." Erde glanced back towards the nymph to see if she was still paying attention. The nymph looked back with patient interest.

"But then," Erde said. "I had another thought. I thought of a pup. I have seen young pups and the way they move and play and frolic. When they grow to be dogs, they may still be the same animal but the dog does not move as a pup does. The dog does not sporadically pounce like the pup nor does it saunter. It is stronger, more ferocious, its bounce is gone. How can the same creature change so much on the inside? So, maybe the rose is not the same from bud to flower. Maybe I would not be the same if I cracked and split like a monster. Then I thought, the outside will always be the clue to how things change. If it weren't for its outside color, I would never know how ripe a fruit was on the inside. The outside is like a clue to the inside. And then my thoughts got so much bigger."

She glanced at the nymph. "Just think about the sky," Erde told her. "What does it mean when the sky changes? Are we what is changing because we are circled by it? Or is it circling something else? And what about you?" Erde brought her face closer to the water, the nymph leaned forward, almost so that their noses touched. "Is your world the inside or the outside?"

Erde pulled herself away from the water and rolled onto her back. She sighed and absentmindedly brought her thumb to her lips. She pinched at her fingernail with her teeth, they were bitten down too short to grip. "So many thoughts, big thoughts."

The air landed heavily on her as she stared blankly and unblinking at nothing above her. She momentarily let the air take the place of her thoughts so that instead of the constant chatter she usually had in her head there was only white noise. When she zoned back in, she turned to her side and let her hand fall into the water, letting her fingers bob gently.

"You know what happened the other day?" she asked the nymph. "I was sitting with Tieren along the riverbank, watching the fish traffic through the stream. I asked where he thought they were going.

'Past the mountains,' he told me.

'What do you think is past the mountains?' I asked.

He sighed. 'More land, of course.'

I asked him if he would ever want to go to that land and he said he wasn't sure. He asked me if I would go and I said that one day I would go."

She paused.

"He told me he knew I would. He said I should have been born a bird or a fish. That way I could explore the whole world. But you know, I don't think I want to explore the whole world. I think I wish I wanted to go but I really don't. Does that make sense? I like it here. I like everything about here. It gives me a feeling that I lack the words for. It just feels right. Like this is exactly where and how I belong. But my feelings are so strange. I am certain that this is where I belong but, in my mind, I leave and go on big adventures. I would never want to leave but am antsy staying put. No wonder Tieren thinks I'm a bird."

She thought about this as she twirled her hand in the water. The nymph looked away, lost in thought.



"It is like there is the person that I am and then the person in my imagination." She looked into the water, holding the nymph's eyes. When I look at my reflection," she began, "which person looks back?"

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During the time when the birds fly south and the adolescent deer leave their mothers, a Tiger Swallowtail had fluttered her yellow wings against the bark of a black cherry tree. There she laid her green eggs and left. Within days, a white creature had emerged, grub-like and small. The larva had squirmed and eaten and spun itself into a silken chrysalis, swinging against the trunk of the tree. It lay there dormant for many months, still and listening. Beneath the rough brown skin of its cocoon, it heard the squirrels chase in nearby trees. It heard the rain and laughter. It heard the steady pull of the wind, washing and receding like the tides, counting the minutes pass.

When the birds returned and their eggs began to squeak, the creature broke from its chrysalis. Its body once so worm-like now hung ornamented with the striped black wings of its mother. Incrementally, it stretched its soaked wings, shaking off their moisture. How naked it felt without its walls but how brilliant the world looked. It could now see the squirrels and the leaves shaken by the winds. It watched while slowly stretching out its wings. On a nearby tree, a bird stomped, hammering into a branch with its feet. In the bird's mouth was a reed of grass. The bird turned its head from left to right, hammered, dropped the reed, looked around again, and picked it back up. It jumped in another direction and repeated its motions. From below, the butterfly watched as the humming bees bounced around the wildflowers, considering each flower carefully before crawling onto its surface. And reaching right in front of the butterfly was hand, grabbing absentmindedly for the black cherries that grew above it.

Erde didn't notice the butterfly. Her attention was on the berries, which she piled into her free hand, cupped against her belly. The juicy stained her skin as she gaily groped for more. She was turning to leave as the butterfly tested its wings. It swooped and brushed her cheek. Erde stumbled back and blinked until the sight of swallowtail took form.

"Oh, how sweet," she said, watching the creature take rest and fly away again. "Tieren, look do you see it?"

Tieren sat with his back against the tree, fiddling with an acorn shell he had found earlier in the day. He had scraped from it the dirt, which now lay buried beneath his thumbnail, and was practicing whistling into it.

"See what?" he asked, not looking up from the whistle.

She flopped down beside him, popping a few berries into her mouth. "There was a butterfly," she said, her mouth still full. "It's the first one in a while. That means more are coming."

Tieren blew into the acorn and swiped the dirty pad of his thumb over it to clean it further. He frowned at it and looked up at Erde. "What are you eating?" he asked.

"Cherries. You want some?" she extended her hand.

Tieren clicked his tongue, shaking his head in slow amazement. "I swear," he began, "you should have been born a dog. You eat non-stop. How are you not full?"

Erde shrugged. "It's insatiable," she said. "It's a gift, really. There are so many tasty things out there and my stomach doesn't limit me from eating them."

"Yes, but it seems to defy rationality. I had to quit at the raspberry bushes because I was so full. I simply cannot believe how you can eat so much without feeling sick."

Erde fixed her attention on her palm, contracting her hand to shift the berries into a small pile, and then slapped them into her mouth, tilting her head back.

"Hmmm," she chewed, thinking. "It's not like I've never felt full before. But for whatever reason, I've been insatiable lately. I feel like I could eat a whole tree and still be ready for more. I'm like a pit. A walking stomach with legs."

Tieren shook his head in amusement and blew into his whistle. He pattered only dry air. He shook it and tried again.

Erde fell onto her back and stretched out her arms and legs and toes. "Tierennnnnn," she whined. "I'm bored." She popped back up into a sitting position. "Let's do something."

Tieren blew into the whistle again. The same dry air came out. He shook the acorn and glanced into it with one eye opened.

Erde pulled on his leg. "Let's do something."

"Like what?"

"Hmm. We could do a race. Or maybe we can throw stones into the river and try to find them again. Oh, or maybe we can head to the cliffs and see if the goats will let us closer to their babies this time. Are you listening?"

Tieren took the whistle away from his lips. "Yes, I am," he said. "You want to race or throw stones or get chased away by angry goats again. I swear, something you ate is making you crazy. Just relax with me."

Erde fell back again. "I don't want to relax. I want to move and run and lift heavy things. I feel the ants creeping under my skin and I feel so restless."

"What has gotten into you?"

"I have boundless energy." She sat up and leaned towards Tieren so that their noses touched. "We could dance. You like to dance. Let's dance. Come on. Get up, let's move together."

Tieren smiled. "Can't you do all the stuff by yourself?"

"Yeah, but it is more fun with you. Come on, move with me."

"I'm not sure if I feel safe being alone with someone so volatile..."

"Tieren."

"... I mean, who knows what you might do to me?"

"Tieren."

"With so much boundless energy, you could push me off from a cliff."

"Tieren."

"Or maybe you'll eat everything in sight and then try to eat me."

"Tierennnnn." She bounced with each syllable of his name.

"Finnnnnnne," he said with a grin. "I'll move with you, you psycho. You want to get mauled by goats? Let's go to the cliffside."

"Yes," she cheered, giving a small clap. "Thank you," she cooed, hugging his arm. Tieren pulled his arm out from her embrace and embraced her fully, pulling her into the full circle of his arms.

"Anytime," he said. "So, are we heading towards the riverside?"

"No," Erde said, pulling herself from his arms. "They have migrated near to the east towards that spot the lightning cracked."

"Near the boulder pile where I broke my pinkie?"

"No, the opposite direction. Where that skinny tree got pulled out of the ground and I thought it was a snake."

"Oh, I know where you mean. That's this way, right?" Tieren asked, pointing towards the rising sun.

"Mmhmm," Erde said. "But wait," she ran back to the cherry tree and grabbed a handful of berries. "For the trip," she said.

By the time they had reached the cliff's face, the sun was already tipping past noon. At the cliffs, the walls rose steep, textured with notches and jugs. If they squinted, they could make out a black smear near the top of the face where lightning had struck it sometime before.

Erde and Tieren paced back and forth, looking at the wall for a clear path to climb. There were a few edges that were within reach but crimping them cramped their hands. There were a few juts but they were just out of reach. Erde tapped her finger against her chin.

"Do you think you could lift me?" she asked Tieren. He looked the mountainside up and down, letting out a low whistle.

"I can," he said, "but I don't see how much sense that would make if there is nowhere you can place your foot afterward."

Erde ran her hands along the wall, inspecting it more closely. He had a point: there weren't many places that she could step. She squatted down, taking in the edges. She stood up again, scanning the upper part of the cliff, her hand over her eyes, shielding from the sun.

"I think it is only flat near the bottom. If I could get above our head level, there are far more places to grab on to."

"Well, how are we going to climb that high with nothing below us?"

She thought. "We could drag a log over to climb or maybe roll a boulder over. Oh, but here, this just looks large enough for me to stand on."

Tieren looked to the place she pointed. The jut poked out just slightly, perhaps two inches. He tried to trace a path but couldn't figure out where she would hold.

"I would grab here," Erde said, pointing diagonally upwards.

"What? You'll never be able to balance that. They are too far apart."

"I could do it if you held me up. My foot could go there and I could lean up and grab this ledge, you just need to make sure I don't lean too far."

Tieren hesitated. "Okay," he finally said, throwing up his arms. "We can try it."

Erde lifted one foot on the protruding edge and when she felt Tieren's hands circle her hips, she sprung from the wall and stretched to jut. As she stretched, the muscles in her abdomen yanked and winced.

"Whoa," she said. "Let me down, let me down." She released the jut, falling into Tieren, who awkwardly buckled to brace her fall.

"Are you okay," he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, doubling forward. The muscles in her abdomen still seemed to pull. She squeezed shut her eyes, taking in a deep breath. As she breathed out, she felt the tightness loosen but the grip was still there. She breathed in again but before she breathed out she felt Tieren's hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, straightening and shaking off the discomfort. "I just pulled something or something. I just need to walk it off." She paced back and forth as Tieren watched her quizzically.

"Let's go again," she said after a minute.

"You sure?"

"Of course." She reached her arms up and immediately pain pooled in her lower abdomen. She hissed and caved forward. "Whoa."

"It's probably all the food catching up on you," Tieren said.

Erde shook her head. "I guess," she said.

But as the day wore on, her discomfort escalated to a chronic pain, more severe than she had ever felt before. The pain in her belly cinched her forward and, by the end of the night, she was lying in fetal position, her knuckles white as she bawled up her fists.

"It must have been something you ate," Tieren cooed, rubbing deep circles into her lower back. She whimpered miserably.

"It's like a fist, turning and twisting my insides," she said.

Laying down helped- until it didn't. When the pain was too much she paced back and forth, a fix that was also temporary.

"Is it hot right now," she grimaced, fanning herself as she paced.

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?" Tieren asked.

She brought a fist to her mouth, choking down a shutter of nausea. "Keep food away from me."

Her alternations between curling up and pacing lasted well into the night. Tieren lay beside her and rubbed her back and asked her what she needed but she could only moan back. Soon he fell asleep and she was left with the darkness and the pain. *Sleep, just let me sleep*, she begged the swelling moon. But she could not make herself tired. She tossed and turned and finally gave up trying altogether.

Gently, she lifted Tieren's arm from around her waist. She glanced to see if he had stirred. She carefully adjusted his arm so that it lay on his side and slipped away from him. In the

moonlight, he looked almost dead. His mouth hung slack and his long hair spilled over his face. She wanted to wake him, to bring animation back to him but she let him rest.

She followed her familiar path towards the pool. The air was almost tangible beneath the cypress's dome. She fell to her knees and looked for the nymph. She could just make her out in the moonlight.

"What's happening to me?" she whimpered. The nymph looked just as miserable back. "You too?"

Erde moaned and rolled to her side, clutching her knees to her chest. The thick air suffocated her into sedation. It was there she found sleep.

When she awoke, the pain had lessened, her belly now only carried nausea.

"Oh, brother," she moaned, sitting upright, messaging the sides of her temple. She took in a deep breath and looked around her. Light prickled the water with sparkles and made the flowers flush. She went to crawl forward, to catch a glimpse inside the pool when she felt something wet between her thighs.

"What the," she began, sitting back on her heels. She looked down at her thighs and immediate alert dilated her eyes. Her chest rose in a panic to see blood streaked down her flesh. She felt down her legs, pulling her skin back, searching for the place she was hurt. But she couldn't find anything. She half-crawled, half-dragged herself to the pool, and urgently showed herself to the nymph. But to her surprise, the nymph was showing herself back. Blood spilled from her and clung to her legs as well.

"You too?" Erde asked, and she no longer felt fear. "You too." The words carried with it solidarity. Erde stood, letting the blood drip down her legs, the flowers seemed to turn their heads to stare at the crimson elixir with awe.

She would soon learn that she would bleed often. It surprised her when it came again but then it started to come so often, so predictably, that it became an event she stopped noticing. She had told Tieren about it and warned him about the discomfort, the mania, and the fatigue that came with it. She wanted him to be ready for the day he, too, would wake with smudges between his legs. But it never happened. She wasn't a fool. She knew they looked different which must be why he never bled. It was something unique to her.

She didn't quite understand it, like the stars and transformations of a butterfly it seems to have no definite explanation. She wasn't sure why it was necessary for her to bleed but she did have a few suspicions. She talked with the nymph about the blood of birth and knew there must be a connection. The blood was special to her, made her like the foxes and mares, those who could give life. And so there was life in it. Somehow, she was a part of that life. She kept that truth and it became an essential part of her being.

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In the land of Eden, there were no seasons to pass the time. The days were suspended in warmth, an eternal summer. Sometimes a year, though, it would rain. It would rain heavily and

then the rains would stop. The sky would only open again during the rest of the year in soft drizzles. At night is when the drizzles seemed to come so that by morning the creatures of earth would see only the memory of it: the swelling logs, the wispy branches of the saplings, studded with jewel droplets.

The heavy rains were not so subtle. They tore up the grounds and left the trees panting and sweaty. It brought with it the ghostly operatics of the winds and steady drums of rainfall. The rains strongly shaped the earth, falling trees and flooding the landscape. The morning after the storm brought a new world. In such weather, it was impossible not to feel alive.

Erde and Tieren were waiting for such a rainfall. When was the last time they had been shaken through with such ferocity? They could not remember, for it had been so long.

In the shade of a plum orchard, Erde und Tieren sat, elbows resting on a large boulder, racing snails. Above them, the sky was gray and curdled. Every few minutes, Tieren would glance up at it.

"If you keep looking away, you are going to miss the winner," Erde said, her voice muffled by her fist pushing up her cheek.

"The sky has been like this for two days. It will rain, I know it," Tieren said. "I can smell it."

Erde smiled, plucking one of the snails that had crawled to the end of the rock and replacing it at the beginning. "This one is the champion," she said. "Ready to race them again."

"Sure," Tieren said, giving a quick glance upwards. He moved the second snail to the top of the rock and they released them to watch them slowly drag themselves to the edge of the rock one more time.

Erde flickered her eyes to the sky. All the clouds have melted into one entity that blanketed the sky in a uniform fog. Small, dark wisps floated by like puffs of smoke before quickly disappearing into the drab background. "What does the coming rain smell like?" Erde asked.

Tieren inhaled deeply through his nostrils, his hands wafting the air closer to him. He exhaled loudly. Erde could catch in the light the dust in the air being blown away by his breath. "It smells sweet like melons. Clean and fresh."

"Have you noticed how low the sparrows have been flying? They only fly that low before the rains."

Tieren stood, looking to the sky, and shook his head. "Any second now, that sky will open up and wash over this place. Any second. I can feel it."

Erde glanced back to the boulder. The one she called the champion had veered to the side of the rock and the other snail had disappeared altogether. Erde dropped her hand from her face and went to stand beside Tieren. She gripped the slim trunk of a plum tree with one hand, swinging out and breathing in the air, filling her nostrils with its sweetness.

"Mmmm," she hummed. "It's thick. I can almost taste it."

"Can't you?"

"How soon do you think it will be?"

"Any second. I'm telling you, I can almost feel it on my skin."

"Hmmm," Erde mused, swinging slightly back and forth. "When it rains, I want to stand in the river and see if I can run against the current."

"I want to lay still. Let it fall on me."

Erde coughed up a chuckle. "You said that last time. You didn't last more than five minutes."

Tieren turned to her. "You nearly drowned last time you went into the river during a storm."

"Hmmm, did I?" Erde sang, tilting her head in remembrance.

She could only remember bits and pieces. Those were the days when they were always in motion before they began to sit back and watch the day unfold before them. Back then, they had let their feet carry them not their chatter. She had been hiding when she felt the first drop. It had pecked her forehead and slid over the bridge of her nose. She had brought her hand to her face. As she did, another drop of rain had brushed past over the back of her hand.

"It's here," she had yelled, bursting out from behind a tree. Tieren had turned from where he was searching in time to catch her. "It's here," she had sung out again, as Tieren spun her around, her head thrown back in laughter. That afternoon, the rain had pounded hard. They were both painted with mud when Erde had the idea to jump into the flooding river.

"Watch me run through the current," she said. She had just barely dipped one leg in when the current had swept it from under her. She had fallen back against Tieren's chest and had caught her beneath the armpits.

"If I remember correctly," Tieren said presently, "after that, we waited out the rest of the storm under the roots of a fallen tree."

"There were centipedes," Erde said, scrunching her nose.

"But you were too scared to leave because you thought the trees might collapse on one of us." The wind stirred slightly and they both paused to glance up at the sky.

"Well, I am braver now than I was then," she said, after a moment, starting to swing again. "Hey, Tieren, can you grab a plum for me?"

"Of course," he said. He gave the sky another longing glance and scuffled over to her. He stood beneath the tree, glancing up, carefully appraising each fruit. He scratched his chin and then stretched his arm above his head to cup one of the plums. His sharp muscles flickered under his skin. With a quick twist, he freed the fruit from its branch.

Erde straightened up and walked right up to him, tilting her head to examine the area he had just reached. "The tree must have gotten shorter," she exclaimed after a moment. "I had to jump to reach these earlier."

Tieren offered the plum to her. "Perhaps it is you who have gotten shorter."

Erde eyed the tree and then Tieren and then glanced at the tree again. "Nope," she said definitely. She placed her hands against his chest and walked him backward. He laughed.

"What?" he asked.

She moved to stand in the spot he had just occupied and reached for a plum. Her fingertips just barely brushed the waxy surface. She grabbed her armpit and tried to pull her arm higher, grunting as she stretched.

"What is the purpose of this?" Tieren asked, smugly, biting into the plum.

"You must have grabbed a low-hanging fruit," Erde said, chomping her fingers at the plums. Tieren sauntered over and stood so that his chest touched Erde's. He grinned, not taking his eyes off of hers, and twisted down another fruit.

"Impossible," she said, dropping her arm. "How can you be taller than me!"

"You said it would never happen," Tieren said, the grin still on his face.

"It still hasn't," Erde protested. "The ground must be slanted."

Tieren laughed at her mocked outrage and followed her to a space in front of the boulder. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

Erde squatted down and measured the ground with her forearm. "I'm making sure it is leveled."

"And?"

"Get over here," she said, gesturing him in with her arm. He shook his fingers through his long hair and ambled to her. She clasped her hands on his shoulders to square his chest with hers.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Give me a sec," she said, adjusting. She heard her back crack as she pulled her shoulders back. "Okay, I'm ready," she said, wiggling up straighter.

Tieren placed his palm on the top of her head. She stepped back to see his hand stuck just above his eyebrows. She stepped back.

"Impossible! Again."

She walked back to him and wiggled herself as tall as she possibly could. This time she used her hand. And when she stepped back, it was placed just above his eyebrows.

"Impossible," she said again.

Tieren gently took her hand away, shaking with laughter. "You're the impossible one."

Erde stood, jaw floundering. She looked around as though the words she was looking for were hidden somewhere amongst the grasses. "When did you get taller than me?" she said. How did she not notice the inches, okay, centimeters, that he had sprung up? She shifted her weight to her back foot and looked him up and down. What else had she missed?

She might have found the words to ask but just then, she felt a raindrop graze her cheek.

The rains did not bring with them strong winds and thunder but they did fall heavy. Heavily enough for the earth to slide into mud and for the animals to creep into the dense foliage of the forest, beneath brush and trees.

"Do you feel it, Erde?" Tieren hollered over the booming crackle of the rain. "Do you feel alive?" He twirled in the field by the river. Freezing water beat his upturned face, he spread his arms out in welcome.



"I can't hear you," she hollered back. Rain streamed down her face, she drew back thick strips of hair and shouted, "What?" in response to his moving lips.

"I said," he shouted. Far off, a heavy oak branch cracked. The branch splintered to the ground. Erde whipped her head towards it. The rain gurgled in her ears, rumbling like a waterfall.

"What?" she shouted.

"Come here," he hollered, pulsing his arms towards himself.

Erde leaned forward, looking left to right. A sudden wind pushed her back to standing. "It's too wet!"

"What?" he called.

"It's too wet over there."

"There's no dryer under that tree you're under!"

Erde scrunched her face looking up at water cascading down the leaves in buckets. It spilled down her face. She shook it off. "Okay," she shouted, after a second. "I'm coming." She lifted her arms about her head, palms towards the sky, shielding herself from the rain. "I'm coming," she assured, tapping her foot in front of her to get through the mud.

"What are you doing," he laughed. "You couldn't get any wetter."

"Don't make fun of me. I'll go right back to the tree."

The rain drowned out Tieren's deep laugh but Erde could feel its vibration. She slid her way through the mud, deep wells forming in her footsteps.

"You're taking forever," he called.

"I'll get there when I get there." The wind whooshed by and slapped her hair into her face. Her fingers got caught in the tangles. "What do you want," she yelled when she got to him.

"What?" he grinned.

"I said, what do you want," she said leaning closer.

"What?" He stepped to her.

"Oh, you can absolutely hear me," she shouted.

"I said," he began. She leaned forward and suddenly he had her off her feet. "Are you having fun?" he called spinning her around.

"Tierennnn!" she squealed as he spun her and they tumbled into the ground. She landed with her back in the mud. From above, he shook his wet hair over her face. She squeezed her eyes shut and squealed.

"Are you having fun?" she shouted back, slapping a handful of mud on his shoulder.

"Hee, hee," he laughed, wiggling above her so that the mud fell onto her instead. He tossed his head back and did the kind of laugh where no sound comes out, only shaking. She giggled watching him. She saw the way the rain dripped from his chin, snaking down his throat. She saw the way his hair framed his face as he shook it on her. The way his nose crinkled when he laughed. That has always been her favorite part about him. When had he grown taller than her? And then she began to notice things she hadn't before. The bulk of his shoulders, the curl in his lashes, the short space between them. When had he gotten taller?

And she felt a falter in her laugh, a twinge almost like a whimper. And then she wasn't laughing. She was breathing but it wasn't air that filled her body but something lighter and charged. That thing inflated until it pressed against the inside of her ribs threatening to burst out. Her heart beat faster and she felt the thing crawl into her lower belly and burn.

She felt it as they rolled in the mud. And she felt it when they ran from the rain to find shelter in a cave that bent into the forest. She watched his silhouette against the mouth, looking for something else she might have missed. He turned to her, smiled, and jiggled his hips in a dance that had once made her laugh but now made her queasy.

She felt it when the rain had slowed to a drizzle and they stood outside the cave, tracing the raindrops as they rolled down their bodies. His finger gently traced the rain on her arm, making her body shiver. She slapped his hand away with a squeaky: "Enough".

And she felt it again when the rains passed and they explored the change. The river had swelled to twice its normal size. A tree had fainted across the waters forming a bridge, spiked with its dead branches.

"Come across," Tieren said.

Erde held back. "No, it's too slippery."

"I thought you were brave."

"Yeah, but not stupid."

"Come on," he said, grabbing hold of a branch to pull himself up.

When he was halfway across, she clicked her tongue and followed. She patted her feet against the slick bark, using branches for support. "Like I said, it's too slip--"

A branch broke. He caught her mid-fall, hugging her close to his chest. Her heart raced as she watched the river carry away the splintered wood.

"Are you okay?" he said in her ear. The feel of his breath against her neck made her chest tighten. How warm his skin felt against her body.

"Fine," she responded after a moment, not turning to meet his eye.

The feeling followed her everywhere. She would watch his movements with dizzying admiration and wonder to herself again and again, when had he gotten taller?

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In the slow curl of its fingers, the wind summoned to it petals and seed, delicately shaking them over the rushes along the river. In this area, the waters ran slowly, tucked out from its great chase down the mountain ledge. Erde woke to the gentle sloshing of the river. She heard the quiet stir of the morning before opening her eyes to its murky light. She clucked her tongue through her dry mouth, sighing in hums. Through the thick of her eyelashes, she made out Tieren's profile. A smile painted over her lips. She had dreamed of this: waking to see him. But in her dream, when she had opened her eyes, his stare was already upon her.

In her mind, she reached for him, stroked his jaw with the back of her hand. But in life, she only looked, committing to memory the way the shadows darkened the space under his eyes. The way his lips parted as he slept, revealing the tips of his front teeth. In sleep, he seemed so animated. His eyelids flickered and muscles jerked. He did not move like this when he was awake. In daylight, he was soft and gentle in his motions. His pace is always slow and controlled.

His shoulder jerked, she reached to still it. His head lolled towards her hand and she froze. Her belly tightened. What if he woke and caught her seeing him? Would her face give away her thoughts, her feelings? What would she see in his eyes? Happiness, admiration? Would he see her as plainly as she saw him now?

He opened and closed his mouth, blowing a huff of air through his nostrils. She pulled her hand from him and looked away, her cheeks flushed. What was she doing? From the corner of her eye, she glanced at him again, looking up and down his frame in longing. The warm feeling settled again in her abdomen. She let out a sigh, shaking her head. She needed some air.

Silently, she brought herself to the river's edge, the morning air pricked her skin making her fine hairs point. Above, the birds began their call. She knelt, stirring the water with her hand. It was cold, she liked that. She glanced back towards Tieren to see if he had stirred. He was as still as she had left him. Her stomach started to warm. She shook it off. Quietly, she slipped her legs in, hissing as the frigidness climbed up her body. She waded into the middle of the river, where the waters gathered at her hips. She sucked in her belly like she was pulling her body up against the water.

“Hee hee hoo.”

In her head she counted, squeezing her eyes shut, and she let herself fall below the surface. It was warmer under the water, her teeth did not chatter so much. She went up for air, taking a deep breath, and fell below the surface again, drawing the water back to pull herself through. When she surfaced, the Tieren was no longer in sight. She rolled to her back and let the current carry her. She closed her eyes to the light of the climbing sun and drifted, lolling side to side as she stroked. In her gracefulness, the fish were unbothered and swam alongside her, slipping past her legs and against her back. One floated along her spine, she squirmed under its touch. She thought of Tieren touching her like that and immediately pushed the thought away.

"Stop thinking about him," she told herself.

She drifted on and soon the sun broke through the fog of the morning. It warmed her belly and face. She breathed well on the water. Her muscles thanked her for their much-needed stretch. She swam until she reached a spot of familiarity. She drifted to her feet, soft mud squishing between her toes. She allowed for the waters to stir around her, gently swaying her arms. Through the droplets in her eyes, she saw color, prisms of green and brown. She blinked them away and saw the world fresh.

She pulled herself from the water, following a path of stone into the woods. She had not returned to her pool since the rains. She did not want the nymph to see the flush on her face. She did not yet have the words to explain what it meant. How could she explain the fever that fell

over her when his breath touched her skin? Or the jolt she felt when his leg pressed too long against hers? Or the immobility she felt when he stared at her from beneath his lashes? Thinking about it now made her stomach beat with butterfly wings.

As she brushes past the vines, she noticed that they seemed thicker in her hands. Did the rain make them swell? Inside her secret garden, the air was hotter, denser. Beads of sweat formed at the top of her brow. She knelt beside the water and in the pool's reflection noticed something new. She turned around to see a large peach tree stretch behind her. When had that gotten there? Something deep rumbled in her, making her antsy. She wiped the sweat from her forehead.

She turned to the pool. "What does this mean?" she asked. "I'm sorry, I can't seem to think straight. It's... it's this thing that keeps... I can't explain it. Something came with the rains. I can't focus anymore. He speaks and I shudder. His touch never made me squirm before. But now, I can't stop thinking about how much I want him to... What's going on with me?" A red canna petal floated over the nymph's image. "Help me make sense of it."

The lady of the water peered at Erde between heavy lashes and reached for the peach tree, twirling her fingers around the fruit. She turned the fruit around, brushing over it with the pads of her fingers. Erde did the same. So soft and delicate it was. Like touching velvet. The nymph held the fruit to her lips and bit into its soft flesh. Erde copied and as the juices spilled down her chin she felt her chest papillate. It was like a drug, sedating her muscles but opening them up. The taste intoxicated her, such a flavor her tongue had not yet known. She glanced at the nymph through half-shut lids, watching her enjoy the gift as well.

She placed the peach down, wiping the juice from her mouth, and stared into the water. The nymph held out her hand and Erde pressed their palms together. There was something undeniably vivacious, magnetic, in their touch. The nymph's radiance seemed to pass through her hand and into Erde, filling her with power. It made Erde's breath grow ragged. She felt as though the whole creation of the word was happening inside of her: the slow seed breaking through its coat to crawl and bud and finally burst into the crescendo of creation.

A hum vibrated through her body and she looked upon the nymph with warmth, falling into her embrace. The water was hot, steam hazed around her shoulders. Erde dipped below the surface, suspended in languid heat. When she emerged she felt new.

The shadows of the forest reached its long fingers over the ground, darkening the grass so that it showed like dark fur. In one of the day's last pockets of light, Erde and Tieren sat. Erde reclined against a stone, a hand behind her head, looking into the treetops. Tieren had absentmindedly pulled her foot onto his lap and had begun to rub it.

"Do you think rabbits make sounds?" Erde asked, still looking at the treetops. She pulled her hands through her hair, stretching her arms to run the length of it. She twirled the strands through her fingers, then untwisted, and twirled in the other direction.

"Squirrels make sounds," Tieren said.

Erde chuckled. "No, they don't."

"I'm serious. I heard them."

"Oh, yeah? What do they sound like."

"They sound like *gippa, gippa, gippa*."

Erde laughed. "They do not."

"It's true," Tieren said, switching to grab her other foot. "I've heard it."

"And when did you hear it?"

Tieren shrugged his shoulders. "At some time, in someplace."

"How mysterious." She smiled at him and wiggled her toes. "You missed a spot."

"What a brat," he teased, working his knuckles between her toes. "You're lucky you've got me."

She smiled. "I might be lucky," she said, and inside her chest ballooned. "Make that squirrel sound again."

"*Gippa, gippa, gippa*."

Erde snorted. "You're so funny."

"No, I think you're the funny one," Tieren said, squeezing her foot.

"Funny how?"

"Well," he began, glancing around. "You got these funny little feet here."

"They are not little."

"And I think it is funny when you are tired at night and fall asleep before I finish telling you stories." Erde's heart pumping. "And it's funny how your nose crinkles when you laugh."

"What? My nose doesn't crinkle. Your nose crinkles."

Tieren booped her nose. "It's crinkling right now. It's very funny."

She swatted his hand away, a nervous laugh hammering from her chest. "It doesn't crinkle."

"And don't get me started on these." He hovered his hand above her ankle, sliding his hand up her leg without touching her. Erde tried to keep from squirming. "I love these beautiful, long legs. Always so restless, so curious." He shook his head. "They're funny, that's what I meant to say. I think they are funny."

He shyly turned his face from hers. She opened her mouth to say something to him but she was paralyzed.

"Erde?" he asked after a minute.

"Hmm?" It was all she could get out.

"Do you..." he scratched the back of his neck. "Where do you find those peaches, which you come home with so often?"

It was Erde's turn to look away, her cheeks warm.

"Umm," she began, fingering her earlobe. "By the, uh, mountainside."

"I don't believe you," he whispered. She glanced at him. "You always play with your ear when you are lying."

"Uh."

"Would you take me there?" he asked, the full weight of his gaze on hers. He must have seen her chest quake.

She lowered her lids, her lips trembled, trying to form words. "I..." she started.

But he was already close, close enough for her to feel his breath brush her cheek. From then words were forgotten. She leaned towards him, at first she moved just an inch, then another, bringing her face closer to his. At the moment their lips touched, a stream of heat lighted from her throat to the pit of her belly. She tangled her fingers in his hair and he fit his face in the crook of her neck.

How perfectly they fit together- her hand on the curve of his back, his leg tangled with hers. It made her limbs weak. It was nothing she had ever felt before, not even at her pool. His touch made her skin tingle. And when she opened her eyes to see him looking at her an explosion crackled in her chest.

After, they lay in each other's arms, looking up at the sky. Erde smiled to herself.

"Life is exhilarating," she said, turning on her side to look at Tieren. She brushed a stray piece of hair from his eyes. He took her hand and placed it firmly on his chest. She felt the steady jump of his heartbeat.

"This is exhilarating," he whispered, squeezing her hand. Her heart lurched at his words. She thought of him: his soft eyes, his thoughtful demeanor, his way of wrinkling his nose when he laughed.

She brought Tieren's hand to her own chest. His hand pulsed slightly over the gentle rocking of her heart. Her teeth grazed over her bottom lip.

"To me, it is like falling into bed. The world is invigorating and exciting because everything about it makes me feel alive. But this," she said, "is like coming home. It's like I know who I am here, while out there I feel like everything is bigger." She smiled to herself. "As magnificent as the wind feels, the bird is always searching for a bough."

She brushed her thumb over his jaw. "Am I that bough?" he asked.

"I think so," she said, shifting to rest her head on his chest.

Their bodies rested like that even after the sky was strummed in violet and rose. So absorbed they were each other's giggles and whispers that they did not notice the fireflies, hanging off the grass like morning dew.

"Tell me a story," Erde said. "To help me fall asleep."

"Okay," Tieren said, pulling her in closer.

She closed her eyes to the soothing percussion of his voice. Beyond them, in the river, the bullfrogs splashed. A sweet breeze passed over them carrying with it the perfume of the night phlox.

It did not occur to Erde to savor this moment for all moments in paradise held such loveliness. She nestled closer into Tieren. There would come a time when she would beg to remember this feeling, the security, the sureness she trusted in life. But for now, this feeling wasn't rare, it wasn't precious and so she did not cherish it. She simply leaned into it with confidence. In a waking slumber, her innocent heart eased into the sacred rhythm of the night. Around, the bullfrogs croaked and the fireflies burned. And the moon washed two of the earth's elegant creatures in white.

## Chapter 4

The wind pulled with it time. Time could be measured in the rise and fall of the sun. Or in a creature, once unable to open their eyes and now taller than their parents. Or in migrations. Or in the turn of the stars.

Erde measured it in bliss, in the exponential way her happiness grew, so that each day she could confidently say she was happier than the day before. She would throw petals into her pool and feel happiness. She would rub her nose against Tieren's and feel happiness. The feeling itself was not new, she had always known bliss but there was something more weighty in it now, something more mature.

It came with a growing sense of sturdiness. She could run her hand along the trunk of a maple and understand its strength for she too felt the roots that secured her. There were times, as she laughed with Tieren, his fingers deftly weaving flowers into her hair, that she would pause and look around her, smile pressed to her lips and feel as though everything was perfectly in place.

But her sturdiness brought more than happiness. It changed the way she looked upon the earth. Perhaps once she was like the scuffling cubs, using the world as her plaything but now she saw through the eyes of their mother. She could appreciate details like the painstaking marks on a tree or the busy shuffle of a caterpillar. She could just look and not feel inclined to touch it or make up stories about it. In that way, she felt like she was part of the world. She was like the cat that weaves its way through the grass, its path undisturbed. Not the dog that romps and chomps everything in its way. In the nativity of her youth, she thought herself wise and ancient like the soil.

Her maturity affected the way she carried herself, the way she stepped. It made the water nymph glow with pride. It was something Tieren was beginning to take note of too, for one day he asked her,

"How do you know when something fits in?"

They were reclined in the sunny fields, full from a day of raspberries and plums. Tieren leaned back into Erde's chest as she ran her fingers through his hair, gently massaging his scalp.

"Fits in where?" she asked.

"Fit in the world."

"Like a mouse through a hole?"

"No, like a mouse amongst mice. How do you know when you fit in?"

"Oh," Erde thought for a moment, watching his hair pull through her fingers like waves crashing against rock. "It is something you just feel."

"What does it feel like?"

Erde chuckled to herself. "Why are you so curious?" she asked.

Tieren adjusted his body. "I don't know. I just have seen the way you are in the world. The way you stand back and watch it, so invested. You radiate for it is your element."

Erde blushed. "I didn't know you were watching me."

Tieren nuzzled his cheek into her chest. "Are you kidding? How can I not watch you? I'll see you, squatting by a tree, feeling up the bark. I know how intense your gaze can be. And I can't but think to myself, 'Where did she come from?'"

Erde squirmed, feeling giddy. "I know how you feel," she said in his ear.

"I just want to know how you knew. How does it feel to fit in."

"Hmmm." Erde thought through her sensations. "I guess, I just feel at peace."

"Do you ever feel... unsatisfied?"

Erde plucked a leaf out of his hair and sprinkled it away. "Of course, all the time."

"What are you satisfied with?"

"Oh," she said, rubbing her hand over his chest. "Not you, if that's what you are asking."

"No, no. I mean, with life."

"Umm, I can't think of anything off the top of my head. Give me a minute."

Tieren was quiet for a moment. "Well, have you ever felt like you haven't fit in?"

Erde cocked her head to the side. "Sure," she said. "Tieren, what is this about?"

"Nothing."

She rubbed his head some more. "Alright," she said after a minute. "I guess, I used to feel really disconnected with my body. My mind would wander further than I could go. And my limbs felt huge and lumbering like they were too large. I wouldn't be able to stretch as far as I wanted to and I would trip and stumble. But now, I feel like I've grown into myself more. Like my body and mind are on the same plane. Is that what you're asking about?"

Tieren thought. "Maybe. It's not something I've given a lot of thought to."

"Do you think you don't fit in?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Erde giggled and wrapped her arms around his shoulder, squeezing him tightly. "You fit here pretty well," she laughed. He laughed back.

"Oh, I feel at home in these huge lumbering arms of yours," he teased.

"Wowww," Erde said, reaching down to tickle his side. He squirmed underneath her, freeing himself from her grasps.

When he was out of her reach he said, "You should have been born a tree with such large limbs."

"Do you want to be attacked," she said, pouncing at him. He caught her effortlessly and rolled her to the ground pinning her down. She struggled against the weight of his arms.

"I'm just kidding," he said, grinning. "You are not a lumbering tree, you are practically a sapling."

She wiggled under him. "I swear, I'm never going to be nice to you again."

"Hmmm, never is a long time."

"Get off," she laughed.

"Who said that? Saplings can't talk."



Erde tried to look serious. She glanced around, looking for some kind of leverage. "Oh, look at a porcupine," she said.

"Where?"

As he looked, she rolled him off of her and jumped back, in a ready position to lounge again.

"Trickster," he said.

"I learned from the best."

And she laughed at him and he tossed her and they played and laughed and tumbled and Erde's happiness increased.

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Upon the ground, the two lay curled together in the early grey of the morning. Erde nestled on Tieren's chest, settling into his soft muscle as a footprint settled into the sand. The gentle light pulled her out of her dreams and she slowly opened her eyes, welcoming the fresh melon smell of dawn. Above, the birds were already calling and beating the air with skillful wings. A drowsy yawn brushed through Erde's lip as she stretched her long limbs. She glanced at Tieren and let out a short humored breath. His head lolled to the side, his eyes rapidly jumped beneath the lids. Erde traced slow spirals across his chest as she watched, humored by his sweet unconscious movement. She smiled to herself and nuzzled his shoulder with her nose before rising. The early morning always seemed to work against gravity, pulling her up as soon as light began to touch down.

"Chirp, chirp," she whispered to Tieren but he did not stir. She rolled off of him to her back and looked at the pale beauty of the morning. In her belly, she felt a familiar itch. "Are you awake?"

Tieren snorted but his eyes stayed closed. Quietly, she sat up. She planted a small kiss on his nose. In her own languid pace, she found her feet and took a moment to feel the grass that brushed her ankles. To feel the brush of a butterfly on her shoulder. To let the flute-like thrill of the cicadas settle over her. She stretched her arms above her head, letting her muscles sing out. Whole eternity rested in such moments of tranquility.

She glanced at Tieren, one arm flopped overhead, and smiled. Then, she turned and headed into the day.

When she returned, the sun had not yet reached its zenith. The soft fuzz of a peach brushed her lips as she bit into the succulent fruit. She searched and caught sight of Tieren kneeling by the river.

Small grains of sand grated her feet as she approached him. He did not turn to look at her, his eyes were fixed on something in the sand.

"What are you looking at," she asked.

He started, breaking from his trance. "Oh, uh, nothing."

Erde wrapped her arms around his shoulder, hanging off of him to view what was in the sand. By his foot, lay a stick, which he used to etch an image. In the dirt, there was a hole, wide and deep.

"What is it?" she asked. He scratched his nose in embarrassment and swiped the image away.

"It's nothing," he said.

"No, really?"

Tieren was silent for a moment. "I don't know," he finally said. "I guess I'm trying to remember something."

Erde thought back to the drawing. "Remember what?" Her voice was soft. Tieren scratched his head. Erde flopped down beside him, tilting her head so that she could catch his eye.

"Where do you think dreams come from?" he asked, finally.

Erde bit into her bottom lip. "I don't know. Why? Tieren, are you okay?"

Tieren was looking in the distance, there was no focus in his eyes. Erde gently shook his leg. He rubbed his eye.

"I don't know what I feel. I've been having this dream lately. I'm a horse and I'm searching... I don't know what for. I was drawing to help myself remember."

Erde thought. The space felt so empty. "Did it help?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea what I am supposed to be looking for. It's just out of my reach."

It bothered her to see him like this and it seemed his melancholy was only increasing. She would catch him more and more often staring at nothing and when she asked him about it he would shrug and say it was nothing.

"I wish I could help," she told the nymph, pacing back and forth along the water's edge. "I feel so useless."

The nymph nodded in understanding.

"The other day, I surprised him with pears smeared in honey, his favorite food. And he hardly touched it. I try talking and distractions and games but nothing seems to get through." Erde stopped and put her hand on her hips. "I just hate seeing him like this. I've never had trouble cheering him up before. I mean, if anyone would know how to, it would be me, right? And yet, here I am, useless." She kicked a scruff of grass. The nymph stared at her in deep contemplation. "Maybe you're right. How can I help him if he doesn't know how to help himself. I just can't help myself, I want to do something."

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The droplets falling from Erde's hair disturbed the mosquitos, which hovered over the still surface of the river. Erde wrung her hair tighter and more water spiraled and dripped. The

mosquitos fluttered around the ripples, bumping into each other in their flight. Over their buzz came Erde's steady voice, singing with the chickadees, under the noon sun.

"Finish my tune," Erde said and began to hum. It was a game she and Tieren played. One would begin a song and the other would follow, a conversation of rhythm and hums.

She glanced over her shoulder. Tieren sat with his knees pulled up and his head buried.

"Tieren?" she cooed, going over to him. He shook his head as she approached as though chasing away a thought.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Umm, let me think of a tune."

Erde clicked her tongue. "Tieren, she said again, taking her place next to him. "Forget that." She put her arm around his shoulders, resting her cheek on his head. "What's wrong."

He let out a long sigh. "Oh, nothing. I'm just tired."

"Look at me," she said, matter-of-factly. "Do you think that's going to fool me?"

He smiled a little but his eyes stayed down. "I suppose not," he said quietly.

"Something has been bothering you for weeks now. What is going on in that beautiful head of yours?" She tousled his hair playfully, but concern still touched her eyebrows together.

"Ohhhhh," he breathed. "I don't know. I can't... it's hard to say. It's just something I've been thinking about."

She waited patiently for him to continue. When he didn't she asked, "Is it the dreams again?"

Tieren scratched the back of his neck. "Kind of. No, not exactly. The dreams are part of it but not the source." He was quiet for a minute. "Do you remember how you used to tell stories?"

Erde lifted her shoulder. "What kind of stories?"

"Before. You used to make up all of these stories about how the world worked. Back before we really knew that birds did not hatch from stones or that bats were not afraid of the light."

"I remember."

"Well, you used to say that it was okay for something to have more than one story. I believed in that then but now, I am not so sure."

"What do you mean?"

He turned his head and looked at something in the distance. His head shook slightly. "I think I need a second to figure out what I am trying to say."

"Do you mean that there is only one answer to everything?"

"Well, I guess, maybe. I think what I mean to say is there is only one thing something is." He plucked a flower from the ground. "This is a petal. This is a stem."

She nodded, trying to follow his logic. "Okayyyyy."

"If you plant a strawberry seed, it does not grow into a watermelon or a bird. It grows into a strawberry because it is a strawberry seed."

Erde clicked her tongue. "I think I get it now. You are saying, something is what it is."

"Yes."

Erde smiled a little. "I agree, a strawberry is a strawberry. But I think what it *is* is multifaceted. To me, it is tart and delicious. To you, it is distasteful. It is dessert for me, punishment for you."

He shook his head. "The strawberry still is what it is, regardless of how everything perceives it."

"I'm not so sure about that. Think about mistletoe. To us, it is called beautiful but to the tree, it is called danger, it will be remembered by the forest as death. The memories and perspectives of the things that experience the mistletoe are just as much part of what it is as what it perceives itself to be."

Tieren shook his head. "No, that's too complicated. Something is what it is. Others can interpret what they want of it but that doesn't change what it is."

Erde scratched her head. "Sure it does. Things don't simply declare themselves to be something and that is it. Being is not fixed. Part of being is blended with the perspective of others, that perspective influences how you are remembered, how you think of yourself. And you change in response."

Tieren slapped his hand on his thigh in frustration. "But then you could never know what something is!"

Erde clicked her tongue and pulled him against her chest. "What's really going on?" she asked, fingering his hair. "Why does this bother you so much?" She could feel the muscles on his face squeeze and contract as he buried his face closer into the warmth of her breast. She rubbed her hand, slowly, up and down his back. "It's going to be okay."

"It's just," he pulled himself away to look at her. His brows turned upwards and his eyes were red with weariness. She pouted her lip in concern. She hated to see him like this. "I feel lost."

She reached out and caressed his cheek. He leaned into her touch. "Lost how?"

"I see you. I see your confidence in who you are and what you want, and I am envious because I do not feel it in myself. You emulate what is here around you and you are fulfilled but it is not enough for me. I need to know who I am too. If we can be everything then we are essentially nothing and I don't want to be nothing anymore."

"Oh, Tieren, you are not nothing. To me, you are everything."

"But to me, I am not."

"Oh, no. Oh, if only you could see in yourself what I see in you."

"I don't want to be what *you* see in me, I want to be what *I* see in me. I want to figure it out by myself for a change. Sometimes, I feel eclipsed by you."

Erde dropped her eyes to her lap. "You do," she whispered.

"Oh, I didn't mean that," he assured, grabbing her hand and pulling them to his chest. "I just mean, you have always been the one with all the answers. I want to be the one to figure them out now. I want to tell you stories. Wouldn't that make you happy?"

Her smile was tight. "Of course." She pulled her hands back from him and placed them on her lap as she looked over his shoulder. "You know," she said after a moment. "I don't have it as figured out as you think."

"Of course you do."

"You are right that I am happy but I often duel with the person I am and the person I think I am. And it is okay that I feel that way. It is like this place." She spread her arms to hold up the world. "There is always more to discover and rediscover. If it is true for the earth, why can't it be true for ourselves?"

Tieren shrugged. "I guess, my answers don't come from the earth."

Erde chewed on his words, savoring them as the day waned on. She excused herself and sat by her pool, staring into the water wondering how well she knew herself. Did she feel fulfilled? Did she feel present? The nymph nodded her head, answering the questions for her.

"But why do I do the things I do?" she asked the water. "Why do I come here?"

*To look inside myself.*

It was true that she felt most like herself here, weighed down by the heat of the air. She felt a twinge of sadness. Does Tieren not have a place of his own like this? She thought about it. How often did he steal away from her side? Maybe that is what he needed to feel better, a space for himself.

She asked him about later as they lay, facing one another, beneath an oak. Around them, crickets hopped and struck their legs in song.

"Don't worry about it," he whispered to her.

Her voice carried gently in the darkness. "How can I not? It hurts you."

"Erde," he assured, stroking her face. "For now, my place is here by you. I'm so lucky to have you to worry over me."

"Tieren," she stopped his hand. "I'm serious."

"I know you are. But this isn't something you can solve." His words were kind and held no sting.

"How can you be so calm now? You were so upset earlier."

"I thought about what you said, about there being more to discover. I think you are right. It left a seed, I just need more time to work out what it means."

Erde sighed. "Good. I hated seeing you so upset."

The glow of the moon caught the white of his smile. "I know you do," he whispered. "I love how much you care about me."

"If you could see what I see in you, you would understand why I care so much."

"And what do you see?"

She reached out and stroked his face. A familiar pinprick poked her belly, flooding her with warmth. "I see you," she said seriously.

She could hear the sweet sigh of his breath. He pulled her close to him and wrapped her in his warmth.

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It was too early for the birds, too early for dawn when Erde sat amongst the red tinge of the blueberry grasses. From her lips, peach juice flowed. She watched but did not really see the skunk that wiggled its snout into a decaying log. She did not notice the praying mantis's long bounds over the leaves. She did not turn to see what shuffled behind her.

"I woke up and you were far away," came his groggy voice.

"I did not think you would wake."

He stumbled towards her, resting a tired head on her shoulder. "I had a dream," he said.

"A dream?" she asked, running her hands through his hair. She felt him nod against her shoulder.

"All this time I have been looking for you. I haven't been able to shake it."

"What was it about?"

"In the dream," he yawned, "I was waking up alone." She could hear his smile. "When I woke for real, I could not be certain if I were still dreaming or not. But in this dream, I woke and I knew I was not here. The colors were different. Duller. I was laying in the dusty goat paths at the foot of a great mountain, the mountain that touches the sky."

She nodded gravely, she knew the place he meant. It stood erect on the furthest part of the horizon, its summit hidden by the clouds. They had never dared go there before. Beasts, older than them, roamed upon that mountainside. Creatures like them but with the legs of animals. They had never seen such creatures but the young nymph had told them about it in whispers.

"I rose from the dust," he continued, "and in the far distance, I could hear the steady clicking of hooves. I saw the tail first. A thick, hypnotic pull of black, swaying back and forth back and forth. This was a horse twice the size of a normal one. Strong and sure and grey. And as it walked, I followed, eyeing the tail the whole way. I didn't feel myself move. It was like space had moved past me instead. And then there was this hot light. It was brighter than the sun itself. A voice rang in my ears but I could not understand it. I tried to look at it but then I woke up."

Erde chewed her thumb.

"I must go there," Tieren said.

Erde snapped her head to look at him. "But it is so dangerous."

"Something is telling me I must. This isn't the first time I dreamt of this horse but it is the first time it told me to do something. I want to know what is there."

She nodded. "Then I will go with you."

Tieren was quiet for a moment. In the dirt, he drew lines with his knuckles. "I'm not sure," he finally said. "I think this is something I have to do on my own."

She nodded again but ice crept in her veins. "Tieren, how do you know if it will be safe?"

"I know the stories as well as you do. I would not go unless I was certain. I am certain. This was just the thing I needed. I need to discover something more, this is it."

"Oh, Tieren, I didn't mean physically discover."

"No, Erde you were right. Maybe this is my place."

"Okay," she said hesitantly. "I trust you. If this is what you need, I'll help you in any way I can."

"Erde?"

"Yes?"

"This is the most sturdy I have felt in a long time."

"When will you go?"

"As soon as there is light."

She suppressed a gasp. "So soon?"

"I would go now if I could make my way in the darkness."

She nodded again. "What will you need? Should we pack supplies?"

"Just time. And Erde?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for being here."

She squeezed his shoulder. "Always," she promised.

But concern corroded her organs. When light came, something bubbled in her gut like a sickness. It grew more potent as his back grew smaller and smaller in the distance. She wrung a thick section of hair and let out a sigh.

"Be safe," she whispered into the air.

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*Erma. Ertma. Erla. Erde.*

"Erde!"

She stiffened upon waking.

"Erde." His voice came gently as he rocked her.

She blinked back the sudden brightness from her eyes until all she could see was his face, framed by radiant streaks of sun.

"You're back," she cheered, drowsily, pulling him into an embrace. Hard she squeezed him. Three days had passed since he had gone.

"Erde," he said, pulling back. He placed both hands on her shoulders. "Oh, Erde, you have no idea what I have seen. What I have learned."

"What? What is it Tieren?"

He wetted his lips and then wetted them again, rocking on his heels with the same potential energy as a scouting lion. "Do you remember when I promised you that I would help you answer all of your wonders? That I would search for the answers?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have." He beamed. "Every stone, every leap, every secret the universe has I hold the answers to."

"What do you mean?"

"Erde." His lips wetted. He took in a joyful breath. "I have met our Father."

"Father?" she choked. A strange laugh left her throat. "Tieren?"

“Yes, our Father. Atop the mountain, the earth touches the sky where he lives and guards us. When I went, I felt him in every inch of my being.”

“We have a father?”

Tieren nodded. “What do you remember about being born?”

“Ummm...” Her forehead tensed as she dropped her eyes to the ground. “I don’t know,” she admitted, shaking her head. Wisps of untethered memories were all she could recall, not a full current. How long had it been? “Maybe some sounds. And musk, something earthy.”

“Oh, Erde, sweet child.” Tieren tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “I have seen it. It was conjured before me like visions in flame, it was as though it was happening. He showed me everything. The world was nothing and then he made it, first there was light and then sky and water and earth. He created the trees and shrubs. And then me.”

“You?”

“Yes. From mud and dust, he sculpted in his own image. Then breathed his life into me. Of course, I should have known. Life has always been given from the air for it is His breath.”

“The air?” Erde pulled back from him.

“I was lonely in the land and so next he made animals. I named each one but the weight of my loneliness was too great.”

“I remember you telling me how you felt lonely.”

“And so he gave me you. My gift.” He stroked her hair. “Now neither of us shall ever feel such loneliness again.”

Erde paused, shaking away sleep, trying to take it all in. “Well, how was I born?”

“From me. While I slept he took my rib and created you from it. We are bone and bone, flesh and flesh.”

“What? Tieren,” she scoffed. Tieren frowned, sulking at her mockery. “That is the most ridiculous thing that I have ever heard. How could I have been born from you? Have you ever seen a father birth a child? It is the mother who has the womb. Where is our mother?”

“There is none,” Tieren sulked. “There is only Him. And it makes perfect sense. Of course, you were made from me, that is why you are so much smaller.”

“But our hands and feet are of the same size. If anything, you would have been born from my ribs, that is why my waist cinches. Are you sure you remember it right?”

Tieren turned from her and crossed his arms. Erde clicked her tongue and put her arm around his shoulder, flicking the dryness out of her mouth.

“Maybe there is truth in what you say,” she tried, gently. “It is not as though I remember. Tell me more. What was your journey like? What is our Father like?”

Tieren put his hand on hers and turned back around. “It was awe-striking. In all the beauty we have known, I have never seen anything that made me feel as I did there. The climb was hard, I have never known exhaustion as I did when I reached the peak but then I heard His voice and all weakness left me and I was lighter than air. He told me things. And all I wanted to race back to tell them to you because I know how much you like to know. Erde, He told me our names.”



She shook her head drowsily. "Our names?"

"Yes, the names we were given. The names of who we are. He called me Adam and the moment I heard it I knew it to be right. And he told me your name was Eve."

"Eve?" It tasted bland. There was no rhythm or music to it. "I like the name I have. It would be strange to call myself anything different."

"It isn't strange at all. It feels right like finally knowing how to use your legs."

"I did not need to be told how to use my legs. I just knew, just as I know what my name is."

Tieren's shoulders dropped. "All I have ever wanted was to give you the answers that you always seek. Erde, I have found them. If you were there, you would know as I know. Why is my word not good enough for you?"

It shook her to hear this. In all the world she cared but for him, she cared the most. He was her brother, her lover, her companion, her friend. Why did he keep questioning that? Did he not feel the deep love she had for him?

"I hear you," she whispered. "I trust you."

"Do you accept it? Do you believe His word to be true?"

She took in the glow of his face. Had she not wanted him to find this kind of happiness? To feel better? She breathed in deeply, her stomach churning as she spoke. "I believe in you," she said. She could feel the bile rising in her throat. "I will call you Adam."

He signed and stroked the side of her cheek. "And I will call you Eve."

Her body tingled. But for his happiness, she could change her name. What was in a name anyway? But she could recognize something darker in her motivation. Even foggy with sleep she could see something clear as the morning spring: something was different. Atop of that mountain, something won him over. And she feared if she did not accept, he might go on without her.

"Adam." It sounded foreign to her. "I want to go back with you. To the mountain."

"Erd- Eve, I wish you could but I am the only one permitted to go. But I promise to tell you everything. Word by word so that it is like you are there with me. I wish there was some other way."

Erde balked and her throat burned with a sensation she had never felt before. "But..."

"I know," he said. "It's just... I won't go back if you don't want me to."

She squirmed under his solid gaze. She held all the cards and veins flooded with the guilt of it. The pride on his face was plain to see. *I had never seen anything that made me feel as I did*, he had said.

"As if I would keep something like that from you," she said and he beamed.

"Come," he said, grabbing her hand. "Let's find you some food. The olives in the grove are beginning to ripen."

## Chapter 5

In the luminescent field of dreams, Eve watched herself walk. In the black night, an electrum glowing mist fogged the ground and clung to the trees, a hazy mimic of day. Eve watched the other version of herself elegantly twisting through the forest, turning with a sly smile to be sure she was keeping up. Eve waded through the mist, racing to keep up with the figure. This woman looked like her from the diamond skin to the long hair which fell before her breasts, swaying by her navel. All was Eve but for the figure's glowing eyes, green-gold like the fog. Upon her head was a crown, twisted from twigs and violet bittersweets and ferns. Eve called out to her but she heard only echo- sounds are not normal in dreams. The graceful figure moved further through the magic forest, emerging in a wide clearing, which was almost swallowed by the night. She turned to look at Eve and smiled. Eve stopped before her. The air had an electric charge to it, cool and clear, it tasted sickly sweet. The figure tilted her head up towards the sky. Slowly, Eve did the same. All she saw was darkness, there was not even a moon.

"I don't see..." she trailed. She brought her eyes back down but the woman was gone. In her place stood a horned cow, black but for the very tips of its fur which glowed with the same green-gold as the fog.

She recoiled, heart pounding. "What are you?" Her voice came as though underwater.

The creature's yellow eyes bore into her. "Are you afraid?" It was like the wind had said it.

Though she trembled, she shook her head.

"Will you hear me?"

Eve tried to settle her quickened breath to find her tongue. "What will you say?" she asked, at last.

"I will speak of change. Imminent and irreversible."

Eve felt a stone weigh in her stomach. How did the creature sense her dread? "I do not know of any change," she lied.

"You will see it in the rains, in the snow, which hides the earth. In the sun, which distorts shapes with shadow."

"It will not happen."

"It has already come."

"No!"

Lightning flashed, the creature flickered. "We forget the earth when we look at the sky but, remember, it is forever on the earth that your feet stand."

A low rumble and then the ground began to quake.

*Remember*, something whispered, bouncing between her ears. She felt a tug at her leg, she looked down to see the forest roots snaking up her legs, dragging her down. Her breath quickened in panic. *Remember*. She pulled at the roots as they grew higher and higher.

Eve gasped, jumping out of her sleep.

"Adam," she said, reaching to shake him. Cold sweat dampened her forehead and lower back. "Adam?" But he was not there. She had forgotten he had returned to the mountain. She sat, panting in the darkness, the dream still vivid. She could almost feel something peering at her

through the darkness. She pulled her knees close to her, squeezing her eyes shut. Goosebumps prickled on her skin and she felt herself shake.

"It was only a dream," she repeated to herself, rocking herself back to sleep.

When she opened her eyes again, Adam was there. Dawn's light sifted through the sieve of the tree's branches, illuminating his frame and the sage woven into his long hair.

"When did you get back?" Eve asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I've been here for a while. But you are so peaceful when you sleep," he told her, "I wouldn't dare wake you."

"Oh, Adam, I had such a strange dream," she yawned. She thought for a moment. "But I can't remember what it was about. I woke to tell you, I wanted to remember."

"Well, tell me about it tonight. Wake me if you have another for I will be here by your side. Come, I have gathered pears for you. I have more news to tell you."

He pulled forward a large leaf platter with fruits and flowers alike. She reached for a pear, rubbing her eyes. Out of habit, his hands reached for a poppy which he began to braid in her hair.

"On my trip to the mountains, our Father told me about the valley. He told me how He tamed the chaos of nothing to bring forth the fruit we eat and the air we breathe. We spoke of the animals, their beauty and simplicity. He told me all and He has asked that we tend to his garden. The world, he told me, is ours to care for and look over. It is our gift."

Eve silently chewed, her hair hardly tugged under Adam's deft hands.

"It is," he continued. "our purpose. And he instructed me to make use of the land and build a great homestead to rule from."

"Our own home?"

"Yes, like the grizzly's den or a thrush's nest. It will be our shelter, our base. There we can watch over the world, tending His garden. We can watch as our creatures grow and multiply. Maybe even bring our own creatures into this world."

Erde chewed, turning the bits of pear over and around her tongue. "Why do we need a homestead to tend the world? Can we not live as we do now and care for it?"

Adam finished his braid and tucked it behind her ear. "It is not our place to question His will. If He asked for it, it must be done."

Eve was silent. Her whole life she had only known freedom. Her feet may take her down the path of deer or in the impulsive direction of the wind. She might sleep under the lacing birches or amongst the gardenias. But if Adam wanted it, she would try and settle. There was no reason waking in the same place each morning would be boring. The consistency might be an adventure in itself. Imagine how the trees around them would change. Perhaps a rabbit would borrow near them and they could wake each morning to watch its family double and then triple in size.

A home together.

"It could be wonderful," she said to him.

He kissed her forehead. "It will be wonderful. Come, finish your breakfast. I want to show you the place I have chosen."

"You've already picked the place?"

"Of course, it needed to be perfect. You will love it, I swear."

After breakfast, he walked her to the eastern side of the valley, close to its edge. Wide fields lay there, rich in color. Here, the river lay still, depositing onto its bank red clay and stones.

Adam covered Eve's eyes, walking her towards their plot of land. She stumbled forth blindly, holding her hands out in front of her. When he lifted his hands away, she saw a massive angel oak, standing alone in the field. Its thick, arachnidian branches grasped both the earth and clouds. Its trunk was short and fat, giving way early to its many limbs. They had played here before. In the early days, they had raced each other up the branches, their eager muscles bursting with excursion. Once, Eve had hidden from Adam here as a game. Eve knew that a blue jay nested on one of the branches. And knew that before dawn, young fawns would run ahead of mothers to feast upon the acorns scattered along the trunk. The oak's heavy crown created shadows that stretched the length of four loons.

If she climbed atop the highest branch, she could see the full curve of the valley. Three branches lower she could see the spread of the forest, puffed like monkey bread. Six below that, the river was visible. And behind them, perhaps a few hours walk, the mountain stood in guard.

This was the foundation of their new life. He took Eve to the riverside and sketched into the clay his vision.

"Here, at the base of the tree," he said, pointing to his drawing with the branch. "We will dig a trench to store gourds of water and other supplies. We will need to build tools, weave baskets. And along here," he drew around the tree a wide circle, "we will build a fence."

Eve looked at him. "Why would we need a fence?"

"To mark which territories are ours."

She reached her hand past his to add a line saying, "We would need a path to the riv-"

"Don't!" He slapped her hand away. Immediately, he reached back out to her hand, holding it and petting it gently with his thumb. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that. You're right, we need a path to the river. Just, let me do the sketching. It's too distracting to have too many hands in the way."

She jerked her hand away. "I still don't think we need a fence," she said. "No other animals have them and their territory is clear."

"Well, as we settle," he said, chewing on his thumb, eyes focused on the drawing, "we might need them to pen things in."

"Pen things in?"

"Yes, it would be far more convenient to have animals on hand. We could use them to plow or to gather eggs. Maybe even milk."

Eve shook her head. "I'm not going to help you do that. I thought we were supposed to tend to the animals, not trap them."

"Eve, it isn't- okay, let me explain. We are tasked with tending the land. The animals are our resource to use to do that."

Eve shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Well, will you let me finish? Grrrr, you keep interrupting me. I'm trying to get you to understand." He chuckled nervously. Eve glowered at him. "Look," he tried again, patting her hand. "I love you, I just am not good at explaining things. I need a second."

Eve crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine," she said. "Explain."

He took a quick breath. "Look, we were given the responsibility to take care of the world. Our Father created us in His image to do His work for him. It is a grave and sacred responsibility. As compensation, we are allowed to share in the spoils of the world. Everything here is ours to care for as we please. If keeping an animal allows us to do that, then we can."

"How would keeping an animal help us better care for them?"

"They can share the tasks of taming the land. They are faster and stronger than the two of us. We could use them to utilize the earth."

Eve shook her head. "No," she said. "That only sounds like you are helping yourself."

"Well, so what if we do? We put so much work into it, why not get something in return from it."

Eve gawked in disgust. "Does a mother look at her cub and think, what can I take from you? No, she cares for it and her reward is enjoyment in her baby's life and beauty."

Adam scratches the back of his neck in frustration. "Well, luckily we are not the mothers of the land. We are the rulers of it and can have more say in how we care for it. Our Father gave us full permission to do what we want to the land. So, we are building a fence and that is final."

Eve threw up her hands. "Then I will not help you." She stood.

"Wait, Eve, please." Slowly, she knelt back down. "I understand that this is strange to you. If you had heard Him speak of His vision then you would understand why I share it."

"Adam," she said. "I don't care whose vision it is. I will not care for the world in that way. I will help you with your fence but promise you will not use it to trap anything inside."

He twisted his lips in thought. "Okay," he said, finally. "Okay."

"Okay. Now, what else do we need besides fences."

"Right," Adam turned back to his sketch. "Along the fence, we will need to build entrances here, here, and here." He tapped the drawing with his stick. "Then, along the left side, near the tree line, we can dig a latrine. We will also need to construct a tapestry to protect us from the rain." He tapped his chin. "Maybe also figure out a way to suspend our food in the trees to keep insects away from it."

Eve slapped her knees and stood. "Alright, where do we begin?"

"Well, this is all meaningless unless we have the right tools. Upon the mountain, I learned how to fasten stones into blades and axes. I can do it here by the water. You head into the forest and find me some sturdy sticks I can use as handles. Perhaps sturdy logs we can use for our walls."

She headed off into the woods to search for lumber. Much of the fallen wood had already given way to rot and fell apart in her hands. She sifted through ferns and under brushes, carrying bundles to place under the shade of the oak. The blue jay squawked when she came near.

The two had constructed many monuments in their pasts. They would tip sticks together, creating pyramids to shield resting turtles from the sun. They would convert loose branches into forts. But this task already felt burdensome and it had hardly begun.

"We were given a great responsibility," Eve told herself. "Responsibilities are not always fun but they are necessary. Just trust him, let him take the lead. He knows what he is doing."

The next morning they woke to the screaming bird. Adam spent the morning sharpening sticks into steaks while Eve began to dig their supply trench. Rich loam soiled her hands and knees as she dug. At the sun's peak, Adam instructed her to find food. When she returned, arms heavy with fruits, he was measuring the distance between the oak and the imaginary perimeter of the fence. She paused to watch him, smiling. He stretched out his arm, using his strides as his metric. He walked six paces and then stopped, looked over his shoulder, scratched his head, and started again. She could hear him counting aloud to himself as she approached.

"Oh, good, you're back," he said when he saw her. He grabbed her shoulders and walked her to the perimeter. "Alright, just stand there." He adjusted her position slightly and then began his paces again. "One, two, three, four..."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Trying to figure out the distance between the tree and the fence. Take a few steps back." She did. "A little further, wait, stop. Perfect." He jogged over to her and dropped a stick to mark her place. "Hmmm," he frowned.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. This should be enough space. Will you run over and grab me some posts? The ones leaning against the tree?"

As she walked, the blue jay trilled. She set the fruits at the base of the tree, arranging them neatly on a clean pile of leaves.

Adam took the posts from her with a frown.

"I don't know how to stand them up," he said. He leaned posts against each other, forming a triangle. He stuck out his tongue, adjusting the sticks, trying to feel for its point of balance. But his monument collapsed and he threw his hands down.

"Why don't we just stick them in the ground?" Eve asked.

"I thought about that. But to stack the posts one after another seems like excessive work."

"You don't have to fit them one after another. Here, hold these two straight." Adam held two posts up and she held a branch perpendicularly to their sides forming an H. "Just do it like this."

Adam shook his head. "But how would we get it to stick?"

"Hmmm."

"We could make rope and tie them together."

"Yes! That's a good idea."

"Okay, help me drive these posts into the ground."

He grabbed a post, bringing it high above his head, and drove it into the ground. It hardly pierced the soil. He lifted and struck again and again, tearing up the grass but not driving the post deeper than its tip.

"I don't think this is working," Eve grunted, leaning over the top of her post, trying to screw it into the earth.

Adam threw his post to the side, panting. The blue jay hollered in the tree. "I can't think with all that noise!" He pulled his hair out of his eyes and said, "We are going to need something heavy to hammer them through the ground."

"We should dig holes and bury them," Eve said.

Adam scratched under his chin. "We should do both. It will secure the fence more. Let me think." He ran his hands through his hair again, jutting out his hip as he looked at the ground. "We are going to need to braid rope, dig holes, and sharpen more posts. I'm going to have to fasten better digging tools." He tried to walk towards the river.

"Oh," said Eve, bounding after him. "Show me how so I can help you."

Adam hummed with indecision. "Uh, another time, Eve. We really don't have time. Just focus on gathering materials for the rope." He turned away again.

"Wait, what about lunch? Let's eat together and then we can go off on our own. I brought you your favorite."

He looked past her to the fruit, piled under the tree, and looked back to her. "Sorry, we are already falling behind. Next time." He shrugged, heading back towards the river.

And so began their new pattern. At dawn they would rise, Adam to the woods, axe over shoulder, to gather sturdy branches, and Eve to the river to gather reeds to tie into a rope. Occasionally, Adam would come down to the water to whet stones. And she would hum as she worked and he would think of a tune to hum back. When it would come to be noon, Eve would leave her rope and turn to the forest to scavenge for fruits and nuts. Always, she invited Adam to the riverside to sit beside her and enjoy food and rest. But always, he would look at the unfinished work before him and sigh, asking her to just leave the food beside him. And so, she would sit with him in silence, as his hard muscles push and pull against the wood, shavings littering the ground.

By dusk, she would coil the rope, stretching and pulling on her worn fingers, and leave in the supply trench. Then, she would fasten together balms of willow and peppermint so that when Adam finished his work, they would be ready to rub on his stiff muscles.

"I can barely lift my arms," he would say, as she massaged the ointment into his deltoids.

"I know the feeling," she would say, rolling her stiff neck. "Can you rub my shoulders?"

"Sure."

And as he pressed his thumbs into her soft tissue, she would look at the burns between her fingers, skin torn from friction, and wince. Gently, she applied the balm.

Often, at night they would be too exhausted to speak.

"Tell me a story," she would ask, curling onto his chest but he would already be snoring.

Then, there were some nights when he would not be around at all.

"I am going to the mountains," he would say, his muscles greasy with her balm. "I will be back in three days' times."

"Please, stay with me," she would beg.

He would look at her with a sad smile. "I wish I could," he would say and then leave behind a list of things to do-- dig holes for the posts, weave together baskets, one for tools and another for food.

Admittedly, she did not dislike the work. In fact, the routine offered a structure to their lives that they had always lacked. And by the time night fell, she would feel a sense of accomplishment when the work was done. Maybe the purpose he spoke of was sacred. She would think about that as she worked, about how they were tasked with such an important responsibility. She wanted to learn about it from their Father himself.

"Why does he send for you only?" she would ask Adam. "When can I go atop the mountain with you?"

"I'll ask," he promised. He promised that every time. And when he would return, he would always shake his head and offer a lame, "Maybe next time."

Every time he said those words, she felt a tightness in her throat. Though, she never let on to Adam for he loved the mountain.

The more they worked, the more time he seemed to spend on the mountain. She would feel him leave in the darkness and wake to find an empty spot beside her. Her heart felt the sting of his absence. But by the time noon came round, she could hear him over the noise of the river hammering in his posts.

"Why must you always leave?" she asked him one night. Her voice was hoarse from lack of use.

"I need to go over my designs for the homestead."

"I thought we had a plan."

"We do. But after the fence, there are places to be sowed and expanded. I'm reviewing the details to make sure I can get it right."

"Maybe it would help if I could go with you."

He shook his head. "You know you cannot. Um, not yet, anyway."

"When?"

"Eve, don't ask me about it. If it were up to me, you'd already be there. But it's not."

She sighed and rolled away from him. "I don't know why we can't design this place ourselves."

"Eve, it isn't for you to question."

She snorted bitterly.

"Eve," he said more gently. "I hope that you're happy."

She softened at this. "So long as you're happy."



One day, Adam came home from the mountain in fury. Eve hadn't noticed at first, she only saw the approach of his figure. Overhead, the sky was colored mint, freckled with the arched backs of birds.

"Adam," she called, gaily, running up from the riverside. "Adam," she called again but slowed in her step.

At first, she thought he might have been leaning against the oak in exhaustion but then she noticed how heavily he kicked it. The blue jay hollered, hopping up and down atop its branch, looking down on him.

"Adam?"

"What?" he spat, pulling the hair from his face.

She started. "I just... are you okay?"

He huffed, running his hands over his face. "Why would I be okay? We have been at this for weeks and there is still no progress."

"What do you mean? We have almost staked all the-"

"And the rope? How much have you done?"

"Uh, it's long."

"Long enough to begin to fasten the fence?"

"I don't know, we haven't tried."

"Because, Eve, we need that rope to finish the fence." He pointed to the western part of their property. "There are tracks ripping up the ground. Animals are coming in. We need this done. We needed it done yesterday. What is taking so long?"

"Wow, jeez, I'm sorry, I didn't realize we were in such a rush."

"No, I know you didn't realize. That's why you spend all day playing in the woods instead of doing what I ask."

Eve rocked back. "Excuse me? I'm only ever doing what you ask."

"Right, so I ask you to wander off for half the day."

"I'm not wandering off. I'm gathering food and herbs and supplies."

Adam put his hands to his temples and shook his head. "I don't need food or herbs, I need this fence to be done."

"Well." Eve crossed her arms. "Good luck getting it done with calloused hands. You wouldn't even have time to work on the fence if I wasn't fetching your meals or rubbing your shoulders."

Adam laughed bitterly. "Oh right, you do it all. It must be hard carrying sticks and braiding reeds all day."

"Oh wow." She shook her head. "I'll gladly switch with you."

The blue jay honked, jumping on its branch, unhappy to be ignored.

Adam growled. "I can't think with this bird around!" He stomped back towards the tree.

"Wait, what are you doing," Eve yelled, running after him. She grabbed his arm as he reached for its nest, pulling it down with her whole body weight.

"Get off of me," he said.

"Don't touch that!" she yelled back.

"Eve!" He elbowed her off and she fell to the ground losing her balance.

"I said, don't touch that," she said, scrambling back to her feet.

"Eve, this is our space and I won't share it with this damned bird anymore. It is always yelling and hollering. It keeps me up all night and tortures me while I work. It goes."

She hopped in front of him. "It stays. You don't own this land, the bird was here first."

"Eve," he said. "Everything here is mine. And if I say the bird goes, it goes." He lifted his arm again and she pulled it back down.

"But if you move the nest, the babies will die."

"So be it."

"Adam, if you move that bird, I will go with it."

He stopped. He closed his eyes. She could see the vein bulging in the side of his neck.

Who was this person?

When he opened his eyes again, they were hard. "Fine," he said. "The bird can stay." He turned, walking towards the fence. The muscles on his back were stiff.

"Adam," Eve called. She stormed after him. "Adam!" She yanked his shoulder back but the look on his face no longer seemed angry but weary. Eve softened.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

Adam pulled his shoulder away from her. He let out a long sigh, shaking his head. "We are moving too slowly. We're falling behind."

"According to whom? What's the rush."

"Eve, you don't- you know what, never mind."

"Adam? What's eating at you?"

He was quiet for a moment. Finally, he said, "He is disappointed in me."

Eve melted. "Oh, Adam," she cooed. "No, He isn't."

Adam kicked a tuft of grass. "He is because we are falling so far behind. We need to be better."

Eve clicked her tongue. "We don't need to be better. We are working as hard as we can. He needs to relax."

Adam snapped his head around. "I won't hear you talk about Him like that again," he said. "It is not for us to question His plan, you especially."

Eve dropped her hand from his arm, her sympathy turning bitter.

"Sometimes, I don't recognize him," she whispered. Her voice fell like an echo and rippled through the shallows. Eve hugged her legs closer to her body, pressing her forehead against her knees. "There is something about him I cannot reach. I am blind to this new part of him. No matter how he explains it, I do not see it."

Beneath the waters, the sea nymph listened. She gently stirred the waters to soothe Eve. And as intended, Eve did relax to the soft pull of the water. She looked into the pool and saw the face of the sea goddess, quiet and thoughtful. As always, she was patient, waiting for Eve to

speak. Eve let her hand fall into the cool water and she gently pulled it back and forth, back and forth.

"It makes me so angry that he goes. But I don't know why."

The tug of the water was like gravity.

"I feel these things, things I have never felt before but I don't understand them. I don't know what they are and I don't know why they are there."

She pulled her hand out of the water, watching the beads of water roll down her wrists. "I miss him," she said. "I admit it."

She looked pitifully into the pool and the nymph looked pitifully back at her.

"No, I can't tell him. He's so happy when he comes back. I can't take that spark away from him. You know, it's just new. When it no longer feels exciting, he'll probably forget all about it."

She fell onto her back. "But this fence, these walls and structures he wants to build are stressing him out."

And then something occurred to her. She sat up. If the fence was finished, he would not need to return to the mountain. He would not need to spend time whittling sticks. Then, things would go back to normal. Then, he would look at her again the way he does the mountain. And then, he wouldn't snap so much or leave so often.

"I have to finish the fence," she realized.

Her realization created a fever within her. Her pattern shifted, now she rose earlier than Adam, spending the morning preparing holes for him to stake his posts. She worked her rope into the moonlight, ignoring the stiffness that formed in her hands. She woke every day exhausted but did not slow down her pursuit, it was a race. She would have the fence done before the mountain could have him completely.

"Adam, hand me that stick over there," she would instruct, gesturing with her chin. Her hands would be tangled with rope, half tied around a post. "Adam?"

"Of course," he would say, distracted with his post.

She would tap her foot impatiently. She would click her tongue. "Fine," she huffed and would grab it herself, balancing the stick on her knee as she tied a knot around it with her teeth.

At night, despite her day's work she would crawl to Adam and ask, "Would you walk with me in the moonlight?"

"Not tonight," he would say. "I'm too tired. Tomorrow, I promise."

And so, her head would fall and she would go to the riverside to whittle posts. When she would return, Adam would be fast asleep. She would look at him in the moonlight, stretched and twisted, and would think back to the days when she had first loved him but was too afraid to touch him. Those days seem so long ago.

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The cicada chirped, calling back and forth to one another from the bushes. Eve sat cross-legged by the river, still but for her twisting fingers. Her presence did not startle a fawn,

who slowly approached the riverside, bending its neck to drink. She could tell that this creature would grow strong and swift. Already, the muscles in its legs showed through its thick fur. Eve offered her hand, leaning across the river to see if it would approach. It flicked its eyes up, pausing to stare. It saw her hand and tipped its head forward slightly.

"It's okay," Eve cooed.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Eve and the deer both snapped their heads. The scream came from Adam. Eve's heart quickened. She glanced back at the deer but it had already fled.

"Adam?" Eve called, running towards the field. "Adam?"

"Ahhh," he cried, shaking his hand, his face pulled in a grimace. He put his thumb in his mouth, stomping one foot.

"What happened?" she asked.

He winced, showing her his thumb. "I hit it with a rock."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my, Adam it's purple. Oh my gosh, get over here."

She grabbed his elbow and led him to the trunk, instructing him to sit. She sifted through the supply area, lifting and sniffing baskets until she found the herbs she needed.

"Chew this."

"What is it?" he whined, inspecting the piece of willow bark she handed over.

"It's for the pain. Just chew it." She flustered, looking through her ointments. She greased his finger with medicine and wrapped it tightly with a leaf. She clucked her tongue. "It looks like the nail might come off. Are you alright?"

He nodded miserably. "I need to get back to the fence."

"You will do no such thing. Stay here, rest your hand."

He shook his head. "It needs to be done."

"Then I will do it." She nodded confidently at him. "Really, it will be fine."

He sighed with relief. She stood to walk over to his work on the far side of the homestead.

"Don't let me catch you moving," she told him as she went.

This part of the fence mirrored the treeline. It was almost funny to Eve to see how minuscule their stumpy posts looked compared to the full growth of the forest. She looked at Adam's work: six posts lay buried and five lay ready. She picked up a fallen post and fitted it inside its hole. She pushed and twisted it until its tip lay buried. She shook it, it felt loose. She found the stone Adam had been hammering with, and carefully lifted it to the post. She whacked it down. And then whacked it again. And again. She wiggled the post. Still loose. She hit a few more times. Solid.

"Whew." She wiped the sweat from her brow. "That wasn't so bad."

She reached for the next post and buried it. Soon, she was out of posts.

"Adam? Are there more?" she called. She looked towards him, her hand shielding her eyes, and saw him curled in sleep.

She walked over to the oak, the sun beating on her back. All of the logs gathered were blunt. She shrugged and grabbed a stick.

She balanced the stick against her leg and leaned over to sharpen it. The log rolled away and she cursed, holding it back into place. She half-whacked, half-scraped the log to a semi-point. She lifted her hatchet for a heavy hit but when the tool hit the log, the hatchet head flew off.

"Oh, no," she gasped, picking it up. She tried to snap the handle and head back together but it did not work. She bit into one of her nails. Adam still had not shown her how to make tools.

She looked through the supplies for a spare but could not find one. This would set them a whole day back.

"Whatever," she said, taking the hatchet head to the post. She sat down, holding the stick between her legs, and scrapped the point. The wood kept slipping, she readjusted her hand, peeling the bark.

"Ssss," she hissed, pulling her hand back. The blade cut into her finger. She held her thumb to the light and could see the cut thicken with crimson. She waved it off. She hunched back over and continued sharpening the post.

When she was done, she had sharpened and buried six more. She could feel the weariness in her bones. Dirt and sweat streaked her face. She let her back slide down the oak and brought a pear to her lips. Her finger throbbed.

"Good morning," Adam mumbled, blinking awake.

Eve snorted. "It's hardly morning."

"Ohhhhh," Adam groaned, stretching out his muscles. "I needed that."

Eve looked him up and down. "How's your thumb," she asked.

He turned his hand over, lifting his bandage to see inside. "Throbbing."

She nodded, taking another bite of the fruit.

"Hey, you," he said, tugging her foot. "Come here."

She crawled her weary body to him and he wrapped his arms around her, kissing the tip of her nose.

"You take such good care of me," he said, nuzzling into her neck.

She yawned. "I'm so tired." She rested her head on his chest.

"Then stay with me."

"No, I have to work on the fence."

"Oh, forget the fence, stay with me."

"Forget the fence?"

He stroked her cheek, tilting her chin up for a kiss. "Forget the fence," he said, wrapping his legs around her.

Afterward, they lay tangled in each other's arms. Eve felt breathless and relieved.

"You know what I need right now?" she asked.

"Hmm?" He lay with his eyes closed.

"Plums."

"You're obsessed with food," he laughed.

"I'm obsessed with plums. I can't tell if I like them better when they are pink inside or yellow inside. I like them sweet, but I loooooove them tart."

Adam chuckled. "On the walk to the mountainside, there is a plum orchard. Some say it is tended by the wood nymphs. They are as large as your fists."

Eve's eyes widened, "Really?"

Adam opened an eye and shook his head.

"Trickster," she whispered, a smile touching her lips. "Do you remember the orchard by the west side of the river? Where the boulders are tall?"

"I think you used to call that place Rock Land."

Eve smiled. "I may have."

"What about it?"

"Do you know it was there where I first realized how much I cared for you?"

He lifted a brow. "Really?"

She nodded. "You had grown taller than me. I couldn't believe it. And I started to wonder, what else didn't I notice about you. And I began to notice that all of the normal things about you changed. I couldn't resist."

Adam smiled. "You should have been born a plum," he said, squeezing her. "Because you are so sweet."

"Adam," she said, lifting her head. "Let's go back there."

"Now?"

"Yes. We haven't left these walls in... I don't even remember how long. Let's go."

He squirmed underneath her. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"We have such an early day tomorrow."

"Okay, fine. But let's at least do something other than sitting here. Let's go for a walk together or swim in the river. Whatever you want."

"Uhh, I'm not really in the mood."

"What do you mean?"

"I have this blistering headache from the sun and my thumb still hurts."

She snorted. "That didn't seem to bother you a few minutes ago."

"Eve, I just don't want to. We still have the fence to look after..."

"What? Now, the fence is important."

"We still are behind schedule."

"Oh, I see," she said, sitting up. "Now that you've gotten what you wanted you don't want to spend any more time with me."

"What, no," he said, sitting up. "It's not like that. Damn, now I feel like such a jerk." He slapped the ground.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Damn, can I not do anything right by you?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Why are you making this about you right now?"

"What are you talking about-- You know what, fine. Let's do the thing you want to do. Whatever. Let's go swimming or look for a frog or whatever."

She shook her head. "Forget it."

"What? What am I doing now?"

"I want you to want to spend time with me." She felt her eyes prick with heat and she blinked it away. "I just feel like you don't anymore."

He sighed. "That's not true," he whined. "I'm just busy, you know that."

She wiped her eyes. "I know, I do. I just can't help feeling this way." Her whole chest tightened.

"Well," he tried, "what do you want from me."

She looked at the sky in defeat. "Nothing," she said. "Just forget it. Let's just work on the fence."

"Is that what you want?"

"Yup."

## Chapter 6

Her breath came like a whisper as she woke. She stamped her dry lips together, her body still heavy from the day before.

"Adam," she mumbled sleepily, blindly reaching for him. She felt his place but he was not there. She blinked back against the light, seeing his back bent over something.

"Morning," she yawned, rubbing her eyes. He did not turn. She crawled over to him and draped her arms around him. "What are you up to?"

"I leave today for the mountain," he said.

Her body froze. Sobriety shook her sleepiness away. "For how long," she asked hesitantly.

"A few days."

"Adam," she breathed. "Why don't you go tomorrow. We've made so much progress, let's just take the day to ourselves. You must feel better now. We haven't done anything together in so long. Let's skip stones or go for a hike."

"I will be hiking," he said. "When I go to the mountain." He pulled her arms off of him.

"Mmm," she mused, pressing her forehead into his back. "Then we can do something else. Anything else. Whatever you want."

"Eve."

"We could just laze around in the sun all day, counting the blades of grass..."

"Eve!"

Adam stood. She caught herself from stumbling forward. "I'm going to the mountain today. I have no choice."

"You do," she whined. *Choose me.*

He let out a low groan, rubbing circles into his forehead. "Eve."

"Come on," she smiled, her stomach in knots. Bile filled her throat, almost choking the words from her. "Stay with me."

Adam stared down at her, she couldn't decipher the blank expression on his face. He looked like that for a long moment. "No."

Eve's chest fluttered. Rapidly, her mind flipped through ideas to get him to stay. He's only different because of that place, she told herself. She just needs to keep him here.

He turned to leave.

"Adam, wait," she burst. He sighed, looking over his shoulder. She dropped her voice and made it breathy. "I'll make it worth your while."

She held her breath. She could see the muscles in his jaw throb. He shook his head at her.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he asked. "I said I have to go, so I have to go. Why would you put this extra pressure on me."

"No," she cooed. "I'm not putting pressure on you, I just want--"

"Want what? To keep me here all day. You know I have to leave."

"Why do you have to leave?"

"I have responsibilities. I don't know how many times I need to explain that to you before you get it."

"I do get it. "

"You don't. I'm already late as it is." He rubbed his temples. "I got no sleep last night between the bird and you pouting. I don't need this. I have to go!"

Eve huffed and bore her eyes into the ground. She felt her eyes prick again but she held herself firm. "I didn't realize my feelings burdened you so," she muttered.

Adam shook his head. "Nope," he said. "I'm not doing this with you right now. I'm leaving."

"Fine, go. I don't care," she lied. "Leave, just get out of here."

"Eve, I..." He cursed. "I wish you could be a little more understanding. You know, the world doesn't revolve around you."

She gasped. But his back was already to her, walking away. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away. It burned to have him go but she wouldn't turn to look at him.

"Oh, and Eve?" Her heart leaped but she didn't turn.

"Hmm?" Let him come back. Let him apologize. Let him grab her in his arms and change his mind. She'd tell him did understand. That she only missed him.

"You need to stay here while I'm gone. I need the area to be protected."

She whipped around to watch him walk away. Her mouth forgot language. It wasn't until he was out of sight did she remember how to speak.

"What is wrong with you?" she yelled into the trees.



Stay there? After those hurtful words, he wanted her to just sit here? Guard his precious homestead. His stupid homestead? His stupid purpose and responsibility! So precious and perfect.

She looked at his fence with white fury. "I hate you!" she yelled.

She went to the nymph, choking on her sobs.

"Why does he hate me so much now," she cried. "What did I do?" She could hardly make out the sea nymph's expression through her tears. "Am I overbearing? I didn't want to pressure him, I only wanted to spend time together like we used to."

Her chest felt crushed, imploding with grief and confusion.

"He said I was a burden," she whispered. "My feelings are burdens." She drew circles in the ground with her knuckles. "How could he betray my confidence like that? Make me feel so... so..."

She shook her head.

"No, he never said that," she said. "I said that. He never said burden. He is just stressed. It's the fence and that mountain. I shouldn't weigh him down with my load too."

She swallowed tightly, and in that breath pushed down her sorrow. It was then that the first brick was laid in her breast.

"I just won't go to him with my problems anymore. I don't need his help anyway, I can figure out my issues by myself. And if I ever do need someone, I have you."

She looked into the water and the nymph smiled sadly back.

When she returned to the homestead at dusk, Adam was there, kneeling by the fence. Several posts had been ripped out. The rope had been severed, spewing strands over their fence, that lay now like timber.

"What happened?" she asked as she approached.

"Where were you?" he asked, no greeting.

"I was..." She threw her thumb over her shoulder, looking back. "I didn't expect you to be back so soon."

"Where were you?"

"I was--"

"It doesn't matter where you were because you were not here like I told you to be."

She trembled under the thunder of his voice. "What happened?" She looked around at the damage. Only a small section had been compromised. It could have been the wind. Or a pack of animals, mindlessness rolling.

"Your negligence, that's what happened."

"I..."

Adam threw down a post and stood to his full height. She cowered back. "What excuse can you possibly have? Do you know how far this is going to set us back?"

"Adam, I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

He shook his head. "You don't know what to say, don't know what to do." He gave the fence a swift kick. "Why don't you just do what I tell you then. Unbelievable. Your incompetence is unbelievable." He huffed out a breath, squeezing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

She lifted her chest, her heart beating wildly. "What could you possibly mean. I am here every day, breaking my back to build this fence. I gave up sleeping for this. Freedom. My fingertips have lost the feeling they are so scarred up. Remember, you did not build this alone. But I don't get any credit. I'm excluded from your plans, your secret meetings, your life. And now I am at fault? Me sitting here wouldn't have stopped whatever happened."

"Eve, I told you why you cannot go to the mountaintop. I've told you 100 times." He vigorously scratched his jaw. "And I'm not going to keep repeating myself. Do you want credit for something? Earn it."

She looked at him in bewilderment. "How dare you? All you do is draw sketches in the sand and cry at every bruised thumb and you are supposed to be the one that is looked up to? Pathetic."

He leaned into her, enunciating his words very carefully. "If you are going to speak to me like a child," he said. "Then don't speak to me at all."

Her eyebrows shot up. "A child? How dare you call me a child?"

"How dare you act like one? You want to be treated like an adult, act responsible and quit sulking."

She stared at him with blind fury. Breath, she told herself, count backward from ten, nine, eight...

"I am sick and tired of not having a place here. This was supposed to be our home but it's all your vision. I'm excluded from every step. You say I don't understand but you never explain. You ignore all my efforts but complain when something goes wrong. My presence is a bother to you. I am simply a chore boy to you. And you are surprised I am not invested?"

Adam growled. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to tell me what you want because your actions make no sense to me. You say you want me around but then you ignore me. I ask to be included and you shut me out. So, which is it? I won't be where I am not wanted. Do you want me to stay or should I go? It makes no difference to me."

Adam's glower was hard. She could feel the ripple of his intense silence. "Of course," he said.

She threw up her hands "What? That doesn't answer my-- Nevermind, do you want me around or not?"

"Oh my gosh, will you frigging relax! I already answered your question. You sound obsessed."

Eve startled. "Excuse me?"

Adam paced back and forth. "It's like I can't catch a break from you. You are always whining for my attention like I have the time. Just get off of my back."

Eve gapped. "Whining for your attention? I ask for nothing of you. One afternoon in weeks. You don't even look at me. If I didn't reach out, there would be nothing but silence.

"What do you want from me? I'm busy. I apologize for having a life outside of you."

"Like I don't?"

"Oh, please, if it weren't for me you'd be nothing. What else do you have?"

She shook her head, disgust pinching her mouth. "You know what, Adam?" Her eyes began to burn. "I don't care what you want. I'm leaving."

She crushed her temples between her fingers, willing back the tears that welled behind her eyes.

"Don't do it," she threatened. "Don't you dare! He doesn't deserve your tears."

She bent over her pool but in the darkness, the sea nymph slept and there was no one to greet her across the obsidian surface.

"Obsessed," she yelled into the night. The thick air seems to hold her up. "Imagine his ego!" She rocked back and forth, pressing her fingers harder into her skull. She gasped as though drowning, trying to swallow her pain.

"I made such a fool out of myself, asking him to choose me. I looked like a child. A weak, petulant child. Is that what I am? Is that how he sees me?"

Her spine began to quiver, she pulled her arms around herself, shaking in self-pity. Her elegant face shrunk and twisted.

"No wonder he hates me," she mourned. "Look at me? Pathetic and ugly. I'm clingy and annoying. I have no glow, I am nothing special."

Eve pulled her limbs around herself tighter, rocking herself, talking to herself with soft whimpers. The gentle stir of the waters and the soft touch of the canna petals did little to soothe her. She sniffled, wiping the moisture under her nose with the back of her hand. She bit her lip, and a tear escaped her. "Let him be happy without me." She whined miserably. "I'm so unlovable."

Her tears fell from her cheek and into the pool. So soft it was, it did not disturb the water's surface.

She woke to the waterfall's mumble, to the insects' chirp. She woke to find the space beside her cold. She rolled to her back, squinting her eyes against the harsh light. Between her thick lashes, she could make out the shadowed movement of the cypress's branches flickering in the wind.

"So, this is what it means to live in the world alone," she said.

Shards from their fight fell onto her memory like shattered pottery. She tried to piece the fragments together, tried to restructure the events so that they never happened. If only he had not come back early. If only she had stayed. If they had never started the homestead in the first place.

What was it like before the fence? Before the mountain? She sniffled. He had been drawn to the mountain before he could even name his desire. What was so wrong with her that he wanted to leave so badly? What was she not giving him?

She pulled her knees to her chest, empty of tears. She welcomed misery. She welcomed emptiness. Even in her pool, where she had always felt safe, she found no solace. Even there, the color seemed duller.

Finding legs proved difficult, it was as though she could not walk. Her stomach was empty, food had not passed her lips in days. She had to leave, she had to move. She needed to leave the poolside, breathe fresh air. Her mind knew it, even as her body clung to the ground. It started with a crawl but she found her feet. And with them, she walked over to the pool. Huddled in her own misery, she had not yet peered into the pool. She did not want the nymph to see her in such distress. But when she leaned over the water's edge, it was Eve who recoiled in shock and disgust.

Driven into her gaunt face, the nymph's eyes swelled and sagged. Greasy hair ballooned in a nest-like tangle around her face, decorated with twigs and petals. Eve did not recognize the broken creature before her.

"What happened to you?" she asked, disgust snarled onto her lips.

The nymph merely shrugged.

"Was it me? Are you upset I have not seen you?" Eve wondered if the creature had even heard her, for the nymph's eyes were opaque and distant. The sight of her made Eve itch. She needed to leave.

Her first steps out of her place left her feeling naked. The air outside felt cool and indifferent. She was almost embarrassed to be seen by the forest, how it must have mocked her. She placed her hand over her rumbling belly. *Berries, there were berries nearby.* She cautiously waded through the wood in search of food. In her path, a bunny hopped. Eve hugged her arms over her chest and pushed forwards. More than once she thought about turning back but she continued.

Amongst the ferns, strawberries grew, still hard and small. They tasted tangy against her tongue. As she picked, she caught sight of the rope burns between her fingers. And the gash that split the top of her thumb. Her shoulders immediately drew forward and she began to shake. How much of herself did she need to give before he was happy? How much had she already given? *No, stop*, she told herself. That part of her life was behind her, memories only. Now, she only needed to concern herself with things that would make her happy. It had been so long since she could choose what she wanted. So, what does she want to do? Perhaps reacquaint herself with the smells of the forest. Perhaps burn her muscles with the pull of the stream. Any number of games or adventures she could have.

She sank. But how unfair that she has them alone. Where was he to enjoy freedom with her? Where was the boy who braided her hair and gave her foot rubs? Who told her stories before sleep? Who looked at her like he wanted her?

"Gone," she whispered. "Gone to become a man."

Perhaps it wasn't the person she missed, only the memories.

From between the ferns, a fox trotted, nose to the ground. It looked up when it saw her, staring directly into Eve's eyes as it slowly backed away.

The fox returned to Eve in a dream that night. In her dream, she chased it through the dark forest. Hanging in the trees, hidden in the grass, were fireflies, tinting the world in a green-gold hue. The air was sweet, thick. Dust swirled around Eve's feet as she pushed from the earth in pursuit. *Wait*, she tried to call but her voice only came in fragments. *I know you*.

She burst through the branches, standing on the bank of a river. The trees had disappeared, the forest had melted away. Atop the water, the fox stood, its back to Eve. In the swish of its tail, in the tips of its fur, came a familiar, eerie flow. Eve looked around, stepping onto the water. To her surprise, she did not fall through.

"Will you see?" The sound echoed in her head. The fox looked over its shoulder. In the dim light, Eve could make out the crown on its head, twists of ferns and bittersweets.

"What will you show me?" Eve asked.

The fox turned and prattled over the river. The water glowed where it touched.

"What will you show me?" Eve asked again, catching up.

"Your memories."

Eve slowed, shaking her head. "I do not need memories," she said.

"How can such a thing be so?"

"They are my chains, binding me to my old life. They are shades, blinding me to what is real. I see him falsely because of memories and can't let go."

"Perhaps," the fox said, "you are remembering the wrong moments."

"How can you say that?" she gasped. "I remember happiness and care. That doesn't exist anymore."

"And what do you remember of yourself?"

Eve took a step back, the ghostly waters splashed drily around her ankles. "I am the same as I've always been."

"That is why we need memory."

"What do you mean?"

"To remember means to tell ourselves the truth. You have forgotten and then lie to yourself. Memory is not the lie, forgetting is."

A great wind brushed the river, strong and steady. Its hands slapped the water, sprayed droplets into Eve's hair.

"What do you think I have forgotten?" she yelled over the noise. "What do you think I have forgotten?"

Eve raised her arms against the violence of the wind. Through her brace, she could see the fox, standing at a distance, looking at her with its yellow eyes.

"Look into the river," its voice echoed in her head. "Look into the river and remember."

All around, the wind howled its deep crescendo. Eve huddled under her raised arms, looking down at the dark waters that welled around her feet.

"I don't see anything," she called. "The water is too dark. There is nothing there."

Just then, the wind stopped. The world fell away and she was standing beside her pool.

"Look again," the fox said, coming up behind her.

Something twisted in her chest. She shook her head, backing away. "It is too dark," she repeated. "There will be nothing to see."

"Look into the waters."

"No."

"Are you afraid?"

Yes, she thought but shook her head.

"Then see into the waters. Look and remember."

Eve hesitantly walked forth, the grasses and water glowed in soft gold. She looked back at the fox, its tail swishing back and forth behind it. She pulled in a deep breath and leaned over the water. She saw--

--the morning light floods through her closed lids. She inhaled through her nose, shaking out of sleep. She awoke beside her pool. She glanced at it, her chest beating wildly. She gripped the grass. That was real, she could hold it, feel it. Should she look? She swallowed. Then swallowed again. Slowly, she rose, crawling towards the water's edge. She leaned over the pool and looked inside. She sighed with relief. It was only the nymph staring back.

In the afternoon, Eve rested by the river, her back against a stone. The dream from the night before still crawled under her skin like ants. What would she have seen if she had looked in? Nothing? In her waking thoughts, she tried to piece it all together but the memory of it was already slipping from her. She bit her lip, twisting dandelions on her lap to form a crown.

Then, in the distance, she heard a call. She stopped, listening. Silence. She went back to her work. The wind, she thought. Then, she heard it again. She strained, organizing the vibrations in her ears, trying to make sense of the noise. She heard it again, this time more clearly. It was a voice and her name being carried across the wind.

"Here," she hollered back. "I am here."

In the distant treeline, she saw the ruffling of branches and ferns. Her breath stopped as Adam came towards her.

"Eve," he said, kneeling by her side. He grabbed her hand and she looked away from him. Inside, her heart pounded. Her mind popped with color. "Oh, Eve."

*What was he doing there?* she thought. How did he find her? How long was he looking? But scars burned her excitement. *Obsessed*, she remembered. He wanted you to leave.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said at least, hiding under false austerity.

"Eve," he said again, scooting closer. "Please, forgive me."

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, tilting her chin up. Her heart slapped faster. Could he see the lump pushing its way into her throat?

"Listen, I didn't mean it. I messed up, I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please, I am so alone without you."

He came for her! He still cared. She locked her jaw to the joy.

"I know I don't deserve it," he continued, holding out his hand. "But will you come home with me?"

She looked at his extended hand, the desperation in his eye. As though she hadn't forgiven him the second she recognized him come through the forest.

"Why should I?" she asked aloud.

His hand faltered. "I don't blame you for saying that. I wouldn't blame you for turning yourself away from me entirely. I do not doubt that you could and still be happy. You should have been born an eagle, all you need are your wings to be happy. But I hate this loneliness. Come home," he begged. "I have something to show you."

She nodded, unable to find words.

Returning to the homestead felt strange, as though years had passed, not simply a few days. Was it really her who had run from it? It seemed as though that lifetime belonged to someone else.

"Close your eyes," Adam said, as they walked through the gate. She obeyed, feeling the ground before each step, as he led her to the west side of their property.

"Now open," he whispered.

Her hand clasped her mouth. Before her, a flower bed lay, spilling with petals. She looked at him, unsure.

"Eve," he said, taking her hands. "Of all the beauty our Father has given me, you are the most precious gift. You say that you have no space here, take this space. Expand, take more. Bring beauty to this place and make it your own, your design. Flowers or fruit, this garden will be yours to tend. Eve, I never wanted you to go. Will you stay with me?"

She looked at the bed before her. He wanted her to stay. He still cared. Her heart drummed. In such darkness, she had been hiding and here he offered her light once more. An eagle he had called her but was it true? Could she be happy without him? Even a bird needs a bough to land. Take him, take his safety, his warmth, and cast out the misery of solitude, the terrifying pulse of freedom. She glanced at the fence, walling them in together. That is what it would mean to stay, to stay in. Did she want that?

"Yes," she said aloud and her chest swelled.

"Oh," he cried with relief pulling her into his chest.

The feel of his body flooded her. To have it was to have a home. Tears threatened her eyes but she had promised herself to be strong. So, she swallowed her relief, her joy, her pain, and wrapped her arms around him, patting his back.

Eve couldn't meet the nymph's gaze.

“You don’t understand,” she explained eagerly to the watery shadow. “To love is to weather. I’m not fool enough to think of anyone as perfect. Even here in paradise it storms. Some people are worth weathering for. And he is one of them.”

She wouldn’t look to see the other’s reaction.

“We have had a lifetime of happiness together. Would I really betray our history for one fight? He’s given me thousands of good moments, it hardly seems fair to turn my back because of a few bad ones.”

Eve glanced into the water, the nymph stared back patiently.

“Remember,” Eve told her. “He’s the kind of man who patiently hears me tell stories and braids flowers into my hair and plays with me and gives me foot rubs and is sweet. Always so sweet. He hears me, he built me a garden. I had forgotten him for a minute but I will not forget now. We will be happy together just as we were.”

Eve glanced back into the water, the nymph gave a weary smile.

“I’m glad you believe me now,” Eve said.

## Chapter 7

The seasonal rains came and passed, and came and passed again. Under their harsh batter, the earth melted and reformed, trees fell and rotted, new life grew. All Eve watched from under the oak. She saw fawns outgrow their mothers. She watched as year after year, birds shook themselves free of their shells. How silly that she once thought they were stones.

As time passed, their homestead was designed and redesigned. The west fence was torn down and expanded. Adam insisted on the construction of a shelter with a root cellar. Then insisted on a barn. At first, Eve rejected animals being introduced into their home but Adam explained how chickens would eat the snails, which plagued her garden. From there, she allowed for pens and cows and goats and pigs. She stopped being able to remember why she rejected the idea of husbandry in the first place.

"Let him construct and tend animals," she said to herself. Her only care was that of her garden. Eve had thrown herself into her garden from its onset. Under her experimental hands, the bed of petals became a jungle of vines, stems, and color. She would knot her hair up at the base of her neck, smearing dirt on her forehead as she wiped it free of sweat, and dig into the soil. Her once small garden bed doubled in size then doubled again. Her first crops turned yellow and withered. She played with shade to protect them from the direct sun. The second crop died from a blight. She arranged and rearranged plant combinations, she examined the amphids, which crawled over her leaves, and found that those things mattered.

"I think insects are spreading disease to my plants," Eve once said, chewing her nails beneath the oak, lost in thought. Above her, the blue jay chirred. "Do you think that is possible?"

Adam shook his head, not taking his eyes from the post he was whittling. "The weather is beginning to affect the fence. I've already had to begin making repairs to some of the older posts."



The wind stirred. Her teeth pinched her cuticle. "I wonder how I can keep them out of the garden?"

"I'll probably have to lacquer the posts for protection from the elements," he said, scrunching his brows.

"There might be an herb I can try to get the bugs away."

"I might just need to start collecting fresher wood."

"I could spread the plants further apart. Density spreads the disease faster."

"I'll have to consider the wood type as well. I'll ask Father for advice."

"I suppose, I'll look into it more tomorrow."

"I guess I can ask about it tomorrow."

They both had sighed and looked off in their separate directions.

It was that each morning, Eve would rise before Adam and hurry towards the forest, searching for inspiration amongst the flora. She would admire the wild strawberries and raspberry bushes, which clunch to the birches; the woody fungi spotted on the trees like steps, floating above the lichen that crept after it; and the forest flowers weaving through the fallen leaves and twisting root, which textured the forest floor. It is like a garden of its own, she would think to herself, collecting specimens into a basket.

But her days of experimentation had long passed. Now, her garden has flourished. Not just flowers but vegetables and fruits spilled out of her beds. Great trees, mere saplings when she had transplanted them, now hung heavy with fruit. Every tangle and root was familiar to her.

There were moments when Adam might join her at the garden, not to help, just to watch. She would stiffen, feeling him kneel beside her. She would glance over at him but would not pull her fingers from the soil. He would say something like.

"I never knew how much you liked sage."

She would turn to look at him slowly, lifting a brow. "What?"

"I didn't know you liked sage so much," he would try again.

Eve would look at him curiously, her eyes darting back to her plants and back to him.

"That's lavender, not sage," she would say.

"Oh. Well, I never knew how much you liked lavender." He would chuckle at his own joke, nudging her with his shoulder.

She'd brush him off. "I don't, it just keeps the bugs away."

It would be in moments like then that she would wonder why their Father had chosen Adam. Surely, as a gardener Himself He would find far more in common with her. She knew that if ever she were to meet their Father, they would speak endlessly about plants and growth and earth. But thoughts of meeting Him did not possess her like they once did. In fact, she hardly thought about it at all.

A steady shower had fallen in the night, quenching the thirst of the land. Before the evening rain, there had been a long period of dryness. The drought had turned the grass brittle

and yellow. But now vigor had come back into the soil so that the grass twisted in lush brilliant green.

Eve looked at the grass from afar, sitting cross-legged under a lemon tree. She was hunched forward, weaving together a small basket of pine needles. Now and then, between every few stitches, her eyes would flicker towards the grass and she would absently wonder about it. Were they still brown at the roots or had the rain cleaned the blades of their sickness? Did the soil still crumble? In her mind, she ventured onto the grass, felt the soft tickle against her soles, and watched, smiling, at the black bugs, which hopped around ankles. But she did not feel it in her muscles to actually move. And so, she sat, weaving.

“Eve,” Adam said, approaching the far corner of their homestead. Their borders had grown wide enough so that in their quiet moments, Eve would sometimes forget he was there.

She did not turn out his voice. She finished her row of weaving and squinted her eyes so began the next one. “Yes, Adam?” she asked, poking a needle through a hole.

“I will return to the mountainside today.”

“Alright.”

“I may be gone for several days.”

“That’s fine.”

“I think I will leave now.”

“I figured.”

“Right,” Adam said. “Then I’ll be gone.”

She adjusted the basket on her knee, listening to him rustle through their supplies. “I have gathered some fruits from the garden,” she said. “I placed them in the mint. You should take something with you to eat.”

The rustling behind her stopped. She twisted her pine needle and reached for another to add to the weave, Adam’s footsteps carried towards her garden.

“Where?”

“In the mint.”

He was silent. “I don’t know what that is.”

She rolled her eyes, muttering to herself under her breath. “It is a green plant, low to the ground and has wide leaves.”

“I don’t see it.”

*Then you must be blind,* she thought.

“Why don’t you keep it in a normal place.”

“It is a normal place. That is where I always keep my harvest.” *Which you would know if you ever prepared a meal.* “It keeps the ants away.”

He clicked his tongue. “It’s okay, I’ll simply find something along the way. That is what I usually do.”

Eve let out a frustrated sigh and put down her basket. “They are right here,” she said, heading over to a patch of mint. The leaves hung out like fat tongues. “Take these with you else it will spoil. I pulled too much, thinking you would be around. I can’t eat all of this.”

“Oh, wow,” Adam said, plucking up a watermelon. It was small enough to fit in his palm. “These look wonderful.”

“Yes,” she said, walking back to her place. She lifted the basket back onto her lap. “They do well when the soil is dry.”

“I’ll say. It looks sweet,” he said. Eve continued with her work. Adam cleared his throat. “Well, while I’m away, I will need you to watch after the homestead.”

*Obviously.* “I know, Adam”

“I noticed in the far corner of the fence, on the side of the river, some of the rope is frayed. It will need to be repaired or replaced.”

“Okay, Adam.”

“Make sure you pull the threads tightly so they don’t unwind. But not too tightly to choke it.”

*Thanks, I’ve made rope before.* “Sure thing, Adam.”

“Great. So, uh, I will see you then soon.”

“Yup.”

“Goodbye.”

“See you.”

Adam was quiet. She could hear the soft patter of his feet as he shifted his weight. She looked over her basket at nothing, her eyes heavy and half-closed, waiting for him to say whatever so that he could finally be off.

“Um, I’ll miss you,” he said.

“Yeah, me too,” she said.

Eve abandoned her basket, pulling herself up against the lemon's trunk. From above, she could hear a bird trill. Its noise bore into Eve’s head. The semi-circles under her eyes felt swollen and tight. She could feel the tug of her optic nerve stretching the back of her eyes. She pressed her palms against them. Their cool touch soothed the ache in her eyes. Why did she feel so exhausted? If anything she had been sleeping more now than ever before. She would see the sunrise and turn her shoulders to it, not awaking again until the sun positioned itself directly above her.

Perhaps she was not eating well. Though her garden flourished, she found no satisfaction in food anymore. It all had the same diluted taste to her. Her jaw moved automatically when she went to eat, motivated more from boredom than from hunger.

“Maybe I should go somewhere,” she thought to herself. Perhaps to the river for a swim? But her legs did not feel like moving. Maybe she could hike through the forest. She chewed on her nails and pictured herself walking through the trees. She imagined gathering foreign berries to introduce to her garden. Maybe she would spy on a bear. It had been some time since she had seen a creature from the forest. Why didn’t she hike as much anymore? She bit into her nail and wondered at it.

Then she let out a long yawn and stretched.

"I'll go to the forest tomorrow," she decided. She took the basket back onto her lap. "Tomorrow."

But when tomorrow came, her interest waned. She slept through the misty dawn, missing the sight of the deer, which jumped through the nearby fields. She missed the call of the birds and the shake of the wind. When she did stir, she groaned at the sun's light.

"I was having a wonderful dream," she mumbled to the world. "Let me go back to it."

But honestly, what did she have to wake for? There were chores, of course, but watering the animals and weeding the garden did not take nearly as much effort as she needed to give. She needed occupancy, without it, minutes dragged on endlessly.

"I suppose I could walk through the woods," she said to herself. She stumbled to her feet, stretching her arms in greeting of the noontime sun. She scratched her side, letting out a yawn, and trudged to the animal pen. Around her ankles, the chickens swarmed. She threw seeds down as she headed for the pigs.

"Good morning," she greeted, scratching the swine's back.

Fed and catered to, she abandoned the animals for her garden. She plucked a few yellow leaves from her tomatoes, tore some knotweed from her eggplants, and then leaned back in exhaustion. She reached above her to pluck a green bean. The plants hung like caterpillars from the trelous she had crafted together from fallen branches.

"I should go," she said to herself. But she did not make any effort to move, she just munched another bean. Then another. She let out a long sigh. "Finnnnnnne" she exhaled, spitting out the stem end of her green bean.

Her feet did not take her to the forest but instead to the familiar river path. She sat on the riverbank, submerging her feet into the water. Curious fish swam to her wiggling toes, trying to nibble on them. The fish would quickly turn away when realizing they were not food.

She wondered where all the fish went. Every day, the streams were saturated with fish, lost in their own fixation of their travels. Where were they going? Were they the same fish, trapped in an endless looping circle, passing through the same place again and again without realizing it? Eve could follow one, see where it ended up.

It excited her to think about it. When was the last time she had wandered far from the homestead? The river was so long, it might take days to reach the end. And so what if it did? She could camp under the stars, surviving only off the land as she used to. In her mind, she traveled so often. Why not do it for real? It would only be for a few days, then she would be back. Adam did it all the time.

Oh, but then who would be left to tend her garden? Adam wouldn't know how to prune or weed as she does. He would yank food from their stems, not twist them free.

No, it wasn't her place to chase the river, not anymore. She belonged home with Adam and her creation. She had invested too much to abandon it.

She left the river to return to her garden.

When had she gotten so stagnant? When had she grown so old? She was bent in the thickets of her tomatoes, skillfully tying their long stalks to stakes. In her peripheral view, she saw Adam near their shelter, stacking wood. Had she even greeted him when he had returned that morning? She let her hands fall from the tomatoes with a sigh. She turned and watched him. From her distance, she could not see the flex of his muscles as he carried wood, nor could she see the tension on his face from the weight.

"Is this okay?" she asked herself. When had they stopped speaking? There were whole days when Eve would not hear her own voice aloud. If she really concentrated, she could conjure moments of bliss between them. She remembered finding him irresistible, he had dominated her mind, given her bellyaches. She had been excited by his touch and his laughter. She felt no sentiment in those memories, it was as though they had happened to someone else.

"We are just busy," she told herself. "We don't have to do everything together to enjoy one another's company. Sometimes it is enough to simply share a space." Their relationship had simply matured. It is unrealistic to expect two people to stay as animated as they once were. And there were so many advantages to how they loved now. Now, they had more independence. They could enjoy what they each liked without as much compromise. Eve shook her head, recalling back to their younger days. How many days did they spend tangled in the grass because they were too indecisive to decide what to do? They were far more productive now.

Eve clicked her tongue, returning to her work. Overhead, the sky was flooded in blue, there was not one cloud to blemish the sky. Eve shook her head, there was no reason to work herself up into such a fret on such a calm day.

But in her work, she could not help but think.

"Adam," she said, approaching him, with the three ripe tomatoes in her resting in the crook of her arm.

He turned from his woodpile, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Huh?" he grunted, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"I thought you might like some food," she said, lamely gesturing to the fruits laying on her arms.

"Oh," he said. "Thanks." He reached out and took one, taking a large bite. The skin popped under his teeth and orange pulp ran down his chin. "Yummy." He handed it back and wiped his mouth.

"Adam," Eve tried again, stepping in front of him.

"Yeah?"

"I thought today we would go to the forest. We could have a picnic under the trees." She was used to such offers being rejected, he either had a headache or there was too much work to be done.

"Maybe this afternoon," he said. The chickens began to press around him, clucking.

"Adam, let's go now," Eve said. "Nothing here is that pressing."

"Now?"

"Yeah." She didn't know why this mattered so much to her. In truth, she did not feel any sense of urgency or desire to break from her garden and spend time with him. But it was exactly that lack of desire that drove her. She needed to prove everything was fine.

Adam sucked in through his teeth. "Alright," he said at last. "Let me just finish up here and then we can go."

She stepped out of his way and headed back towards her garden. She packed some grapes and fresh mint and cucumbers into a basket for their lunch. She waited for him to finish stacking, staring at the fence.

"Funny," she thought to herself. There was a time when building that fence had so much importance. But in all their time on their homestead, she had never seen anything try to get in.

"All set," Adam said, dropping the last pile of wood. He shooed the chickens away from his ankles.

They headed towards the gate, he raced ahead to open it for her.

"You know," he said, closing the gate behind him. "If you were bored, I could have found something else for you to do."

"No, I wasn't bored, I just wanted us to try and have fun together. It feels like it has been a while."

"Oh," Adam said, kicking a rock out of her path.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"I think we still have fun," Adam said. "I mean, we do keep pretty busy but that doesn't mean we don't have fun."

"Right," she said. "You know, I was just thinking the same thing. But still," she scratched the back of her neck, "it would be nice to try something different."

"Right, of course."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"So how's the gard--"

"How did you sleep?" They broke in over each other.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry."

"You first."

"Okay. How did you sleep last night?"

"Oh, pretty well," Adam said. "I had some incredible dreams. But I can't remember them."

"Oh, I can't stand when that happens."

Silence.

"Yeah, I sleep pretty well on my trips. That bird isn't around to wake me up. I wish we had gotten rid of it when we had the chance."

"Which bird?" They reached the treeline. Adam brushed a branch out of her path.

"You know, the blue jay."

"Oh, right," Eve said. "I don't even notice it anymore."

"Well, you sleep pretty solidly."

"Hmmm."

More silence. Eve smacked her lips.

"You, know what," Adam said. "I'm getting pretty hungry. Maybe we should have lunch now."

"Oh, of course," Eve said. She waved her pointer finger between two trees.

"Either place is fine with me."

"Okay, uh, here then." Eve placed the basket beneath a pine. Awkwardly, they felt their way onto the ground, stretching out to get comfortable. Eve smiled tightly at Adam from across the basket. He smiled back.

"This is a beautiful arrangement of food you brought," he commented.

"Oh, thank you," she said.

"You really enjoy gardening, don't you?"

She shrugged. "It passes the time." She reached into the basket, pulling out a cucumber. She passed it to him. "I've been playing with the acidity of the soil. It's yielding some pretty favorable results. But that's not very interesting. What about your projects? What are you stacking wood for?"

"Oh," Adam stretched out his leg, breaking the cucumber in half. "I am just prepping in case anything needs mending. I have to repair the roof on the shelter and the supply hole is beginning to fill in. Oh, and after that, I have to deal with raising the goat fence. They keep hopping into the cow paddock and spooking the cattle."

"Oh, no," Eve said, her attention wandering. "Hey? Do you think you can still catch grapes in your mouth?" She lightly tossed a grape into the air.

Adam shrugged. "Try me."

Adam opened his mouth wide and Eve took her aim. She tossed the grape and it bounced off his tooth and fell to the ground. Adam picked it up and rubbed it clean against his chest and placed it into his mouth.

"Guess I need some more practice," he said.

"Want to try another?"

"No, that's okay."

"Oh, come on."

Adam shrugged. "It just seems like a waste of food and a bit of a choking hazard."

"Oh, yeah," Eve said, rolling her eyes. "Hadn't thought about that." She placed a grape in her mouth and it gushed with pulp and seed.

They leaned back against the trunk, their eyes busy, searching for something to see and discuss.

"Look at that pine," Adam said after a long minute. He gestured towards the, which stretched across from them.

"What of it?" Eve asked.

Adam shrugged. "It is a wonderful tree. I bet you could see our whole property from the height of those branches."

Eve brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Let's climb then." She got to her feet. "Boost me up."

They stood beneath it, Adam bent, splaying his hands. Eve grabbed hold of his shoulder, digging her into his clavicle.

"Okay," he said, as she brought one foot up. "One... two..."

"Wait, I don't have my balance."

"Three!"

"Woah," she yelled, tailbone smacking off the ground.

"Oww," Adam hissed, hunched over, grabbing his back. "Oh, I think I threw it out."

Eve winced, rubbing her tailbone. Surely, it would bruise by morning but it did not hurt, she thought, watching Adam's spectacle. He leaned his forehead into the trunk of the tree, moaning in pain, grabbing his back.

When had they gotten so old?

Something vile flushed Eve's cheeks. She marched straight for their picnic basket and jammed their food back inside.

"What are you doing?" Adam called.

"This was a stupid idea," she said, fumbling with the grapes. Her face was warm. "What were we thinking?"

"What do you mean?" She could hear him wince as he approached.

"All of this," she said, irritably. "What were we thinking? We don't climb trees. We don't go on walks. We don't play. That's not who we are anymore."

Adam groaned as he knelt. He reached over her hands, helping her collect their lunch. "I guess, it is not as much fun as it used to be."

She scoffed, shoving the basket towards him. "Nothing is," she said.

"What is wrong with you," he snapped, jerking his head towards her.

She rolled her eyes. "Nothing," she said, standing up. "I'm going home. There is stuff I need to do."

"No, wait," Adam insisted. "Talk to me."

"About what?"

"What is going on right now."

She let out a hot breath. "It's just," she squeezed the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "This is just so humiliating. I feel pathetic, trying to replicate..." She couldn't think of the words.

"Replicate what?"

"I don't know. What it was like when we were happy."

Adam's voice was small. "You are unhappy?"

She shook her head. "Let's not make this a conversation. Let's just go back home."

"No, you brought it up. Are you unhappy?"



She clicked her tongue. "No," she lied. "No, I'm not unhappy. I just... I just feel stupid."

Adam stood, tucking the basket under his arm. "Don't feel stupid," he said. "You're right, we are not young anymore. But so what? So what if we don't play or climb trees? We don't need that to be happy."

"Right," she said, putting her arms around herself. She drifted away from him. She could hear his sigh but he said nothing. They walked to the homestead in silence.

"I think, maybe I should go back to the mountain," Adam said, after closing the gate.

Eve looked at him over her shoulder and shrugged. "Okay."

He huffed. "Is that all?"

She threw her hands up. "What more do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess."

She looked at the ground. "It must be important. You just got back."

"Yeah, there is something I forgot. I'll make the journey quick."

"Alright."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning."

"If it is so important, why not leave right now?"

Adam turned his head. "If that's what you want."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be dramatic. I didn't mean to suggest that I don't want you around. You're the one who said it was important."

"Fine, then I'll be off. I'll see you... when I see you."

"Okay, have a safe trip." She turned and headed towards the garden.

"I love you." She heard from behind her back.

"You too," she waved, glancing over her shoulder.

The colors had dimmed around the pool, Eve noticed it in the flowers first. The canna and orchids which used to blush so vividly now paled to the sickly color of spoiled meat. The peaches hung, dripping with rot, from the branches. She really ought to tend to this place, she thought. But the strength seemed to elude her.

She lay by the pool, rolling blades of grass between her fingers. Back and forth, back and forth she spun it like the strings on a harp.

"I just don't understand myself," she said. She lowered her eyes. "It's like there is some kind of disconnect. My mind tells me I should want things, I should feel things. My brain knows how to react and what to want but my body doesn't. Sometimes when I look at him, I feel nothing at all. In fact, I feel that most of the time. How can I like someone more when they are not around?"

She lay still for a moment. She shook her head and flicked the grass away.

"It isn't fair," she continued. "I know he tries. I see it. I just don't know why it isn't enough." She sighed. "I feel like I am living in the shadows. Every motion is a reaction to something he wants, I feel like I don't have control over my limbs anymore. Which is crazy because he doesn't ask anything of me. But I've grown accustomed to stagnation, to compliance,

to safety and now, I don't even know where my desire has gone. There is no more lightness in my step."

She glanced into the water. "It hurts him," she said. "I see it but I can't help it. I think I might hate him. I had the chance to leave, to keep my freedom and my vivacity but I traded them in for him, thinking he was worth it. But he wasn't.

"He thinks of me, you know. I know what he thinks. He thinks I am brave and caring and strong. Maybe I once was. He tried to hold my flame but snuffed it out. He doesn't see that he rules the world beside a corpse."

It was nightfall when Adam returned. The air wheezed its chilling breeze and crickets jumped to match its pitch. Eve felt a hand on her shoulder and was startled.

"What are you doing?" she said, rocking out of sleep.

"Nothing, I just wanted to tell you I was back," Adam said.

"Oh," she sighed, turning her head back towards the ground. She nestled down onto her arm and closed her eyes. "Welcome back."

"Would you like to hear about it?" came Adam's voice through the dark.

"No," Eve said. "Let me sleep." Gravity pulled on her body, pulling her back into her slumber.

"Are you sure?" Adam whispered, wrapping himself behind her. "I really felt our Father's light this time. I've been learning a new way to meditate to connect with him more deeply."

"That's great, Adam. Now, let me sleep," she mumbled. She felt herself pulled in the current of sleep, drifting back into her foggy mind.

Adam's voice startled her awake again. "It was just such an incredible experience--"

"Adam, I don't care. Stop talking," she muttered sharply.

He fell quiet. She could feel his chin raise and rest against her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I just want to talk to you."

She huffed through her nose and shook him off of her.

"Fine," he said, getting up. She could hear him stomp and plop down on the other side of the tree.

*Good riddance*, she thought but through her fogginess, she felt a twinge of guilt. *Be moved*, she thought, *be moved by his hurt*. But she wasn't. It bothered her that she didn't feel bothered. She knew logically that she should go to him, cooing. Empathize. She could hear his leg tapping from where he sat. She didn't want to feel distant anymore. She wanted there to be warmth but knew not how to create it.

"When was the last time I even touched him," she asked herself. She couldn't recall.

She wanted for this to be a problem in the morning but could hear his leg tap. It always did in his frustration. She knew he wanted her to hear him and approach. To comfort him. To let him melt in her arms. For as much as her mind sought other worlds for comfort, she knew that he fantasized about her. Some kind, gentle image that did not mirror the woman she was.

So, she went to him. Half-motivated from obligation, half-motivated by a quiet inner voice that wanted her to want him. She went to him and saw his frame, glowing in the moonlight. He sat with his knees drawn into his chest, arms wrapped around himself. One heel rose and fell with the steady rhythm of the bullfrogs.

He looked at her as she came and opened his mouth to say something. But she stopped him with a touch. She took his face into her hands and brought him gingerly to her mouth. And as their lips touched, he devoured her. The intensity of his kiss made her immediately regret coming at all. His tongue and lips slobbered over her chin and mouth. He laid her down and fell into his predictable exploration of her body. Her interest seemed to wane in proportion to his growing intensity.

“Alas,” she thought to herself. “It will be over soon.” All she had to do was play the part and it would be over and he would be comforted. She closed her eyes and let the drowsy fog cloud her brain once more. What was it that she was dreaming before she was woken? Oh, something about a duck with a red leaf tied to its foot. She conjured back the image and let herself fall into a daydream. How did the leaf get tied there, again? Oh, right she put it there because it had won some kind of race. The dream was coming back and--

“Ow, Adam!” she hissed, shoving him off of her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I’ll--”

“No, forget it. Never mind. I don’t want to anymore. I’m not in the mood.” She sat up, wiping his spit off of her face with the back of her hand.

“No, I can try again. I’ll slow down,” he insisted.

“No,” she said, flatly. “Not interested.”

“What did I do wrong?” He sounded almost child-like.

“Nothing, I’m just... tired. That’s all.” She rose to return to her bed.

“Eve,” her name was spoken like a passing wind. “Why don’t you care for me anymore?”

She let out a sigh and touched her fingers to her temples. “Adam,” she said, “I do. I promise I will.”

“It doesn’t feel like you do.”

“Please, can we talk about this in the morning?”

He stood. “I don’t want to talk about this in the morning. I want to talk about this right now.”

“I can’t talk about this right now. My head is too clouded. I want to talk about this, I swear I do but it needs to be when I’m not feeling like this. I need to be feeling better to give you the kind of communication you want.”

“No, I won’t wait that long. Then we will never talk about it.”

“Please, Adam.”

“No. This is important and we have to talk about it now. Why do you always turn away from me now?”

She pressed her fingers deeper into her temple. The clouds of sleep were returning as a tempest. Her eyes yanked at their sockets and her head was drumming. *Lay down. Going back to sleep,* her body kept whispering to her.

“I feel like we don’t even talk anymore,” Adam was saying. “Like every time I try to say something you act like you’re listening but nothing goes through.”

*Rest your head down. Oh, it feels so good to close your eyes.*

“And every time I try to come near you, you shove me away. And I look like a fool because I don’t know how to make you happy.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” she asked.

“I want you to talk to me. Tell me how you feel. I want to hear your perspective.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay? Okay. That’s all you have to say. Talk to me.”

“What do you want me to say? I agree with you. I confirm everything you observe to be true. I’ll talk to you. There. Are you happy now?”

“No, Eve. No, I’m not happy now. You say this and then nothing changes. You always just say okay every time I have something to say but you aren’t even listening.”

“Okkkay,” she said, groping for something better to say.

“Unbelievable.” He threw his hands in the air.

“What do you want? You want to hear what I have to say?”

“Yes.”

“I told you I don’t want to talk right now. Why don’t you try to listen to that? I. Don’t. Want. To. Talk.”

“Fine, put it off like always. Heaven forbid that you don’t have your way. But you know what,” she could hear the choking in his voice, “I don’t deserve to be treated like this.”

“Ohhhhhhh,” she let out a long exhale. “I can’t do this,” she thought. “I should never have gone to him in the first place. I should have known it would end with him whining and me being forced into a conversation I never wanted to have.”

“Don’t do it,” she warned herself. “Don’t engage it further.” Aloud she said: “I’m sorry, Adam, you’re right. I don’t mean to make you feel this way. I just am so exhausted, I just can’t have a meaningful conversation with you. Let’s just talk about this in the morning. You can have my full attention then.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, not looking at her, his voice thick.

“Hey,” she cooed, closing the space between them. “Come on, now. Don’t let me fall asleep without you.” She gently stroked his arm. He melted under her soft touch. He pulled her into a tight embrace.

“I just don’t want to lose you,” he whispered.

In her exhaustion, she couldn’t feel the weight of his words. She laid down and he squeezed her close to his chest. He murmured something but she wasn’t listening. She was just glad to have the conversation done so that she could finally sink back into her dreams.

Come the morning, Eve had forgotten about their spat but Adam carried it. When she laid down breakfast, he made an excuse as to why he couldn't eat. She called his name but he pretended the sound of his hammering masked her voice. She crossed her arms over her chest watching him with a frown. *How childish*, she thought. But a smaller voice pleaded for him to stop.

The day was washed out, even during the noon. The sky was a uniformed blend of clouds that dulled the ground below. There was not much color coming from the ground, everything had been muted and grayed.

Eve tried to distract herself with her plants but she kept glancing towards him. She shook her head.

"I'm headed for the forest," she said, standing before him, basket tucked under her arm.

He looked up from the stones he was sharpening. He stared at her, slowly grinding the stone over stone. The sound made her teeth grate.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'll be looking for more seeds."

He shrugged. "Okay." He turned his focus back to his stones.

She huffed from her nostrils and turned towards the gate. Once in the forest, she felt lighter. She didn't realize how heavily Adam's silence weighed on her.

"What is wrong with me," she thought. They must have been happy once. What has changed? She pulled pieces of her memory together, quilting together a narrative.

Her feet carried her with no aim. She stepped over a log, in which a skunk was nestled for the day. She passed the aspen saplings. She passed a fallen tree, whose roots dangled and stretched like a web. But she saw none of these things, so lost in thought she was.

"I'm exhausted," she said to herself. "I'm tired of not living."

She came to an incline, where boulders began to crumble from the cliff's sides. The stones were large, some larger than her. In their shadow, a cluster of marigolds grew. Eve looked at the soft bed of flowers, puffed in an autumnal tint, and fell amongst the petals. The flower's breath was musky like the heavy odor of soaked hay. She rolled in its fragrance, laying on her back to look at the sky.

"Give me a sign," she called it the universe, lifting her arms in reverence. "I'm lost."

She let her arms fall and her palm slapped something hard. She winced, pulling her hand back, shaking it. She sat up, feeling through the flowers to find the thing again. It must have been a stick. A stick has no place amongst flowers. Her hand circled it, she pulled it out to toss into the forest but the sight stopped her.

It wasn't a stick. It was wet, almost meaty. She pulled it closer to her face, her vision trying to register what it was. She could smell it before she could see it. She dropped it, gagging. It was not the first time she had seen bone but never had she touched it so fresh.

She wiped her hand on the ground and shot up, wiggling to erase the memory of the touch. From her new height, she began to see what the marigolds hid. A struggle had happened here. All around, branches were snapped. The plants looked pulled and dragged.

The shadow of chaos stretched far beyond the place she stood. Slowly, toe to instep, Eve began to follow its trail-- the breakage of the forest, the blood that clotted between grooves of bark.

It took her up the incline, the area was a hybrid: half-forest, half-mountain. The incline sloped and chopped like sagging steps. Eve picked her way through the rumble, wincing at the sharp stones which nicked her inner foot. She grabbed hold of a boulder and began to climb, bits of diamond falling in her wake as the stone scratched her inner thighs. Once atop, she surveyed the area. Her eyes combed over the crunchy leaves that piled between the rocks, over the exposed pine roots, and over the brown prism of the stone's faces.

Then she saw it.

She dropped from her place and knelt beside the carcass. At first, she had mistaken the body for another boulder. But now she could see the creature for what it was. Or used to be.

She clicked her tongue, her chest twisting with pity. The bobcat's body had been ravaged, its insides spilled out in front of it. Blood matted its striped fur, chunks of flesh stuck to its claws and mouth.

Death had never been a stranger to paradise. Flowers wilt there, animals age, creatures feed. Eve had seen decay before. Flesh could fall from an animal in days, sometimes hours. Decay, like birth, was part of life.

But this creature was so fresh... Its blood had not yet thickened into brown sap, it still showed red.

Eve's brows knitted together. "You poor thing," she whimpered, stroking its head.

Its eyes flicked open.

Eve fell backward. "You're alive?"

A low, miserable moan gurgled through its throat.

The pity in her chest hammered into a frenzied panic. Her breaths came quick and shallow. Her hands trembled as she reached for it. "It's okay, it's okay," she repeated. She looked over its body, a high whimper streaming from her throat.

"How can I...?" She bit her lip, reaching out to touch the creature before retracting her hand back. "I'll save you, I'll save. I promise."

The cat's eyes, half-opened and milky, bore into her. Eve looked over its body, gasping. Its ripped bowels spilled over the ground. The creature could hardly lift its chest to breathe.

"Oooo," Eve moaned. "Okay, okay." She knelt by the cat, grabbing hold of its organs, trying to push them back inside.

The cat twitched and let out a croaked hiss. Eve jumped back.

"I'm trying to help you," she yelled, her voice unsteady. She crawled back over to the animal and its low, gurgle came back. It tried to pull its head back, recoiling in fear. Tears pricked Eve's eyes. "Let me save you," she cried. The animal simply moaned, its eyes rolling back into its head, heavy and unfocused. Its breaths came heavy and wheezed.

Eve squeezed her hands over her ears, trying to drown out the sound. But over her cries came a whimper, high and shrill. She dropped her hands and frantically looked around. The

sound came again. Eve wiped her cheeks and crawled towards the noise. It came from behind the animal, in a den crafted from fallen rocks. As she moved towards it, the bobcat began to cry in warning, its eyes rolling desperately.

Eve ignored it. She peeked in the cave and her stomach heaved. She fell onto her hands and vomited. Long trails of saliva hung from her mouth, clinging to her chin. Whimpering, she crawled back towards the cat's den. The stinking hole reeked of copper and filth. Blood smeared the walls and dragged through the dirt. Only fragments of the creature's babies were left behind. A severed leg, scraps of fur, delicate bone.

The sound came again and Eve moaned, reaching blindly into the shallow cave to retrieve the cat's surviving kitten. It had been nestled in a root, unreachable to predators. The kitten fit inside the palm of her hand. Its tiny limbs flailed in her hand as it grasped for a finger to suckle. The dirt and filth that stained Eve's hands soiled the feathery fur that poked from the kitten's body.

The mother moaned and wheezed, trying to lift her head to guard her baby against the threat that held it. Her miserable sounds were soft and pulsed in low, monotone stretched like a siren. Legs and paws twitched and spasmed. The creature's dying was slow, painful.

Eve burst through the gate, her legs barely able to hold her. Adam was by her side in second.

"What happened?" he kept asking over and over. Bruises and blood smeared across her legs. She didn't remember running from the forest. "What happened?"

She thrust her bloody hands out to him, cradling the kitten. The young creature wriggled and cried.

"We have to help it," she begged when she could find her words again.

Adam was quick. He fumbled through their supplies and retrieved a small basket to set the kitten inside. Eve didn't notice him switch out the baby for the basket but suddenly the warm body was replaced by boxy reeds. She felt herself sitting down. Water was dripping down her face. When had he gone to the river to fetch water? She caught glimpses of his worried face through the back of his hands, which he used to clean her. She grabbed his wrist. He stopped. She held his eyes, without speaking, recounted the entire story to him. The sounds, the stench, the blood. All she told with her boring eyes.

Adam licked his lips. And then licked them again, cupping her face and pulling her into his breast. From the basket came a high whine. It snapped Eve from her daze. She pushed Adam back and stared into the basket. The kitten squirmed and pawed at the sides of the basket, trying to break free.

"We need food," Eve told him. She put her hand in the basket and the kitten kneaded her wrists, licking her skin, searching for something to suckle. "Let me have that water."

Adam handed her pitcher. She poured the river water into her cupped palm. She flexed her hand, letting one drop of water drip at a time. The kitten hungrily latched to the small opening in her fist and gulped the water down.

“More,” she instructed. Adam filled her hand again. When the water was gone, the creature still cried.

“It’s not enough,” Adam said. “It needs its mother.”

Eve’s head spun from the kitten to Adam. “You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know what it needs?”

“Please, I’m just trying to help.” Adam put his arms up in defense.

Eve felt her face draw together. She looked mournfully in the basket, stroking the squirming creature's face. "I'm going to save it. Adam, go into the coop and grab one of the eggs."

Adam nodded, retreating to the far end of the property, battling the hoard of circling chickens for an egg.

Eve pulled the whimpering kitten from the basket and cradled it to her chest. Softly, she cooed, rocking it gently. The creature was so tiny. Though they could open, its blue eyes still formed tight slits. Its ears hang low on its head and they lacked the tight, pinched look of its mother’s. Soft gray stripes pulled across its young face, feathering off into wispy tufts of hair. Eve smiled at the mousy creature, her heart spilling out to it.

"Here," Adam said, falling beside her.

Eve lay the creature into the crook of her arm, crunching the egg with her fist. Clear mucus slowly dripped from the shattered shell. She adjusted it to control the drip. She cooed at the kitten, begging it to eat but it turned its head away. Eve gently squeezed its cheeks to prompt its mouth open and let the fluid fall in. It tried to retract its head, spitting up and drooling.

“Come on,” Eve insisted, “you need this.”

It continued to pull away. Eve sighed and put the egg down, her brow felt heavy and old. She looked at the creature, yellow dribble on its mouth, curling up against her and she felt a heavy weight on her chest.

Adam put his hand on her shoulder. “Let it sleep,” he said, reaching for it. She pulled the creature protectively toward her and turned away from him. She heard him sigh behind her.

“It’s a cute little fella. What is it?” he asked.

“I think it’s a bobcat. You can tell by the stripes. Its mother wasn’t very large either. And her ears pinched at the ends.”

Adam whistled. “A bobcat. Could have been a number of creatures that got to its mother. Coyotes, wolves, maybe even a mountain lion. It probably happened a few hours ago, they only come out at... night...” Eve’s hard stare cut him off. “I’ll just get some more water,” he said, lamely.

Eve looked back to the creature in arms, rocking it slightly. She pushed away the images of a pack of animals sniffing around its den. The image of its squealing brothers and sisters, caught under the jaws of a predator. How bravely its mother must have fought for them. How helpless it must have felt to fail.

When the sky grew dark, Eve lay the kitten in the basket beside her. Attempts to feed it were futile, it vomited out everything Adam forged for it.



"It's just hard right now," Eve whispered to it, her hand stroking its fierce little body. "But you'll grow stronger."

She imagined what it would be like as it grew. She imagined it walking and playing, snuggling into her arms at night. It would grow, Eve thought, to be the size of its mother. And it might stay with them, in the homestead. She pictured it grooming itself near the garden. Napping under the oak. It would be a good life here.

"Eve, come lie down." Adam touched her shoulder, pulling her away from the kitten. She shrugged him away.

"I'm fine where I am," she said, promoting herself against the tree.

Adam hesitated for a moment but let her be. "I'm here if you need me," he said. She nodded but did not look up from the basket. His head fell and he turned to their shelter.

In the basket, the kitten stirred. Eve listened to the way it breathed, trying to memorize its voice. She recognized that it would whimper three times before crying aloud. She reached into the basket and cradled the kitten towards her before it had time to cry out. It wormed its way close to her and huffed.

With the creature in her arms, the world fell away. It was only them and the hazy, unfocused world that blurred into one color. When she held the creature close to her, all sensation was concentrated in her chest. The smell of its breath and warmth of its body triggered a warmth in her that expanded like a balloon, pressing hard against her ribs. When had she last felt intimacy like this? She stroked the creature's cheek with her thumb and let them melt into one being. Its breaths softened, its claws stretched and contracted.

*Rest, she thought. I'll be here when you wake up.*

The river was lazy in the early dawn. It moved in one long sheet like it was ice. Mosquitos danced across its surface, taking advantage of its stillness to drop eggs.

*What funny creatures,* Eve thought. They were no more than a seed. Invisible against the light. Ignorant of the world that lay beyond what they were immediately doing.

She lay, half-reclined, a boulder holding her upper back. The mosquitoes buzzed around, absorbed in their own existence. A few curious ones flew towards her, tapping her ankles, which almost touched the water's edge. The water's stillness was cut but a frog, which dove beneath the surface, no doubt to be near mosquitoes.

From behind came Adam's steps. "Eve?" he said. "I have been looking all over for you."

Her eyes did not leave the mosquitoes' ballet.

"How's the kitten?" he asked.

"Dead."

Silence.

The mosquitoes hummed, busying themselves in their affairs. The frog's eyes poked out of the water and its tongue covertly yanked a mosquito towards it. A rippling "V" followed the frog as it swam.

"Oh, Eve," Adam sighed.

The pity in his voice made her taste blood. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself. "Are you... still holding it?" he asked. "Eve, that's not right."

In her arms, the creature was stiff, cold. She had woken to find it like that.

"I shouldn't have fallen asleep." Her voice was like an echo. Empty and cold. "I was supposed to save it."

The scabs on her thighs burned red. She remembered the first time she had seen blood between her legs. She thought it was powerful, beautiful. She thought blood was filled with life. But now she looked upon it with disgust. She did not bleed life but rot.

"Eve." Adam knelt, putting his hand on her knee. *Take that off*, she thought, but her growing wrath paralyzed her. "You did all that you could."

She chuckled. "All I could do?" she said stiffly. "All I could do was watch it die."

"Oh, Eve." Adam ran his hands through his hair. "If it is any comfort, this creature is with our Father now."

Eve turned her head slowly. "What comfort would that bring me." Her voice was even in her fury.

"Well," Adam said, nervously, "it is the greatest comfort of all."

She blinked slowly, taking in his image one frame at a time. She saw his floppy, sympathetic pout. Saw his upturned brow. Saw his neck bob as he swallowed. All she saw as though for the first time and it made her taste bile. "How could you say something so stupid to me?" she said. "Do you not know me at all?"

"Eve," Adam whined. "I'm only trying to help."

"You can't," she said. And suddenly, it dawned on her. "You can't help me because you don't understand me."

"No," he protested, scooting closer. "I do understand. I see your pain."

She shook her head. "You don't see me at all."

Adam winced. "How can you do that?"

Eve choked in realization, a sound half-cry and half-laugh. "Because you don't. You don't see me. I should have been born as the stars, you know so little of me. Like the stars, you make up explanations about what I am but you don't really know. You don't see."

"Eve."

"But it's true. You sit under the oak and whittle a fantasy about our lives. In your mind, I am just as excited about the homestead as you. In your mind, I dote on the words of our Father that you bring to me. You think I'm content and happy. You want me to love you as it pleases you, mother you as it pleases you, live as it pleases you. You try to understand me through the lens of the mountain, fitting me into the story you have been told. And when I am none of those things, you retreat further back into your fantasy. You don't want me, you want your fantasy. You don't love me but only your own imagination projected onto me. It is a narcissistic kind of love that has left me invisible to you."

Adam shook his head. "That's ridiculous. You think after all this time I don't know you? I don't see you? You aren't a figment in my imagination. You are funny and driven and passionate."

"I'm not any of those things! I have given so much of myself away, I have been left hollow. I have compromised so many of my values and desires for this relationship. I have tiptoed around your emotions, swallowing my own to make sure that I keep your approval. My mind shut out my own feelings and took over me. I don't know how to feel genuinely anymore, it is all performance. I react and behave the way I think you want me to but not because I feel it. It is logical and calculated. There is a script that I follow."

"But then I saw that creature die. I had never seen anything like it so I didn't know how I was supposed to react. Suddenly, I was able to feel again. I didn't think I was able to love until I held that kitten in my arms. I begged it to stay alive, to keep alive inside of me the tenderness I felt. But that hope will be buried with it. Tell me, is that the pain you see me?"

Adam recoiled. "Unbelievable," he choked out. "So, you are saying you don't feel anything and you don't love me?"

"How can I feel connected to you when I don't feel seen by you."

"Damn it, I do see you." He shook his head. "I didn't make you stay here with me. I didn't force anything on you. You chose to be here."

"Only because I was afraid. I was afraid to lose you and then afraid of not knowing myself without you. I don't know where you end and I begin."

"So, I am the villain?"

"Yes! You are and I am and everything is. You reinforced my behavior and projected your expectations onto me. And I let you. And I did the same to you. I used our relationship as an excuse to stop taking risks. And I used loneliness as an excuse for not leaving.

I convinced myself I was content. I was conditioned to think that this is what happiness looks like. This isn't how a relationship should be. We use each other to protect ourselves from our insecurities. But it isn't working, Adam."

Adam looked at the ground. He let out a sharp breath. "Are you unhappy?"

"You aren't? Adam, we hardly speak to each other. We don't love or play."

Adam shook his head. "We do all of those things."

"No," Eve said. "We did all of the things. We don't anymore."

"Then what do you want?" Adam snapped. "Do you want to play? Let's play. You want to run up a mountain, let's do it. What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Then how is this going to work?"

"I don't know," she cried. "I don't know."

She hunched amongst the ferns, her body shaking. *Can I not even cry anymore?* she thought. Beneath her hands, a mound of dirt covered the kitten's body. She pressed her hands to

the mound as though to push the creature's body back into the earth. Around her, the breeze stirred, the leaves of the ferns brushed against her like feathers.

As she knelt, she caught a movement from the corner of her eye. She glanced around but saw only the ferns shuffle.

"Hello," she called, hoarsely. But the air was quiet. She sniffled, sitting back on her heels. The hairs on the back of her neck pricked. Something familiar charged the air, changed its taste so that the air was sweet. She was not alone.

"I can feel you," Eve said, closing her eyes. "Show yourself to me."

The creature heard her summons and coiled around the trunk of a nearby tree. Eve opened her eyes and saw a serpent, whose body was thick and gold, its scales were tattooed with bittersweets and ferns.

Eve swallowed, holding the creature's gaze. "I know you," she said. "You've come to me in dreams."

The creature stared in silence.

"Am I dreaming now? Tell me, what are you?" The creature did not move. "Are you God," Eve whispered.

Slowly, the creature shook its head.

"Will you speak to me?"

"You should speak." Its voice echoed in her head.

"And tell you what? I have nothing to say."

"Tell me who you are."

Her face pinched, a single tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away. "I don't know anymore," she whispered. "I don't know." She shook her head. "I have heard you, seen you but I did not understand you. I was afraid of him changing, I was afraid of losing us. I didn't see that I was the one slipping away. I changed and forgotten and I do not know how to remember who I am."

"Come," the serpent said. "Come with me."

Eve sniffled. "Where will you take me?"

"To the beginning," the serpent said. "Before you began to forget."

She looked at her lap. "Are we going to the mountain?"

The serpent shook its head slowly. Eve let her hand linger on the dirt and then rose, steadily. The serpent led her through the forest and river. Eve brushed aside branches and thorns.

In the heart of the land, they stopped. Before them stood a lone tree, sturdy and ancient. The body of the tree twisted together like a rope. Crimson fruit hung from its low boughs like lanterns. The snake coiled into its branches, flashing its green-gold eyes.

"I do not know this place," said Eve. "Where have you taken me?"

"This," the serpent said, "is the place of your birth."

"My birth?"

"Tell me, what do you remember about being born?"

Eve shook her head, stepping back. "I don't know," she said. "I do not trust my memory anymore. I do not know what is real."

"Do you trust what you see now? Do you believe me to be real?"

"I cannot tell."

"Is the ground real? Are the trees?"

Eve thought. "I can feel them, so they must be."

"Come, place your hand on this tree, try its fruit."

"How will this help me remember."

"This is a tree of memory, the blood of the earth flows through its limbs and ripens its fruits. You were a part of it once. Let the touch of it trigger your own memory, transport you. Taste the fruit, child. Taste the fruit of memory, the fruit of wisdom. Taste it and remember."

Eve bit her lip. "Must it only be me? Shouldn't I share it with Adam?"

"Do you think he would swallow it?"

"No," she said after a moment. "He is happier ignorant. Like I was."

She swallowed and stepped forward. As she neared the tree, she felt something hazy like memory. She reached through the branches, cupping a fruit in her hand. How many times had she harvested fruits before? Why did this feel different? She twisted the pomegranate from its bough, pulling the fruit close to her chest. She looked down at it, her heart beginning to pound.

"Are you afraid?" the serpent asked.

Eve's breath was even. "Only that it will not work."

She inhaled deeply and tore the fruit. The pomegranate bled, splashing crimson down her wrists. Its seeds shined like jewels tucked in neat rows. She pulled out a handful of seeds and held them to her mouth. Her chest squeezed. She wished Adam was there. Not the Adam left behind at the homestead but the boy, who first made her chest flutter. She wished she was that girl, too. What happened to that girl, the one full of animation, who would tell stories and feel electricity in the soil? Where was her vigor?

She hesitated no more. Head tilted back, she threw the seeds into her mouth. The tart juices exploded in her mouth and brightened her eyes. Just as some smells bring with it a memory, the taste brought forth her lifetime. Suddenly, every moment came to her in perfect clarity. There came her earliest memory, the moment she first laid her eyes upon the world. She felt it now just as she felt it then, the pure essence of her being blending with the wonder of the earth. She felt the true and unalterable part of her being, as clean as it was when she was firstborn.

And then came the rest, the rest of her life. The dust and rain, the spark, the chase, the search, the pool, the kiss, the dream, him licking his lips and telling a story, the acceptance and latter confusion, the hurt, the wall, the tears, the anger, frustration, pain, desire, denial. It all laid out before her and she fell back in her steps.

"Speak," said the serpent. "Tell me what you see?"

"Me," Eve said. She suddenly tasted that salt of her own tears. "I found me."

**-The End-**