

FIVA:

An Erasure Poem

by Keeley Young

There is no reason to doubt me.

“Repeat that back to me,” my father said to me, extending out his olive-skinned arm. He had me squat on the ground, in the clearing beyond the worn wooden fence that bordered the house. Gradually, my father made me move, without being limber or exerting anything. I needed my strength, he would say. He would have me here, butt planted to the shaven grass, and he would attempt to scholar me. Of course, his attempts were successful almost always, as I adored my father. Always listened with keen ears. It made me feel endured then. It makes me feel sack-like now. As if it were the puny, simple yet pyrrhic way to endure being a child, and then an adolescent. A young woman.

My father claimed to have loved me most, more than he loved my mother, which I suppose made an abundance of sense. My mother was a poet with a wandering heart, was what he would always say of her, when I wondered aloud if she would ever come home to collect me for some miraculous journey to one of the far reaches of Vaykha. I gave her that indulgent lifestyle – a woman hitched to the cushioned seat of a carriage, galivanting far beyond old town Alestrei. It made no sense any longer to imagine her and my father coexisting alongside one another anymore. It would either be him, educating me from my childhood, or I would disappear with her, smoke-puffed to one of the myriads of places that I imagined someone with the title of poet would describe in their writings. It is easier to depict greatness for the woman who abandoned you than to imagine her head spiked on the end of a frither blade, oozing tangy crimson liquid, making me salivate now, not then.

She'd once been there. On the other side of the fence, which we kept unsteadily upright in case of any woodland predators, which the neighbours frequently squealed over. Crier of wolves, my father would whisper to himself. He had no fear for the creatures. He kept stock underneath one of the counters close to the back door. Stock I would be wise to avoid, another part of his wisdom passed to me. When I had a house of my own, I would then be the protector of myself.

I still longed, then, to hear the delicate tones of her word. I remember some mornings I would peek out the door of my room and see her there, in the kitchen, near the cupboard where my father now kept his weaponry. She would string together phrases and sentences, sometimes in old Vinoaen, supposed to be the language of poetry, before its people lost the war to Teval some thousand years. I never knew how she learnt, but she would say, Fiva, mama is speaking a language from the past that begs to be reborn. The Vinoa were a people that the kingdom of Teval misunderstood, which is not unusual for them.

When my mother left us, I found my father on the other side of the fence, attempting to gnaw off his thumb. I had stuck a few pins into my big toe. We stared at each other. The neighbouring people would say, those grieving souls should be showered in all the comforts they could be offered and kept strongly away from everything that could possibly hurt them. We blamed ourselves. I believe my father never ceased that – but the age that I recovered, cracked my knuckles, and stopped twisting between all those looping strings of emotions, I understood clearer. I was older, by then. For the time, I was still Fiva. I am sitting there many moons ago, being taught by my father.

In the gloom of the wood, I locked eyes with the boy I was already falling in love with. Ashil. He was pretending to be collecting pinecones, and he lifted his head, and my father was distracted. We were both fourteen. I had promised him I would sneak off after him when my father had finished his lessons for me for the day, and he had arrived early, or my father was extending out more than merely his arm. Father focused again. Etched into his palm was an old scripture I like to imagine my mother chose for him, something she taught him. It meant, ‘Your gut is loyal like the wolf.’ It was a way of understanding why he put so little effort every time he patched up our fence, but it was counterintuitive to the sudden blasts of his gun if he fretted that for once such a creature was actually stalking to come slice a deep gash into my arm. My father would chuckle, and tell me that an ordinary like him was not

supposed to be carrying around a firearm, that it was almost primarily withheld only for soldiers, and that they were only supposed to be fired rarely in that case. I would grin at him. It was our secret. I trusted in my father with the weapon, with any weapon. Intensity burned in my blood every instance I saw him there, aiming, firing. More than anything I wanted control like that. Fierceness.

Ashil was a distraction when I was learning, but the moment my father dismissed me, as if I were an actual student of his, all attention could shift. Complete change in me. He and I first became friends when we were eleven. His family lived a short walk from the home I shared only with my father – mother had vacated from the picture of a beautiful family four years earlier by then, when I was introduced to Ashil. Introduced, perhaps, is the incorrect word for it. There was nothing formal about two kids wandering in the gloom wood, the little girl hunting for frogs, and the little sand-haired boy jumping over fallen logs and tripping on protruding roots. I let him lie there. He rubbed at his ankle, a soft groan slipping through thick lips. He hadn't noticed me. Ashil clambered to his feet then, brushing off the arrow-pointing leaves, and a twig stuck into the fabric around his pocket. I heard a croaking near me, something like the sounds of a boring common frog – the sort of frog that would creep upon your backdoor and croak endlessly, hoping you would stir to bathe it in light for even a moment. I bent down to search for it nevertheless and heard his voice instead. This eleven-year-old, soft voice.

“You heard me fall,” he said, grinning. There was nothing scorned in his stare.

“I only heard the frogs.”

Ashil was still brushing off the ground that had clung to his legs. He introduced himself proper, and I told him I knew of his family, because it was the polite sort of thing my father taught me. Know those who contribute to your village, at least in name. His father was a blacksmith, and his mother had once been a midwife, although now she worked alongside her husband. Later, she would be sitting beside me, in a dulled winter afternoon, and she would tell me that giving birth to her son, Ashil, made her exhausted of delivering other women's children. She gave birth a second time, and that would be enough, forevermore.

My father had said that I needed a friend, but not as if I was some miserable loner of a child. Most of the children of Alestrei had not lost a parent. I think it stunted me, in the sense that I was seeing how abhorrently normal all those children were. Pretty mother and father. I had tried when I was much younger, when my mother had yet to flit off like an agitated hummingbird. I had tried – there had been a girl who also lived a short walk from home, her name was Korra. Our parents had thought they noticed a friendship growing, when we would sit there together, making fantasies out of the twigs, and chasing after one another in the wood. Someday I had grown too disparate to her – I was too cunning, too low to the ground, too much of an outsider. I would call her a princess, a sissy, but for a while it had been purely playful, when we liked one another. Once an entire friendship came clattering to the ground like the foreign city of Rumisca, it was a title that could stick – Korra deserved to be flitted away to some outstanding tower in the midst of the gloom wood. I wouldn't see her again proper until I was seventeen. If I had any semblance of my power back then, I was using it to mask her.

Ashil and I were twelve, sitting at the back door of my home, licking at the honey drips off of hexagons of honeycomb. My father had traded them for something from a merchant – it was only the beginning of a boom in the jeebee population and their subsequent farming, something I have heard is one of many reasons humble Alestrei flourishes as it does now. My father proposed to me one night, while I carved an amateur design of a sea monster into the wood frame of the back door, that he would venture into the jeebee trade. Three days later, Ashil and I sat, ravenous animals, giving him the head nods of approval. My hip leaned against the carving of Jomo – I'd named him, the sea monster. To me, his thirst for seamen blood only came from an all-natural instinct. He needed to feed.

Ashil set his honeycomb down on a torn piece of fabric. It was from one of mother's dresses, one she left behind. We had no use for it by then. Ashil looked at me with those pinecone eyes. "Do you think you will be like your father when you are closer to his age?" I knew he had hesitated. He had wanted to pose it as an either or, whether I would be more like my father or my mother. Raising a child, giving a proper learning to that child, or being such a free spirit as to desert everything. When I would return the question to him, I could flow without pause – his parents had two feet firmly on the ground. At twelve, your sense of clairvoyance is merely a bud in soil. Your name is your being. Your family is tied like thick-shooting vine, and girl is supposed to become mother, or at least in the narrow-minded sense of old town Alestrei. I will never claim to know my future, know the elaborate outcroppings half a century in my distance, but when I was asked by the one boy my age in the town that paid me any mind whether I would become the doppelganger of my dry-throated father, I had shaken my head. I wanted only to learn everything he knew, learn how to protect myself from other self-protective strangers, and then be entirely of myself. Entirely of the name Fiva, without subtitle.

It is a marvel to be seeing the past with the truth of the future.

"Will you blacksmith like your father?" I asked him, half expecting of him to be plain in his response. My father had told me men were supposed to tame the sense to butterfly away before they were of marrying age. It felt of grieving, in that moment. But I said nothing more. I watched my father. Two firm feet on the ground. Solid. The rifle in the cupboard in the kitchen. I expected Ashil to be ordinary, as unexpected as our friendship seemed to be. It all lingered beneath the surface – I merely thought myself a complete outcast, a darkened gloom, tangled in the roots. He had no porthole.

Ashil sighed, taking up the honeycomb. "I am expected to," he began, his stare caught on the sluggish move of an embbeetle. Dragging its underdeveloped body across dirt. "I am still considering how I might burden my sister with it all, being a blacksmith *and* impressing my father."

His sister, the infant. She seemed as such back then, small, twiggly, pale with the blondest hair. In her face, I never saw her brother. But I rarely saw her, too. I fear that perhaps she was scared of me, fearful, a burrowing rabbit with her head stuck between her mother's legs. At some point I became so focused on Ashil that I failed to realise Gwynora was a breathing entity, and not merely a distant star in the sky.

Ashil spoke of wondering, and wandering, and how he would peek in through the doorway to see his father, and his mother, in their domain. Business. Busy, always, he said. I was only twelve, and yet I had never sensed so much within myself – feelings that I did not have for my father, in the sense that I never wished my father to rebel against what was expected. Suddenly I was awash with something. I almost understood my mother. Her flight. Had her parents expected so much of her that she gave birth to me out of the necessity to please them, to please my father? I will never know. At twelve, I assumed she was merely abandoning a course, finding some unnatural footing that led her away from blood. Those days, I wished nothing more than to stand on flat feet in front of my mother. Instead, I licked honey. I grew older. My father taught me. I started to fall in love with an innocent boy. My father started to fill other cupboards with other things. I wondered if my mother ever understood him, because I could not fathom what existed beyond the exterior. My father was shifty, and I understood that. I figured there was more beneath his sheep's clothing. He taught me of things the little sweet blonde girl would never hear of. It could become exhausting. It could become rewarding, too. There was something in what my father spoke of, something entirely rooted in how fascinated my father had been in learning Vinoaen from my mother. It would take me years before I could translate it, if you will. Translate the breath, the curiosity. Translate what my father was carving out of himself.

I started bleeding at thirteen.

My father taught me a lesson about the sort of transitions a woman naturally went through. I absorbed moments of it, this discussion, but for the most part I completely ignored him. He spoke of things like a seam split, and a bulb becoming crimson blossom, or I misheard him entirely. As I said, I ignored him – for a silly little young woman at thirteen, I never questioned my bleedings. In old Alestrei, you were given a wide berth when whisperings of your red viper passed from someone’s lips – respectfully, for most of the ordinary locals. My father and I seemed wildly uninhibited compared to our neighbours – he was supposed as a bear killer, a rabbit skinner, but for the sport of it, because there was rabbit enough on our table, and I had scarred a little princess girl by proclaiming that I wanted to pretend to saw her leg off. Princesses do wish they could have the sort of adventures that warranted such danger. So, the town managed somehow to hear of the bleeding, and Ashil walked toward me with caution one day later. He hesitated. It sickened me, it bit at my lip. An arrow carved out of the thickest of wood, and you will have it piercing the thickest of my skin. I stood there, in darker clothes, but I would not have cared if the blood pooled for a patch and everyone had gawked at me. It felt then, those days, the right time to grieve. I was becoming a proper woman, apparently, without my mother – and the boy I liked more than I had liked another was hesitating in front of me. I worried suddenly his mother and father had settled on something unruly and unholy, as I am, as I had been in some eyes. *Fiva is born demon spawn at last.* The old Alestrei of my youth sought out on all the further trauma for an outcast that it could, but it was my father that made it obvious to me. In wandering the village, I never jutted my head to catch what any passing peasant would have had to say about me, or gesture about me – I never cared. Until my father weaved his lessons a new tapestry. *Oh, they notice you now, Fiva* – my father started in such a belief that every notion of a stare, every whispering of the little girl Fiva who will become a woman now then, that it was a trial. They will come for your gut, Fiva. They will come sniffing, their demented wolf-life snouts poking through that fence. Do you not see how the crowning of your crimson blossom is their chance to cut it at the stem and form such a gory bouquet?

Sometimes my father would attempt to be a poet, in an ode to my mother. I would hear his tears staining a verse that I imagine she had written before I was born. Teardrop splashing on a finishing consonant. Reason for Ashil to choose the falling of his footsteps carefully passed. Somehow we were now two fifteen-year-old kids, circling each other. I would stand hidden in the wood, waiting for him, and feel the soft collapse of a leaf upon my head. He would have climbed the tree, crawled his twig body across a branch, and there he was, clinging onto wood after he had scattered the leaf out of his hand. He was entirely fearful I would not catch him if he fell, for all his attention was drawn to my face as I turned to him. Ashil in the canopy.

He was beautiful. In every moment I caught him. I brushed the leaf away, lost it as it became another in the thickening sweep of the undergrowth. Fall came for us. It would be a slowed draw in, the breath of a slumbering forest drago, but there were already footprints of it. Markings. Ashil was oblivious to it, as he climbed down the tree again, more like a stumble, more like a jump-jump-jump, but I was keen to notice. Changes in seasons, those slight, almost unnoticeable changes, do not pass me as much as they had seemed to always pass my father. He seems to not recognise a winter until the snow falls atop his head and his toes begin to numb more than normal. Ashil came to stand in front of me, taller than I was, but not the least bit threatening to me. Still so oblivious. Blonde hair falling a little in front of his eyes, and he brushed it with his dirtied fingers. Something about this boy and I was heart-stricken. Falling in love before I understood even the concept of love. Because he was beautiful.

In every sense of the word.

“You are out at sea, saltwater stinking your hair,” he said, stepping around me, as if some sort of interrogation that seemed to me altogether rehearsed. “There is a sea beast crowning out of the ocean, threatening everything.” He smiled, briefly, our hands brushing against each other’s. “What do you do?” There was only a seriousness to him then, a complete fabrication of a character being

embodied. He reminded me somewhat of my father, of how he speaks during lessons – and I suppose it makes sense, then, that a sternness and yet a quizzical sort of nature too would have arisen from Ashil watching my father. Hiding in those woods, not always merely paying his attention to me. He was awaiting my response. Ashil paid attention to cadences and tone more than anything. The sound of someone’s voice. I couldn’t limply respond to him – and yet then again, I was a girl, barely away from being called little and silly. I wanted to impress him. I wanted him to notice me *like that*.

“What knowledge do I have of the creature?” I asked him, anticipating.

Ashil widened his eyes. “You have never seen such a gorgeous specimen before,” he said, circling me, then pausing. “You’re aboard a navy vessel. You’re in the middle of the ocean.”

I had half of a heart to make some quip about how I had never been near the sea. Never known what saltwater would do to my hair, if it had some affect that freshwater did not. I had never been aboard a navy vessel – and I never would. But I figured out of everything, Ashil wanted my honesty. It was a silly game of no consequence in the end, so it seemed.

“I fire every cannon I have, and every rifle, and every anything,” and it was like there were flames burning through the cloth of my shirt, out from the heart. I could picture the great beast suffering each gargantuan blow. Ashil was coming round from behind me, his eyes narrowed, entirely silent. But then he smiled. It felt of an initiation, of sorts, when I heard him agree with my decision. He said, where is our logic to believe monsters will become our friends? *Kill them, kill them dead*. There was gold, orange and red licking at the dry of my hair. We spent the afternoon hypothesizing these life-or-death war-cry scenarios, and he had admitted at the end of the day that the idea had come from my father after all, with some tweaks from him. We were walking from the wood, and he paused, brushing his hand against mine. Another leaf fell upon my head, one taken by the wind, one without intrusion. I thought it funny, then, the draw of nature to me. How I heard the echoes of a winter incoming. Then Ashil silenced all my thoughts, planting a kiss on my lips. A very first kiss. I had thought he had been completely avoiding thinking of me as something other than an ordinary friend, but I had been echoing my own winter instead. Winters of thinking I would be abandoned by someone I believed I was already in love with, like my father, his spring blossom of a love for my mother. It is gross to be naïve, and reverse-naïve too.

Ashil and I became the sort of teenagers to tumble into each other, stumble through the wood, run our hands through each other’s hair. By the time we were sixteen, I would feel his hand cupping my breasts and I would notice more than the changing of the season. I would scream obscenities at him, at myself, at the bark of a tree, where the colossals would retract their slits-for-ears. It wasn’t pure anger, not for my love, my beautiful, Ashil. I never confessed to wanting to skin him alive, bite at his neck, but in the years I had fallen for the blonde boy, my father was retreating from me. His lessons became passive-aggressive, brutal, sharp as the dagger that hung above the front doorway. I found my father one evening alone in his bedroom, splayed out on the floor, naked, that dagger settled upon his chest with the blade pointed toward his chin. I didn’t disturb him. My father never mentioned my mother. For a month, he claimed to have spent his time on the road, travelling from village to village, attempting to learn new forms of self-defense to protect himself – and me – from some foretold onslaught. I would sit in our kitchen, alone at night, one hand gripped to the wood of the table, or the flesh of my body. I held my hand and it became a punishment. Then, in the morning, Ashil would appear at the front door, enveloping my body with his arms. Warming me up all over again, even in the flame of summer as it was. It was not some elaborate ruse to understand why I thought the world of him.

For some strange reason, he loved me too.

The future queen of a secluded race of vampires.

One evening, my father returned with an unusual trinket for me, a gift he claimed to have procured from a village far north of Alestrei. It was inside a dark wooden box adorned with a crest I was unfamiliar with, but of course I knew nothing of the village he spoke of – Jiana Allea. At first, it sounded to me as if a woman’s name, or at least someone’s name, as opposed to that of a village that was willing to do trade with my father. He began describing the town to me, before he allowed me to peek inside the wooden box. In the town square of Jiana Allea, there was this beautifully-sculpted fountain depicting the goddess of flowering rebirth, K’aana. The fountain flushed with water, but the face of the goddess was chipped, and her hands were missing fingers. A villager claimed there had been a rabbit nibbling at grass at her feet, but someone had hacked away at the outline of its base many moons ago and had stolen it in the dead of night. No one seemed to understand why, or who had pilfered the bunny rabbit.

My father spoke of the vendor next, who had sold him this trinket, and the box that encased it. An elderly gentleman, perhaps thirty years older than my father. Hair the colour of pebbles. He spoke to my father in two tongues at first, before learning what my father spoke. My father did not recognise the other language – it was clearly not something that was spoken in Alestrei, and perhaps was the common tongue of Jiana Allea. The vendor had plenty of wares arranged on a decorated tablecloth on his stall table – small trinkets, larger trinkets that my father claimed weighed more than he expected of them, and an assortment of stained cloth, some of which was fashioned into a form of robe my father thought would have looked comically out of place if he wandered around our village dressed in such. He asked the vendor of the nature of these trinkets – glancing upon them, he could not determine if they were anything similar to what he had come across in his travels before. They did not seem as though they were toys for a child, or concealed weapons – my father loved weapons – or something that would merely rest upon a shelf to be admired each morning and each night. My father, however, was taken in by their mystery. He wanted to learn of every detail, and then repeat it then, when he presented the handcrafted artefact to me.

The vendor told him what was held inside the wooden box was more intricate than what it presented to the idea. It was, at first, a stone hexagonal vessel, half-wrapped in stained gold fabric. The gold colouring was already fading, worn, almost as if sunken in a stream for far too long. It had started to look an almost urine colour. The fabric was fastened tight around one half of the object with a small clasp, which molded into the head of a snake. I moved to unclasp it, and my father hesitated, unsure if the vendor had mentioned whether it was seen as bad luck to “unclothe” the hexagonal vessel. My father tasseled with the fabric, rubbing it between two fingers. But this is the most he would do. Sometimes I would find him studying the strange object, seeming to find something soothing in the texture of the soft cloth. As far as I was aware when my father presented it to me, the stone artefact would not possibly open. In describing it as a vessel, however, I am sure you are aware I inevitably understood one more thing – my father coveted what he had stashed within.

Jiana Allea became a sort of fabled village I admired from afar. My father would describe new details seemingly every day, in the morning mere minutes after he awoke, or before he retreated to his bed in the evening. His stories were limited to his short stay in the town, but he remembered even the tiniest of patchworks, like the styling of a young girl’s hair, and the name of the vendor’s wife, which he had mentioned in passing. Eppielona, the vendor’s wife was named. My father thinks that perhaps she was on her death bed, with the way the vendor spoke of her. Every little detail seemed to come flooding back to my father in dream or in the haze of being tired from the day, and then he ventured off on another expedition, and I indulged in the thoughts of silence.

I considered my own travels to Jiana Allea in the future, for the temptation to fling off the cloth was met with that urge to know if I would be cursed with horrid luck. I wanted to shake it out of the vendor if I had to, the exact nature of it all. Then I would settle myself, see Ashil’s face in the window.

It was one of my father's lessons, that I suppose I was then using in balance against him. Plant your feet upon this grass, this ground, level yourself out – and then forgive your mind for getting tangled in the process of mapping something. It was always vague on the something – I figured, at the time, that my father was being broad for whatever may be losing me, but there's a vagueness. Vague cannot be ignored. Here I was making sure I ignored it entirely, however. I leant my head upon Ashil's shoulder. Once again my father had been vague on when he would return. I was grateful there was someone in my life that was not being hot and cold with me. Ashil spent many, many nights staying with me in an isolated home, shunned out from the light. He made my heart warm to the touch.

There was a hollowness to the time I spent alone but longing. I was growing older, but I had no ambition. I could not entirely say I wanted to be like my father, because would I end up as repetition, having a child in a cracked marriage, and then abandoning my child to pursue odd objects that felt too complex to understand? I understood it in half at that point – I understood my father's misery, his longing to be reunited with someone he loved, but I still didn't understand what he made his purpose now. I tried to ask Ashil if he, or his family, or anyone else, had heard of Jiana Allea before, if they knew more of it than the specific beauties that my father offered. I crouched in the frame of the backdoor one morning and I spoke the murmurings of what I hoped would be a successful summoning spell for my mother. I didn't summon her for my father, he was abandoning me. I wanted to stare in her face and dare her to explain herself, or dare her to say something. The wind cackled.

I remember hunting in the wood. My father would reappear to give me coin, to offer me enough to survive for a time, and then he would be gone with the wind again. But I remember the hunt. I would set traps for rabbits, traps my father taught me of. There was incredible payoff for our lessons when he abandoned me to fend for myself, as if it were the test of strength. Of skill, of cunning. I swung a rabbit over my shoulder and then I heard her voice.

“Fiva, Fiva,” She was the monster of a fable.

I spun around, blood dripping off the corpse of the kill. She was disgusted by it, but she stepped closer towards me. I remember pretending I could sense her disgust of me in a complete sense, but her expression softened, too, when I adjusted the rabbit upon my shoulder, more of the body further from her view. Korra was still short.

“It has been some time,” I said, completely neutral. I remembered the snickers and the sneers. Nothing but warmth radiated off of Korra in that moment. As if she were seeing an old friend again.

She inched closer to me, as if hoping to initiate an embrace. “I've missed you, Fiva.”

There was some initial hesitation, of course. I had felt completely alone when I thought Korra had steered an entire village worth of children and adults off from my course, my direction. Yet she spoke softly, and comfortably, and her arms wrapped round my body, the first time another woman had embraced me since I was very small. I had half the nerve to take an opportunity to punish her, to punish her as if she was a symbiote for my mother, but there were no weapons lying in clear view. Except for words, I supposed, and I heard stanzas of my mother's poetry in my head. Her voice no longer seemed familiar to me.

Korra paused as we retracted from each other. “I heard you are smitten with Ashil,” and she fought off some form of a frown creeping out the corners of her lips. “His parents, they whisper about how you have turned their determined son against them, that he no longer listens.” She seemed entirely sympathetic with me. “I didn't want to believe a word of it, Fiva, I did not.”

I could trace the underlings of it. The creeping vine. With my father absent more often than not, the house would be otherwise almost empty. Ashil kept me company, but it must be true then, with how often he would be avoiding returning home, that his parents saw me as some great demon worshipper, I have gone and traded in my soul for the fire of Xe, or the lingering eyes of Nammon.

Something to manipulate their darling son. He had for many years already expressed his wishes – he did not want to be a carbon copy of his father, striking metal with conjured heat, settling for a family as blonde as he remains with age. Would I run away with him? Nothing so much held me, shackled me, to the ground steady in Alestrei. Korra was beginning to convince me there was no certainty in waiting and she would not realise it, not from whatever expression she read off my face.

“I used to tease you, call you a princess,” I said, my shoulders tensing. She stared back at me, her expression low and distraught, but understandably so. I had not been innocent in shunning myself, too. Lashing out through the grief of my mother simply disappearing into the night. I craved first blood and then wondered why such an ordinarily-minded girl had never stayed my friend.

“The past is the past is the past,” Korra said, chuckling softly to herself. She smoothed out her dress, something far prettier than mine. Still very much in fashion for old town Alestrei, mind you.

I found myself comfortable in her presence, after all this time. We spoke for some time about the subject of boys – she wanted to know what it was like to be in love, what it was like to kiss such a boy as Ashil, and I reassured her that there must be another boy in the village that would give her the warmth in the heart that I felt for Ashil. She shook her head. They were bratty and ordinary, she said. I couldn’t help myself but laugh, but in talking to Korra, what felt like hours in the wood, she no longer seemed so ordinary, or bratty, or a perfect foil to my entire childhood. If we were ordinary, we would have promised to stay in each other’s lives until the grand day one of us keeled over and died. Our parting words that day were much more welcomed.

“Find me again in the woods,” I said, and she repeated it. We grinned at each other.

Then I made the short walk home alone, where I noticed the door stood wide open.

He was laying waste to our everything, searching through every cupboard, a brown leather satchel strung over his shoulder. My father, home again, this time in cruelty. He snapped his head round when I crumpled a torn-down notice with my boot. “Fiva, have you just about upended everything then?” He flung a square ornament behind him, near missing my head.

“What are you looking for, father?” I resisted the urge to snark at him, say *is it the attention you once gave me, or is it your heart wrapped in blue ribbon?* But I stood there, waiting on him. He slammed a cupboard door closed. Then I noticed the faded gold cloth tied to his wrist.

He was not searching for the vessel – he had it upon the table, bare-waisted now without its modesty skirting. It was slightly askew, as if my father had opened it and not completely closed it once more, as if out hurried impatience. I noted then that perhaps there had been something inside it all along. I’d frozen up, hoping he didn’t imagine I had taken whatever it was. There was an unsettled fear in knowing even less now about the so-called *trinket*.

“Did you go and eat every shred of what I brought you from my last visit then?” The word visit dripped blood from my neck. Like this was no longer home for him. My father opened another cupboard and froze, his hand settled unconvincingly on the edge of the wood. His fury seemed to be potently visible.

“Father, I was hoping you would have been home soon,” I said, and immediately did regret it. I had hoped to calm him, soothe him, but I merely sounded desperate for his affections, like I imagined the other village boys acted in trying to seem less bland to Korra. “Why don’t you just take this kill then and find someone else to scream at?” I tossed the dead rabbit down on the table, narrowly missing a collision with the vessel. My father snapped his head back in our direction, corpse and me.

I took a proper look at my father’s features, then. He was ghastly tired by the rings of charcoal underneath his eyes. He seemed much paler than typical of him, and I would have imagined he would have been underneath sun’s glaze for much of his venture – so it made little sense, then.

"I do not know why I am caring," he said, suddenly softening. He left the cupboard wide open, stepping toward the table, gripping the rise of one of our chairs with a dirtied hand. My father looked unholy, more than usual. The golden cloth dangled from his wrist, almost slipping from it. He fussed with it, completely enamoured, as he fell down into the chair. "I wanted one last supper with my daughter, is all." I had not considered before that moment that my father could be dying.

Perhaps I wished that he would have.

He poked at the matted fur of the bunny rabbit. "You will not be wanting to feed with me in a week, or a month, or a year, or any passing of time. Not when you see what is on the menu." He stuck his thumb into one of the rabbit's many wounds. I had been the one to slaughter the creature, and yet I was strangely disturbed by one simple action. Perhaps for it had been unexpected. He withdrew his thumb, and in one swift move, licked the blood from his own skin, his flesh, underneath the fingernail.

"We can settle for roasted rabbit then, and then you will never see me again." He started to grin, and then frowned, unsure of himself. "Just what you would want, I am sure." My father prodded at the rabbit, disgust, disappointment, contempt, all the emotions you could perhaps expect to receive eventually from your parents. All those emotions splayed on his face. He was letting down the guard he taught me of in our lessons, or he was revising it.

I had no words to attempt to understand the bitterness, the root. Bitterness of the root. He was nauseated at the suggestion of preparing the rabbit for the meal, so I stood with my back toward him, entirely silent. My father made passing remark, told me that in any worse case, I could sell this filthy wasted house for a pretty coin and run off into the woods with that normie boy I so much desired with all of my beating heart. I had wanted to defend those walls, those floorboards, as if they meant more than a father ought to. Yet I still waited on the delay of my heart. It was no alarming surprise to see my father grossly melancholic. I'd grown up with his misery.

I watched the golden cloth limply dangle dangerously close to getting smudged from the food. We were sat at the table, father and I. The rabbit had been too small, I had attempted as even a split as possible but my father insisted I eat the larger share, suddenly a generous man. It tasted of autumn. I remember how strange that had felt. My father was mostly moving the bones around with his fingers, shrugging, then licking juice off his fingers.

"Tell me if you are dying, then," I said, in between bites. I expected my father to laugh full-chested in my face and tell me to mind my own business. He seemed to freeze instead, conflicted.

"I am already dead, Fiva." He flicked a bone away in my direction, huffing at it, not at me. I thought for that moment, I am to be crucified as a witch, for precuring the ghost of my father out of some loneliness. Do I not get enough attention from that sweet, ordinary boy? But my father coughed. He tightened the grip of the faded-gold noose round his wrist, and he continued.

"What is the harm in telling you a fable story?" He said, shoving his plate forward so that he could rest both his arms upon the table, crossed over one another. "When you were a girl, I told you of the existence of creatures of the night. Or, more aptly, creatures of the *dark*." My father was the man of my childhood again, becoming the master once more. I had no animosity, no restraint. "Every journey away from Alestrei I was uncovering how true their existence is, and I discovered a new purpose. In a sense of it, Fiva, I am now dead. But I can walk in sunlight. They only come at night for the true, wrought fear that an ordinary will snuff them out for simply existing outside of legend."

He readjusted his arms, clamping tight to the faded gold of the cloth. He explained that it was no ordinary fabric after all, and I began to understand the vessel it had been sheathed upon, and what it protected. "An unknown time ago, a sorceress composed a tether, a ritual of sorts in which to summon the surviving crown-and-throne of this particular species of vampire. They are the only species that has not been wiped out in time," my father said, letting out a sympathetic sigh. "Humans have been cruel to who I now do understand to be my true kind." I had needed another bite of rabbit flesh, then.

He explained the talisman – a much-more intricate piece of designed cloth upon closer inspection, that he assured me he could not untie from his wrist until he had turned to entirety – was an embodiment of their sanctity. It assured the transition from human to vampire would not be *alarming* to the human population – stench would be muted; pale skin would be a shade not so unnatural for the diseased; hair not yet matted to the scalp as if drying of the blood from the suffering of a victim. It was an unusual but holy union between the sorceress and the vampires. In years to come, I would learn more of it, but in our humble kitchen, my father was being strangely matter-of-fact. No overwhelming hyperbole, no wolves in the woods. No, it was perhaps a vampire, if the angle of the moon protected them. He dropped his head. The cloth would wear thin by the time he became a full-fledged one of their kind. He would be vilified the moment he attempted a return to his darling daughter, he said to me, self-confident in a pitchfork’s sense of a *bloodsucker*. A cruel word from the mouths of human beings.

“You cannot ever come searching for me, Fiva, unless you plan on wasting your life too young.” It felt entirely hypocritical of my father to suggest that, after many, many years of following in his strides, that this perfected dream of his was an inconsequential tossing-aside of my existence. But in that moment I had agreed with my father, nodded my head. My future would be with Ashil, and I would mourn the loss of my father to some waking-grave I was not privy to. Understood, papa.

“These are the hands we are dealt,” he said, although an off-balance gaze suggested he did not mean stumbling upon a way to summon darkness entities. Perhaps he would have been a different father if my mother had not abandoned him, abandoned us. These are the hands we are dealt.

I had not spoken for some time, allowing my father to explain every detail he wished. He shook his head, reassured me that he did not blame my mother. Yet I felt the blood he could have drained from her neck, felt it drip down my own. When I finally spoke again, I caught my father off-guard.

“Alestrei is no home for me then, either.” I would move on from this hovel of a village with Ashil, I had decided. I would have been grateful, then, to be in love with someone that did not express such tired ideals as becoming exactly like his father.

In one foul swoop, two generations would lay waste to just an ordinary house.

My entire body ached. I wanted more than anything to sob, simply sob.

When my father stood up, offering to clear away the picked-off bones from the table, I had hesitated before answering. I pictured my father drinking at the neck of some helpless blonde damsel. Her wail slipping down over her eyes like a veil. It was the only image stuck in a mud-mind, and I struggled so to outrun it. My father had attempted to reassure me earlier that there was significant reason why these creatures of the dark rarely disrupted townsfolk, but the teeth of it had yet to bite. Something in me had twinged – maybe I was a hypocrite, too, for thinking my father would be a limp stalk-and-biter, but I would excel so miraculously at it?

He left me alone, the very last time. Wind seemed to howl louder in this moonlight, but I talked it entirely to the splitting of my heart. I attempted to fall asleep, but the one nightmare I had shook me awake. I had been in the burn and the core of a furnace, clutching tight to my father’s coaled hand. The rest of his flesh had dripped down like honey, smooth, slurped by some flame god. I woke to flushed cheeks and feet entirely too warm underneath the covers. I let myself sob. There had once been immense joy in every return my father would make, but then all I could do was understand he would never be seen again. I strained my eyes against the dark, in search of something.

Then, the silence ended. I heard the beginnings of fidgeting, of turning a lock, and for perhaps a moment I wondered if my father had returned to be sure I would never search out for him. The sounds were harsh, sharp, someone heaved against the outside wood of the door. I had no fear in me. I stepped out of the bedroom, eyeing the moonlit centre room for some weapon of protection, without needing

to rush to the cupboard where my father kept his weapons. Mine now. My weapons. I sent a brief thank you to my father, wherever he was, for he had left an unsheathed knife out of the cabinet. I stood my ground facing the back door, where the supposed-thief or murderer was attempting to sneak into that house of mine. The door swung open suddenly, brashly. I should have found light, illuminated the disruptor, but it would have been pointless in that moment before, too. A darkened silhouette stepped inside the kitchen, her features not entirely recognizable, although I knew it was a woman. She was cautious, noticing me in the moonlight. A hushed voice floated out in the space between us.

“Fiva?” She spoke with sincerity, warmth, but fear, too. “I was hoping I would not wake you up...alas.” The woman stepped further into the room, and I suppose there is always some complete understanding in every sense in your body, for I was seeing my mother again, for the first time since I was very, very little.

The woman in front of me had very little of my features, but that was not a surprising detail. I resemble my father almost in a mirror, as if I had been birthed only of him. But in the moment she reclaimed corners of the house for herself, for her to stand in front of me, I searched for any twinge, any thrum, of myself in my mother. Her hair was the colour of smelted bronze pulled from the flame. She wore the clothing of a nomad, a free spirit, fabric draped round her waist and pulled to cover her shoulders. The moonlight caught on pearl-white and weed-green. My mother looked like poetry.

“You hoped I would be asleep when you broke into our home?”

My mother froze, confronted. Isolated, almost, by the walls. “Your father, too.”

“Why did you come back after so many years?” I had predicted her dead by this time. To see my mother alive, stealing away into the house in the late hours of a darkened night, made me grip tighter to my weapon. I was hopeful I would not need to defend myself against the woman who could have raised me.

She stared back at me, compromised by some newer emotion. My mother, undoing a verse.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” she said, and I cut her off.

“You did not want to raise me either, mother.”

“I am sorry I left you and your father,” she continued, closing the door behind her. Suddenly closed off in the room with my mother, everything felt hugged in. There was warmth, and there was not. Less of the moonlight penetrated our collected darkness. “I thought, I have abandoned everything, I will never return to it again. This would be my only return, just to collect something.”

“Never to collect your daughter,” and I hesitated before I said, “who now does not have a father, either.” She would assume he had died, rolled over, and then I’d have heaved him out the door and dug up a hole. Made something poetic out of the collapse and the grief. I reassured her that he had not died before my eyes, or while he slept, or some noble peaceful passing off. My mother did not seem to budge much. “So you did come to burgle us.”

“I left something here, a possession.” My mother spoke warmly, and she made herself comfortable in the house again, just with her words. The cupboards, the wooden beams, they seemed to nuzzle up to my mother, whinny for her returned attention. I was still entirely unsure of her. I knew every inch of home more profoundly than the woman who had flitted from it, I had thought I knew what everything left behind meant and what of her things we discounted to have no meaning left to them. Dresses, fabric, thread, all danced round my head like loose-fitting jewels. Chipped jewels, cracked slivers all that we have left. I did not figure this woman to risk my father’s bereaved wrath for something ornamental, something ordinary.

“This house holds many secrets,” she began, sounding as if a peddler on the street. She drew out the vowels of the last two words, eyeing off the furthest wall from the both of us. My mother had never questioned the knife in my claw. “All is mere code for me having plied off a board of one of the walls and stashed a family heirloom I didn’t want your father trading on one of his travels.”

My father had always been a wanderer then. Somehow it had only correlated that he abandoned any post for the grief he felt in being left to be a single father for his darkened-heart of a daughter. All this constant blaming of emotions, and my father had instead always been eager to explore the four corners of vast, vast Vaykha. The idea came to me, perhaps there had been time lost to a child-like memory of my mother and I navigating growing up without him. Could it have slammed head-first into my mother? I did not know whether to question why she strayed, or sympathize.

“You father, he did not like my mother, at all.”

I had never heard a single story about my grandmother, my mother’s mother. I imagined worms crawling out her eye sockets, and stench.

“My mother, she had always loved my father, but that man, he had spent half his life out at sea, and that was before they had met in their late twenties.” She paused her search, pulling out the chair, taking a seat. My mother seemed like a tree stump the moment she hunched. Squat, and aged, and tired. Exhausted. “My father was more in love with a mirage of a woman he saw in the sea than his wife.” I wondered why my own mother pondered on the heartache of hers, and then it became abundant with the clearing of whatever fog I had helped in approaching everything. Quite broad, sure.

“When my father died, my mother, she gave me the heirloom – it was a very simple necklace, fashioned from likely whatever the maker had found in the wood, but intricately done. Incredibly crafted. Petite and not at all of that sense that it was handmade. My mother told me, find yourself love that is crafted out of simple things that the world offers to you, but make sure it is a gorgeous love that no one else will ever know.” When my mother stopped speaking, stopped rethreading the history of her own parents, I thought for even the most cramped-in of memories, I saw myself in her arms. Little girl Fiva, beaming at her mother. I was only left to assume my mother lost track of the mirage, and went searching for it out at sea. Literal or figurative, who is to say except for the woman who changed course.

She changed track again, sudden sharp burst of energy. She retreated further into the house, and I followed behind her, settling the makeshift weapon of mine down on the kitchen table. I trusted her, strangely. In my father’s bedroom – which had once been hers, too – she was plucking at a wooden board with her thin fingernails, letting out soft grunts with her failing attempts. The wood would inch out, breathe, then my mother would falter, slip, and she would huff. I made little suggestions, keeping out of her way. She paused in one moment, glancing at me.

“He raised you exact,” she said, stifling a laugh. “Did his reason for leaving the home and the house change?” My mother supposed back when she still cared to raise me he was curious about lost artefacts of a peoples who constructed temporary settlements in the desert, but I made brief comment that he had never mentioned them to me.

“He only told me black legends of vampires and sea monsters and such,” I replied, figuring that to be the right response. I could protect another secret, I thought. Hide him away in some cavern, where I was sure he already dwelled.

My mother finally yanked open the hideaway-place for her heirloom. The necklace, curled like a snake, was in remarkable condition. No one had touched it since my mother left it. It was not the only lost artefact, however. Beside it, disfigured with age, was a small in size orange. Perfectly shriveled. I asked my mother why she thought to hide an orange, and she said:

“I don’t remember, actually.” She held the rotted fruit with her left hand, studying it. “I guess I wanted to call it mine, not his. My orange, my fruit.” She shook it all off, walked to the back door and tossed the decay outside. I only remembered that now, and I do not so much remember my mother swiping the necklace, or wearing it again, or anything of the sort. I remember, now, vividly, the orange of the past.

I would never find myself sitting on a back step, peeling oranges with my mother.

Once more in the moonlit kitchen, my mother cast a glance upon me, studying the young woman I had become. “You have nothing of mine now,” she said, and I understood she meant more than possessions. The shimmer of the upwards moon reflected in my mother’s hair – it appeared lighter, almost translucent, if caught at the right angle. I recognise now that perhaps I remembered particles of my mother differently, to satisfy some strange itch left behind by becoming an orphan with two alive parents roaming the wilderness somewhere. I itched for the knife, the blade, to punish my mother, but she was gorgeous. Beautiful, charming, but all twigs and all dirt.

“I’ve outgrown needing a parent,” I said to her, entirely too sure of myself.

My mother just grinned, running a hand through my shadow-black hair. “Of course,” she responded, tilting her head. “I always had some inkling you would be incredibly independent at seventeen.” I let my mother embrace me. I stopped focusing on myself, on the house. I thought of, strangely, a path winding through the wood. My feet smudging in the mud. It had rained, then, the night before. Perhaps Ashil was beside me, hand in hand, or perhaps he was somewhere else. My dark hair was matted-wet against my scalp. I had been navigating the world through the night. Good. Something in darkness was calling out to me, and it wasn’t my father, I would have forgotten him by then. It was something entirely mine, embracing me. I felt its warmth. A beating heart.

“Goodbye again, mother.”

She stared into my eyes, capturing one last mental image of her child. In the dark, I could not tell if she was crying or if the bare light was playing tricks on me, but it did not matter. My mother could sob over me, or she could forget about me entirely. If she ever heard from me again, she would know now that she was at least partially responsible for the woman I have become. That would sit somewhere in a nestled spot in her conscience, an unsupported arch, a cracking spine.

...

In the morning, I heaved unnatural sobs into Ashil’s chest. I was performing, I think, because I had waned on emotion and exhaustion in the night, before and after the cautioned reunion with my mother. Ashil had asked me why I was quiet, sullen, emptied out from the eyes. I had rooted around but found no strength to lie to him.

I put something my father taught me in lesson to good use and I let Ashil become more comfortable with a vulnerable Fiva, a young woman swording off an internal army, not some legion sent out from the king of Teval.

He held me, kissed my forehead, and I pictured myself again in the gloom wood, entirely alone.

“Do you want to me to come stay permanently in your home?” He was clumsily attempting to ask if he should move in, if we should become an official couple and soon wed. It felt awkward, to me. I shrugged him off, not in that moment wishing to talk about anything, only wanting to listen to the wind and the howl and the potential reverberated last words spoken to me by my father, and by mother.

In time, I thought, the agony of it all would evaporate from my body like I was a slumbering lake in the middle of a landmass, and in time, true, the evaporated would turn back to rain and tumble once more – but it would not be a query, a headache, for that current space, that current squeeze. In short: I would be haunted now, and then much later. Ashil made me see an opal-cut of my future in which I could forget any and all ache. Those slices of time would repeat, in new form, over and over. I needed someone there by my side, guiding me, keeping me loved. Yet there was a stillness to the idea of depending on someone – it was something I never wanted again. In Ashil’s arms, I spent a few more weeks drying my face with my sleeve, and I’d slip out the crook to slaughter rabbits.

I noticed something in periphery two weeks after reassuring Ashil that I would survive without his sheltering of me in the home I grew up in, and had spent many days and night alone in. Shadowy

shapes flicked blanketing dark in the corner of my eye, when I'd start to forget that someone could be following me. I could narrow it down to one – it was someone, an identical figure, following close behind me but further enough to not seem entirely too obvious. At first, I hesitated to believe it was my father. Every strange occurrence seemed to be my father to me, come to bite my neck, drain my blood. I would spend evenings pretending to be asleep, waiting to hear the latch on the door crack, snap, flick open. Nothing. I mentioned none of this to Ashil. I stressed on worrying him about nothing, as if it were entirely inconsequential that someone was trailing me, donning their finest of molasses-black. The cloak stained into dreams and nightmares. I was beginning to itch for Ashil and I to flee old town Alestrei, and yet he hesitated, for once, as if there were his mother's crook yanking at his neck.

I found a new warmth to the wood. Those idealistic visions, the views, it made me crave being alone more than I had when I expected someone to come home to me, eventually. Where leathery leaves brush against the curve of my ears, I would pay less attention to everything. I'd stop thinking about everything I will not now quit jabbering about, and the cloaked figure was root and bark and less of a chill now that there was familiarity in the repeat. I saw her time, and time, and time again.

I had assumed by then that it was a she, from the shape of her figure. I could have been completely incorrect, but it made it more comfortable making an assumption. Some woman was trailing me, had been for some time, and I made myself feel as if I were royalty after a miserable loss.

Progress for some novel future was not made, or at least it was a process of taking steps forward, admiring the footsteps I had impressed in the dirt, then caving back into them for the fear of growing to miss them too much. My single follower had begun to grow closer. She would hide behind the house, in the wood there, where Ashil once awaited me after the lessons with my father. Those memories like splinters curving down and round from my fingertips, digging themselves in. I was adjusting, I was adjusting, I would have been telling myself.

I wanted to ensnare the tail that would not let up.

My cloaked woman. I would bait her, I thought, and I set whatever crafted plan I mustered up from the leftovers of my father's things, and I waited it out. I understood her not to be a foolish rabbit, or a woodland fox, so I could not merely plant a tasty morsel underneath a catcher's net and assume bounding would be afoot. I would set up illusions if I had to. I created ambitious plans for myself, and then I ran straight into the woman, abandoning everything as I stumbled to my feet.

"I am so sorry," I uttered out, brushing the dirt off of myself. The plan, all of the sudden, was to pretend as if I had accidentally nudged into her, busy on my feet. "I lost focus, I lost focus," I apologised constantly to the woman, and knew it was a woman by then, as I had seen her face as we stumbled back to our feet. Underneath the midnight cloak, the woman hid a head of blonde hair.

"Very unlike you," she said, a harsh voice. A cold voice.

I had half a mind to glare at the woman, demand how she knew absolutely anything about me. I studied the dark brown of her eyes, almost an unholy black the colour of the garment she wore. I wondered then whether she wore much else underneath, a sprinkle of the childhood I was outrunning spriting back inside me. Even just for the hello.

"I am sorry to have disturbed your walk," I replied, convincing myself entirely of this new persona – a girl minding her own business for once. The blonde woman smiled at me. There was nothing familiar about her face. I was certain, at least, that no one else could have been stalking me round old Alestrei. I sensed it within her.

The cloaked woman struck out an arm, offering to shake my hand. "You might as well be acquainted with me then," she offered, her smile sinister. "I am Cenerre, of the Ryeven Order."

I introduced myself to her, assuming she knew my name regardless. Then a natural silence fell between us, and I studied the shape of her face. She was not particularly beautiful, but I decided not to be the judgmental sort – I needed to understand her, not admire her.

I decided to be the one to break off from keeping quiet. “Does your Order plan to have me executed for some unknown reason?” I thought, perhaps, for a second, that the Ryeven Order she spoke of could be code for a vampiric council that my father now belonged to. But she bore no resemblance to a vampire, what I imagined of them, and she seemed to hesitate too frequently in making her approach.

Cenerre stared at me, smirking. “Have a peasant girl executed for no reason?” She made to laugh, but stopped herself, ducking her head. The hood of the cloak hid most of her expression now. She appeared to me an enveloping shadow in the midst of the wood. Her voice boiled out, entirely of steam. “You mean more to us alive.”

We began moving through the forest, side by side. I grew weary of her silence too quickly, and so I pointed out what I noticed in the scuff of the woodland floor before us. Cenerre offered very little to the conversation, observing me, nodding her hood, reminding me it would be wiser for us to have a little chat somewhere indoors, preferably the house. My dwelling. She was hushed about what it was we would discuss; we couldn’t risk a single other person from the village overhearing.

I reminded myself that she seemingly had no intention to carve out my innards, but the convincing was laborious, and took the entirety of the walk back to the house, the one slowly caving in on itself. Figuratively speaking. I hoped I was not a reflection of the space I inhabited.

Cenerre adjusted to the rise of the back of a kitchen table chair, reaching to remove the hood from her blonde head. She looked entire, whole, in the house. “I am surprised you have not been evicted,” she said, running a combing hand through a tangled side of her hair.

“People in the village ignore me.”

Cenerre cocked her head, smirking again. Her smirk was foul and disgusting and made me nauseous, incredibly so.

“I am not surprised,” she replied, setting both of her hands upon the edge of the wooden table. “But not everyone in the village has taken to such a sentiment. No reason for you to hide him from me.” She mentioned Ashil with such subtlety, and yet without caution, too, a black-bellied snake rearing to strike. My attention never strayed from Cenerre. I feared I would gain a permanent enemy if I distracted, let my pupils drift, show some unholy sign of disrespect, despite her coming to me with such bitterness. All I needed was her purpose. The venom of her veins.

“For a peasant girl, I have intrigued you plenty enough.”

Cenerre was silent for a moment.

“Your humble beginning does not equate for every action through the rest of your time alive.” She undid the cloak from round her neck, exposing the white flesh beneath it. Exposed skin above the low cut of blackened bandages that form a makeshift cover for her breasts. “My lord does not know I am here, paying you any sort of a visit, following you around. Stalking you like prey.” The cloak spooled on the kitchen floor, as if a never-ending hole had opened up before my eyes. Fabric becoming a gape against the wood. Cenerre smirked again, somewhat of a signature to remind me I was the one without any of the answers. “He would have me punished for even saying a brief hello,” she muttered. Something twisted rose out from her voice. Something twisted rose out from her ears, too, some invisible gnat/worm/demonic possession – that is how it seemed with this woman before me then.

Cenerre laughed at me. She was a spiteful, cruel woman. She was beautiful, too. She held some form of a protection for me, albeit spurned into the soil some twenty metres under the ground.

“Your father, he became a ghost of himself, yes?”

“How do you know of my father?”

“I am a sorceress, Fiva, a sorceress practicing under Zacceharian.” She paused, a limp of one, watching the expression that was undoubtedly plastered on my plain face. I did not know that name, then. “You will forget the name all the same in time. Zacceharian is to be *my lord*, to you.”

She explained to me the bones of the Order of Ryeven. They were an organization of sorcerers and spellcasters and powered folk of other kind, too, for there were a few vampires within too. My father was certainly not lounging around within their bounds, and I knew this without asking. It would have been the flicking fire within me at the time, that I knew of him to be frantic and a child in the body of a grown man. In truth, my father is grown enough to know he was true in avoiding the Order. He wished to live forever and among kind like him – he had no desires of bowing to the whims of a man like Zacchearian.

Cenerre was sure to mention with frequency that I was not fated or destined or a chosen one of sorts, that there were no prophecies of a girl named Fiva from the backwater town of Alestrei. *I am so terribly sorry for our appearance*, I would sometimes hear townsfolk whimper out when locals of the nearest city visited. On a miserable morning, it was true that the old town looked as if cursed luck had befallen on it. I figured as soon as I cleared out and took the bleakness of it with me like a succubus, it gave rise to what you report of Alestrei now. I was still there, for now.

“I can wipe your memory if I need.” She flicked her wrist as she spoke this, feigning some claim of magic, but nothing noticeable had happened. Cenerre never did clean my memory of our strange introduction. She would smirk about it, of course. That woman would always find reason to smirk.

“The way your father concocted of himself a vampiric life, it is a sort of trap that lingers from a sorceress long before my time.” Cenerre seemed chuffed to keep her identity from me. Someone of importance, or at least a sorceress with great power. “She enchanted ribbon, this thread of them, to be a sort of beacon for new fledgling vampires. They were aware of it, as a means to keep their new rank outside of dangerous territory.” She paused, adjusting a loosening bandage round her breasts. It was, to me, such a novice approach to covering up one’s wounds – novice for such a sorceress as she was. But I was entirely unsure of who she was, still, so I suppose I expected for Cenerre to have miraculously soothed whatever had been ailing her.

I’m afraid I was thinking too logically.

“We had wondered for some time why fledgling vampires were a new rarity,” she whispered out, her voice callous, strangely so. “The Order harbours no ill will for vampires, Fiva.” Cenerre’s inflection had been misunderstood, then – it was that she thought a species were dying out, or in hiding, not that she were stalking them as she had done me. “The Order has no hope of harming your father, Fiva, I swear it.”

The Order this, the Order that.

“My lord believes that perhaps you, Fiva of Alestrei, could reunite him with his sister.”

“You came without an order, yes?” I finally spoke, and I remember tilting my head just slightly, as if questioning everything about the woman before me. I knew she was breaking some bounds by pouncing on me before the *lord* of the forest did.

“My lord does not know what is best for him sometimes.”

My lord this, My lord that.

“This lord of yours, you wish to overthrow him, I am sure of that.”

I hesitated – I wished, in that moment, to tell her I would be willing for that cause.

The thought arose out of nowhere. It would flicker out with time, too.

“Zacchearian figured you to be the crippled wife, someone a fledgling vampire was keeping alive for appearance sake.” Cenerre’s words felt colder than the last winter. I shudder, now, having said that – I had been so distracted, disrupted, at the time by the notion that I was thought to be *decaying*.

“How did you know my father did not live alone?”

“He mentioned to another vampire that there was someone at home he wanted to keep happy.”

I paused, then. Something struck me – maybe I had forgotten my father loved me.

“Your Order is very concerned with sticking their faces in all of the pies.”

It felt like such a childish thing to say, that I was this teenage girl accusing a collective of supernatural beings of being gossips, being nosy neighbours, of spurring out information from their underlings and sneaking up on their foes. I reminded myself I was not a foe, not likely so. I had very little to offer from the squalor.

“The decimation of our kind is not something we pretend will not happen.”

Suddenly, I could sense all the bones in her body become tense, exaggerated underneath her skin. Cenerre stretched out her thin, elongated legs underneath the table. At one time, she adjusted in her position and our feet collided, and she uttered a soft apology and ignored it further. I couldn't imagine she would have nudged me on purpose.

She straightened her back and smirked, again. I was growing so tired of her smirking.

“I suppose you can wipe my memory now and report back to this Zaccharian of yours.” I was getting a kick out of being immature. I did not, for a second, want her to assume me the threat that would undo whatever championed protection the Order of the Ryeven had assembled for the supernatural beings of Vaykha. I was awaiting a return to a life that was almost bearable, being desperately in love with Ashil, fatherless, motherless, driftless. Take the memory from me, Cenerre, I almost willed of her. Give me back the ignorance.

“You could come back with me, Fiva,” she said, void of a girlish excitement, a thrill that would have slipped out of Ashil's mouth if he had asked me instead.

I sat there, open-mouthed, silent. Then, “Your lord can suffice without me.”

“Fiva, you will never be of the other women he corrupts.”

“Well, that is promising, is it not?”

Cenerre would not take her eyes off me. “You cannot stay here amongst rubble.” It was almost terrifying. Almost contorted and callous. But no. There was something human that remained in Cenerre – there always would be, I believe. Despite her best efforts to be irredeemable.

“You – you call first love rubble? So what if he is ordinary!”

Cenerre paused, sighing. “Do you know of anthropomancy, Fiva?”

The term was foreign to me – my father would not have taught me something that would have more likely been a spiritual concept my mother would write about. All at once the word sounded faintly familiar of her – my mother, gone from me, for good now I had imagined.

“No? Anthropomancy is divination through sacrifice – reading one's future from the organs of a fresh corpse. Sorceresses of old always preferred a human body. It was said to have provided more accurate tellings – the already-decaying corpse of a fat hog could, if poorly trained, communicate to you that your future consisted of being hunted, sliced open at the stomach, and roasted over the coals.”

Cenerre rose out of the wooden chair and began to unravel the blackened bandages around her torso. Her skin underneath was not scarred, or bruised, or gashed – from the front, she seemed entirely healed. She glanced briefly at me, before she contorted her body so that the rise of her back was facing toward me. Like protruding bone, the beginnings of two skeletal wings spiked out from her skin. Underdeveloped bird wings, their edges smoothed down.

“If my mother and father had been knowledgeable of anthropomancy, perhaps they would not have fallen pregnant with me, perhaps that would have been wise of them.”

I said nothing. I had seen her breasts and her deformity, and yet I felt all the same – I did not feel more at ease opposite her, more reassured by her sudden vulnerability. My father would have been disappointed if I caved so brashly at a little bosom, a little scarred flesh.

“I do not understand how this all relates to me,” I had said, so ordinarily, with a woman winding the bandages round her flesh once more in front of me. Cenerre said nothing for a time. I assumed I had offended her, but she seemed the type to not be offended easily. I could have attempted this anthropomancy of hers to figure where this was going before she spoke once more.

“Anthropomancy is not only good for figuring your future.” Cenerre slipped the cloak round her body, easing back into the chair. She seemed to become comfortable again instantaneously. Her blonde hair caught the sunlight. “If someone were to position the organs of the deceased in a certain order at her feet, a crimson halo, they could commune with vampiric kind. They could be converted.”

“Why would I want to become the thing my father had become? The thing he abandoned me for?” I knew she understood the ways in which I was bluffing her. I could tell from those silly little smirks. “What, am I of more use to *your lord* if I am dripping of blood at the mouth?”

“I never said that.”

I sat in that moment wondering why I had not yet shooed her out of my home. Then I understood why I was keeping her there. Why I was almost beckoning her further into the orbit of sly peasant girl Fiva. There was something in the strange connection between the two of us.

“It is getting late, I think it is best you find someplace to sleep for the night.”

I rose to my feet, gesturing for her to follow with a sharp nudge of my head. Cenerre obeyed with a hesitance I had not seen before.

“Fiva,” she said, pausing, her expression patient, “the path is forked for you in one thousand ways. One of those paths will lead you to what, married bliss with a man that seems to understand the simple culmination of your heart. There are many, many others that will you the purpose I am sure your father was hoping for you.”

With that, Cenerre buttoned up the cloak once more and I escorted her through the back door of the little house. On parting, she made as if to mention one last mind’s eye thought, but she smiled at me, instead, and started off toward the wood. A shapeless midnight-black figure, disappearing before me. I shoved the door closed behind me and banged my head against the wood.

On the chair she had sat in, Cenerre had left the torn page of a worn-down tome.

A how-to on the art of anthropomancy.

I barely slept that night. I struck a candle after hours of tossing and turning, and I read and reread the contents of that page some fifty times. Maybe I was committing it to memory, or maybe I was kidding myself, trying to convince myself I would never once consider this opportunity for some life grander than mine was. The Reyven woman was pecking at the idea I had of myself with her blackened beak. For a time, I had been content, utterly content, escaping being an effective orphan by being in love with a normal, blonde-haired boy named Ashil. But to flee from Alestrei was paramount – and I could not be certain Ashil will want to budge in all directions.

In the morning, I awoke to a burned-out candle. I had drooled on the page Cenerre had left for me, but the ink was not smudged, and I had not torn even the smallest of tears in the ancient-seeming parchment. I had half a mind to stalk out the forest behind the house and see if Cenerre had made camp out of my line of sight, anticipating me. Then, I suppose, I would have been admitting to myself that she intrigued me more than I understood.

I got myself dressed – I wanted to walk in entirely the other direction that which I imagined Cenerre would be, but I shuddered at the thought of going for such a wander through the heart of the village. My options were entirely too paper-thin.

I found a garment of my father’s that I had hidden after one of his lessons once. He had been instructing me on how to keep yourself protected in such a space as the woods – how to hide in plain sight, how to use the thin trunks of some of the native species to your advantage, as much as they are not ideal for hiding behind. Hurriedly, I ran home after the lesson, in remembering a hooded coat my father owned, that he only wore in the harshest of winters, to shield his face, mostly. I hid it then.

My father’s coat was too grown for me. He was not a giant man, only a few inches taller than I, but nevertheless I felt mouse-like in his clothing. But it would do. All I wanted was to shield my face.

There was not much of a wind in the woods behind the house that morning, but I felt entirely incognito enough to avoid the glances of chirping birds, the occasional fox, Cenerre herself. I thought that time of setting a trap for a rabbit, to catch myself what would be lunch, or more likely dinner.

I think, nevertheless of what my stomach was whispering, I carried the hunting knife with me. I had nothing for setting traps, but I hid the knife in a pocket of the coat. I thought I needed the protection.

“I found you in the woods again, Fiva,” she called out, her voice sweet. Innocent.

Korra.

I turned round to see her dressed in light colours – she stood out entirely in the wood, a beacon of sunshine, as all-too-unoriginal as it was. Perhaps in some other light she could have reasoned many a thing with me. I smiled at her, uttering her name as a greeting.

“Out for a morning stroll without your Ashil?” I tried to pretend as though she had not sounded like a pestering village neighbour, but after the night I had, I was unsure of her statement – how could I face Ashil, let alone speak to him about what had happened, about the first meeting I had with Cenerre? I told myself then to shake out of it. I slipped the hood of the coat off my head.

“How early it must be,” I said, inching towards her.

Korra and I embraced, a tight hug that I had not expected. “Are you okay, Fiva?”

“Of course I am.”

“You look pale-er,” she responded, caressing my cheek with the back of her hand. It sent a chill down my spine, only that her hand was cold, already.

“My father and I have pale skin, as did my grandmother, I am told.” I have heard a handful of stories about that woman. That she was extraordinarily ill and died suddenly, being the most common of them. When I ask what happened to the rest of my family, outside of my mother. But I was never entirely told that she had pale skin. Not until she fell ill, I suppose.

If I had indeed looked paler than typical of me then, it was because a sorceress had been stalking me for some time, and then communicated to me a series of remarkable truths, before leaving me to ponder the chance to become a vampire myself through the art of anthropomancy. That was why I was feeling slightly unlike myself. Or entirely more alike to who I was to become.

“You are too beautiful to be ill, my dear Fiva,” Korra said, taking a pinch of the fabric of the coat in her hand, feeling the texture of it. She commented that it was softer than she imagined it to be, that it was lovely, that she jokingly would love to borrow it sometime. What was she doing then? Thinking we could be perfectly ordinary friends, I suppose. Two women without corruption. Did I have the migraine for it then?

“What are you doing in the woods?” I asked of her, bumping my elbow against the sheathed blade of the knife.

Korra looked at me with comfort, reassurance, as if perhaps she had been spooked by something earlier and only remembered it now that I had questioned her. “Sometimes I find solace in between the trees, as I am sure you do too.” She bent down to pick up a twig off the forest floor. “It is so impossible sometimes just trying to please everyone.”

I smirked at her, as she set two hands on the twig and snapped it in half. She laughed, a full, silly, girly laugh. A laugh that came from brushing everything off. I guess, a laugh I knew too well. Korra turned away from me, carrying the two halves as she hunted for something in the undergrowth. She started to ignore me enough, let her guard down. I shoved a hand into the pocket of the coat and felt the knife glide between my fingers, a grip to slip off the sheath.

Korra spun around, in a whirl, and oh, I suppose she collided with the hunting knife, sheriff.

It was exhilarating. I drove the blade in, twisting it for good luck. My first human kill, and I was suddenly feeling less ill, less sickened to my stomach with *oh no what will I do?* I cannot remember now

just how many times I stabbed my dear old friend Korra. At least four times, I would say. I think I must have been carried away with the ill intention of it all, the gruesome act, carving a little rabbit with a million and one little wounds. Her body would not have been suitable for anthropomancy. I hesitated on the thought of finding her family and eliminating that chance that someone would truly come looking for her, but if I went on a murderous rampage through Alestrei, eventually someone was ought to figure it was the dark-haired freak who lived in the house all alone and had always been entirely too unusual. She would be a murderess, of course she would.

I did not have the energy nor the shovel to dig her a proper burial, but I held a brief funeral for her. Korra had been somewhat of a friend to me. She never would have understood me, but that was her charm, to an extent.

“You were too precious for this world, princess,” I said to her corpse before I heaved it into a pile of leaves behind the mossy remnants of a fallen tree. “You wasted your time on me.”

Let someone find her body, I remember thinking. I will be gone in a day.

I cannot even recall if I was drenched in the blood that oozed out from Korra or not. I remember how vicious, how cruel I was. Then I fled towards Ashil’s home, screaming out his name. Some buried nook in me wanted to see him, needed to see him, but true, that was teenage love. I wanted his embrace, didn’t I? It mattered not if I appeared as outward-turned flesh, grim and bloody, clinging to my father’s coat. My memory is somewhat foggy on what happened next. That is why sometimes I tell an entirely different story, and people believe me. Of course they believe me.

I am not a weak woman, a weak person, was not even a weak teenage girl, but I remember collapsing against his door, crying out for him. It could have been an act. It could have been the last sincere show of desperation I had left in me. I wanted my love, my Ashil, to hold me.

I could do one despicable act and still be a young woman craving attention, I knew that.

When Ashil opened the door to me, I stood there, shoulders clenched in too-high peaks, the coat stained, my dark hair like the winding river. Ashil was wearing dark, heavy clothing, an apron tied at his back – clothes I could imagine his father wearing in the smith. Ashil wore the discontent upon his face, but he warmed at the sight of me. I panicked and immediately shed the coat – what was I doing wearing it still, wearing all the filth so openly, so defiantly. My father’s old coat fell in a haphazard twill onto the doorstep, and I challenged Ashil to ignore it, burying myself in his arms.

Out in woodland country again, we felt the wind brush past us, some stranger to us both, an accidental nudge here and there. The wind reminded me of Cenerre. The sort of stranger I should not have been surprised I had met in the wood. She warned me of the future, now did she not? Anthropomancy could have been another warning, another hesitance. Go into the darkness without some carved-out weapon you have no knowledge of how to wield.

I held Ashil’s hand, weaving him deeper into the forest. He thought it was a simple stroll, and it began as such, I suppose. I needed to clear my head. I had just murdered Korra and tossed aside her body and I had whisperings from that bone-winged woman in my ear, in my head, curving round the bone of my skull. I began to misremember words she said – I was convinced, so certain, that Cenerre had told me *my lord* wanted to pickle my brain and keep it in one of his many glass jars. Silly, silly thoughts rattled me, but I could simply turn my head toward Ashil, and he would be beaming, and I would settle even for just one second.

His adoration was wearing off of me. What a cruel thing for me to think.

I thought I saw Cenerre there in a shrub, staring out from between fat, olive green leaves.

We were enclosed in a small clearing, someplace a person could camp for the evening. Up ahead, another path began, luring us deeper into the wood, but I froze, my grip tightening on his. Ashil was staring at me, entirely unsure of me – I think he glanced at the parts of how I appeared at that moment that made no sense to him. The frantic stare. A face drained of colour. I was already beginning to look like what I would become, like a cry out, *look father, I am playing the part already*.

Ashil did not know that. He would have thought me straining entirely too much after my father fled from me, which would be as natural a reaction as him being in disgust of not wanting to follow in his father's footsteps, an occupation that did not at all suit him. His father would have expected him to wed an ordinary woman, too.

"I did not think you had the strength for it to be him." Her voice coiled round my throat, I began to worry it would be her words that would kill me. Somewhere, Cenerre was stepping out from the shadows that barely existed, the sun barely obscured by tree canopies.

"Do I need to carve him for you?"

Our eyes met, suddenly. Cenerre's hood rested upon her shoulders, exposing her blonde head. Some sort of black powder was smudged underneath her eyes, or she had barely slept the night. She inched too near to myself and Ashil, eying him off. "Unwilling sacrifice, is he?"

I could sense that Ashil understood nothing of that time. This stranger, shaped by a shapeless midnight cloak, was speaking of things darker than her fabric. Strength to overcome, carving, knives, the one that I had almost left on the heap at his door. Someone else would find the coat now, it did not matter. Unwilling sacrifice, such a brutalitarian way to structure the truth.

"Fiva –" he began, but he was swiftly cut off by Cenerre's serpent tongue.

"You can have newfound strength, or you can abandon yourself."

"Who is this, Fiva, what is she tempting you with?"

I was attempting to swallow an invisible air pocket larger than the hand that had held the hunting knife I killed Korra with. I took another breath, words forming little spaces in between the nothingness. "She is attempting to punish me, even after everything my parents have done." I realised I was acting, again. Pretending. "She said she was a sorceress, if you can believe this."

Those eyes. Those beautiful Ashil eyes, two whole suns setting, and it burned scars into your retinas to stare back at them. I was a girl in love, but a girl torn on the future. Alestrei was the perfect backdrop. In a year or so, they would begin dismantling everything familiar to me. The timeline is rough, but I have no doubt that by this time the home I once awaited my father in is long since been buried by some three-floor monstrosity that houses people after my own heart – what, to consume it, or to stake it. Not to be enamoured by it, I am certain.

"Your father turned himself into a vampire," he said, his voice low, and cold, "I think I can believe everything now, without the hesitation my own parents would have given to me."

"Cenerre said I could become a fabled *bloodsucker*," I began, soft, slow, "but the channels have mostly been closed for some time. My father found an old road, a path once thought brambled, but for me there is no time for incessant searching. My father has been preparing me since I was born, of course he has."

Ashil's eyes were not sunsets then. There was an uneasiness, a natural sense of panic, and ordinarily, I would have attempted to calm him down. Something was biting down on my neck. Licking at my wounds. "Your death will be my fault, of course it will be," I whispered as I inched toward Ashil, withdrawing the hunting knife. I unsheathed it, worried if I hesitated for long enough he would flee from me, disappear somewhere in the depths of these woods. "I am not worthy of being loved by you."

I was not entirely very inventive in how I killed people before I became a vampire, that much is true. Here I was again, knifing someone close to me, not only in proximity. His crimson blood leaked

out the hole in his chest. Cenerre caught Ashil as he fell. We lowered him down onto the duff, leaves forming a crinkled pillow for his head. The knife served me well, however.

I sliced down his torso, opening the cavity that held his organs. There was his heart, his lungs, intestines, his kidney, and all the bones that caged them in. The torn-out page Cenerre had left for me was memorised in my head. With her watching over, I bloodied my hands on Ashil's innards, a fresh sacrifice to make contact with at least the one vampire that was sure to convert me into what I desired. I had murdered the love of my childhood, but I was a woman now, and Alestrei was to completely remain in the ruins of where it stood.

Bringing forth orders, and arrangements, and a constellation of organs, I unpacked his collapsing corpse with tears pillowing up my eyes. I was losing my way on what was an illusion, playing into someone else's hand, and what was real, true feeling. Of course I had cared for him. Loved him so. I held his heart in the palm of my hand. His actual heart, the slimy thing. It needed to sit northeast of me, pointing outward, calling in whichever demonic bloodsucker would be snared in by it.

Cenerre was motioning me to continue, taking a rather mentoring position from a few paces away from both myself and the flayed-out corpse. She had some faith in me, then. I kneeled down and unwound Ashil's intestines. It reminded me of the sausages my father would return home with from some village up north. My father would unfurl them at the kitchen table and remark that if we did not consume every single one of these tender, juicy, fat sausages, that they would stale and rot and the tender creature that had suffered a neck slicing for this would have perished for nothing. Oh pity! Oh pity me, do not dare. I was not losing love and a cherished feeling, I was slaughtering it myself for the flesh it left on the counter. Ashil would not perish for nothing.

The stench of his organs, arrayed in a circle around me, the intestines wrapping round my feet, was an odor I am not likely to forget. Cenerre and I locked eyes, a moment that lingered, and she raised the hood of the cloak over her blonde head and shook me out of such a daze. There was an incantation I was to repeat thrice, and I was delaying by being too meticulous about the placement of each organ. Vampires are not known for being entirely too precise. The offering is what matters – an offering and a siren call, a lure, as if they were crimson landfish crawling for a feed.

I cleared my throat and recited the future myself.

Uogaelm Mo

With the allegiance of eimmpure and the maeges

Uogaelm Mo, vaet elle cashrena mo

I call upon an eimmpure with a sacrifice

Illverna cashrena, uogaelm mo

Qill qill daemonica o' thaedreal

I repeated the summons three times over, closing my eyes in both anticipation and in honouring the more powerful individual that would answer my call, if someone was to answer. I no longer cared what Cenerre was doing, if she remained at my side or not. I no longer cared if this was not my destiny, but a path I would forge without the protection of some all-knowing god. I no longer cared that my family had deserted me...but I suppose I hesitated, still, on having deserted Ashil. Those he had loved, too, despite their indifference to his ambitions, and their indifference to me.

How had his sister grown up without a brother who would have adored her?

Please...I do not care to know.

“Open your eyes, or you will have wasted this handsome boy’s death.” It was not Cenerre’s voice, however. That voice was smooth, yet angular, too, the voice of a man with confidence I had never known. I glanced up to him, a figure that had stepped out of the nothing of the air. He was paler than my father had been, much paler. His blood-matted hair was cut short, although it naturally appeared as though it would never grow again. The blood was containing it, thinning it, restricting it – but, unlike my father, this figure before me did not look much older than I was. When I found him some time later, in a small dimly-lit tomb of novels and encyclopedias, he told me his name had been Haemish. By then, he was known as a name quite unlike that – he was Viiz.

“You must be very intuitive to have summoned me alone,” he whispered out, extending an arm toward me. It was true, I was suddenly alone in the clearing in the wood – aside, of course, from the corpse of dear Ashil. Cenerre had disappeared without a trace.

It was entirely expected of her, I suppose.

“A skin needs to be shed,” I said, grasping his outstretched hand. His skin was soft, almost alarmingly so. As if it had not seen sun in some time. “I would have done anything to talk with you.”

“Only talk?” He looked all at once pained and disappointed, until he noticed the smirk that graced upon my face. “Bring that neck of yours closer and we shall talk.”

You were wondering who I am, this queen of the vampires, this Talutah – a name that is more of a title, if we are to be certain of things. It is true that was the last time I answered to the name Fiva, for I went nameless for some time, attempting some understanding of what it meant to be shedding one’s skin. Eimpure is the proper name of what we are, our subspecies of sorts – vampires you are more familiar with from the tales and the legends you grew up with are long-since dead and buried, although I am certain their corpses merely dusted with the wind. We are vampires that honour the fallen – the dead – and I have my own history to contend with, always. Eimpure do not even need to slaughter for feasting, and yet there is a personal cavern of mine in the underworld of the victims I have unsettled from their bodies.

My father would warn me of the wood behind our little home. He would anticipate the wolves. It would be foolish, silly, the words of a child, to say something of the like as, *oh now I have understood him*, or, *I am a wolf all along*, or, *if only I could be a child again and fear only those I could not see*. In remembering my father, and the lessons that he once taught to me, I focus only on how I would never have ventured from such a beginning as it was to this point in my life if I had not been warned by my father, Jaumn, to always protect oneself. Protect oneself from the perils of the wood, that could instead be your saviour, or more aptly, a gruff shove. That term, saviour, it is overwrought.

A gruff shove toward another clearing in the gloom wood, then.

We are all merely wanderers in an endless forest, are we not?

I found a cavern and I hid myself in it, and now I drain my kind of blood – do not stress, I do not kill them – and foolishly perhaps I wait for the world beyond this darkness to cease its extinction quest on vampires.

A true hypocrite, yes. It was my father, after all, who both loved me and taught me.

There is no reason to doubt me, he would say.

And now I repeat it, verbatim, over, and over, and over again.