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After the Madness: A Continued Journey Through Fiction Writing

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After the Madness: A Continued Journey Through Fiction Writing

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Layla and Hazel both laid sleeping on a wide berth of hay laid out in the middle of the Moriartys' sitting room. The sky was dark outside the lace curtains of the sitting room's only window. Tiny white glints of stars fought against the midnight inky blue. A twig snapped outside of the cottage, and Layla awoke with a start.

Mama.

Black eyes. Black tears. A burning black sun. The glinting gold of the Enforcers' badges as they wrestled her away. Gaping, open-mouthed darkness. *Mama*, Layla almost said aloud, feeling like her chest had tightened up around her heart. It beat quickly—nervous, uneasy.

How long had she been asleep? She looked around the sitting room. Hazel lay with her head nearly on Layla's shoulder, her hair snaking off their makeshift hay-bed to the floor beneath. An empty glass sat just besides Layla's head on the sofa's side table, filled with something thick, green, and sickly-sweet. Mr. Moriarty had given her one of his sleep concoctions after the festival, she remembered now. She'd been crying so hard. Max and Hazel had brought her home. Carried her, really. Layla's cheeks felt hot and dry, like desert sand. If she tried to smile, her face might crack.

Layla felt thankful for the sleeping concoction. Her heartbeat slowed as she took in the familiar room. A cool breeze ruffled the window's white curtains. The air smelled faintly of Mr. Moriarty's garden outside—sweet berries, blooming rainflowers, freshly turned soil. The Moriartys' sitting room smelled just as it always had. Hazel snored softly beside Layla. Max lay sprawled on the floor next to their hay-bed, his head resting on his favorite red pillow. Moonlight pierced the inky darkness outside, casting ivory shadows through the sitting room's window. Layla took a deep breath.

She didn't know exactly where Erik was. Although she wished she did, she was sure he was safe. Mr. Moriarty wouldn't have allowed for anything else. Layla had half a mind to tip-toe into Mr. Moriarty's room and check to see if Erik was sleeping in a cot in the corner, but she decided that it wasn't worth the risk of waking either of them up. There was no chance she'd fall back asleep—that much was certain. Layla felt tired, the kind of tiredness that seeps into your bones and makes your blood run a bit slower. But she could still taste the ginger of the green elixir in Mr. Moriarty's sleep drink. It made her feel jittery. The calm stillness of the moonlit room only unsettled her further.

She needed to leave.

She needed to leave *alone*.

Layla carefully pulled off the pile of blankets she'd been tangled in and dropped her feet to the floor without a sound. They were still brown with dirt from dancing at the festival. She spotted the small, lumpy shape of her burlap bag beside the hearth. She stood up and took care not to step on Max, tiptoeing towards the bag. Coals in the hearth still burned bright orange. She felt the heat of it on her skin as she opened her bag and took inventory.

Red-hilted knife, water canteen, a softening apple, two spools of twine, an old candle, and a crown of crushed purple flowers. *Like the sky before a thunderstorm*. Panic rose into Layla's throat, but she forced it down. She pulled out the crushed flowers and dropped them on the Moriarty's large wooden table, recoiling as if they were made of fire.

Just get home, she told herself silently. *Just get home*. She pulled the strings of her bag tight, closing it and fastening its top flap with steady hands. Her shoes were nowhere to be found. Luckily all of the snow from the long winter had melted several weeks before. She could go without shoes.

Layla looked back at Hazel and Max, lost in sleep, eyes closed and dreams elsewhere. A pang of jealousy hit her square in the stomach. Layla wondered when she would be able to sleep soundly again. *If* she would ever be able to sleep soundly again. Mama's black eyes seemed to appear every time she blinked.

The breeze from outside the window seemed colder than before. Hazel's heaviest cloak hung from the stiff back of one of the wooden dining room chairs. Layla pulled it around her own shoulders and fastened it on her neck. The sound of ruffling fabric seemed to fill the silent sitting room, but neither Hazel nor Max stirred.

As quietly as she could, Layla slipped out the front door and into the cool spring air. She closed the door behind her without a sound. And then she was alone.

Layla walked slowly at first. Hazel's cloak whispered along the ground as she moved outside the Moriartys' cottage, down the wooded path, towards the center of the village. The shops stood so quietly at night. Unlit candles of mismatched heights stood on the windowsill of Melody Hartwicker's shop. The rusty chains holding the wooden sign above Mr. Sampson's flower shop creaked as a gust of wind took the main street. Layla drew her cloak closer to her chest, shivering a bit as she walked. A twinge of guilt turned her stomach. She'd snuck out of the Moriartys' house without telling any of them where she'd gone, without leaving a note or saying thank you for all they'd done. But Mama's black eyes struck her stronger than her guilty conscience. *Home. Home. Home.* The thought propelled Layla forward. Through the town square, across the flowing brook, up the dew-soaked grass of Haggard Hill to the crooked cottage at the top.

Home.

Layla dropped her burlap bag in her own bedroom, pausing to pull a candle from the woven basket beneath her bed. Her colorful quilt still lay in a heap on her bed. Pieces of hay still littered the floor. Already the cottage felt like some kind of museum—an eerie house of clues and half-told stories. She walked out into the sitting room.

The dim, grey light of early morning brightened outside the cottage windows, but it was still too dark to make out anything but silhouettes. Layla took in the curved shape of the itchy sofa, the tangle of Erik's play-rope by the wooden table, the outline of Mama's bedroom door. The door stood slightly ajar. Like Mama had wanted Layla to see what was inside. The floor gave a familiar creak with every step that she took towards Mama's room. Layla shivered.

It had been months since she'd gone into Mama's room. Even when she was younger, she'd never spent a lot of time in the cottage's largest bedroom—Mama liked her private space. Layla remembered one night when she'd had a nightmare about ogres after a particularly scary Lesson with Mr. Oddley. She'd crawled into bed with Mama, and Mama had sung her a lullaby.

Sleep like a songbird, hush like the night

And don't forget to sing, like the wind taking flight.

The flowers in the fields, and the petals know your name

The fields, the fruits, the honey bees,

All in one the same.

Layla hummed the lullaby to herself to break the still silence of the cottage. She tried to ignore her shaking hands and pushed open the door into Mama's room.

It was a mess. The bed sat unmade in the corner. Layla couldn't see what lay scattered across the room—crooked silhouettes and heavy shadows covered the floor in a strange, dark

mosaic. A sour smell, like curdled milk, seemed to be coming from the bed. Layla moved further into the shadows and raised her candle, squinting at the walls. Her stomach dropped.

“Oh, Mama,” she whispered.

The walls were covered floor-to-ceiling in Mama’s paintings. All of the backgrounds were grey. Some light, others dark, almost purple—a thunderous sky. A sun-shape stretched across the largest canvas in the room’s farthest corner. The shape was bright, angry red.

Black eyes, blue sun-shapes, purple flowers, monstrous hands. Gruesome, terrifying hands. Their grey skin was tinged green with swollen knuckles and long, black fingernails—two hands cut at the wrists, hovering ghoulishly with fingers outstretched, as if poised to snatch an unlucky passerby. Another canvas was filled completely with black eyes, aligned neatly as if taking up spaces on a chess board. Next to them, a single eye loomed wide with bloodshot, black veins. A thick, black tear threatened to fall from its corner.

Layla moved silently around the room, holding her candle up to each canvas as she passed. A blue sun-shape with two shadows, one grey and one black. Endless variations of black eyes, silvery eyes, red eyes, blue eyes. A bouquet of flowers with thick, black strokes that cut deep into the canvas. A horse without a head walking a dirt path. A girl with black eyes hanging with a noose around her neck.

As she took in canvas after canvas, Layla felt nauseous, horrified, numb. She heard a dull crunch beneath her feet. Looking down, she found a purple honeyflower, crushed like the bouquet that she and Erik had made that afternoon that felt like years ago.

Honeyflowers were scattered everywhere across Mama’s floor. Stomped. Pulled to pieces. Petals deep purple and rotten. Like bruises placed between the grey canvases. The rotten, sour smell seemed to press against Layla from every corner of the room.

She ran out Mama's bedroom door and heaved into the kitchen basin.

Layla sat on the floor of the kitchen, hands shaking, her mouth tasting nearly as sour as the smell of Mama's room. Raw, sharp fear grabbed hold of her chest. She drew her knees close to her chest and rocked slightly, back and forth. *Don't think of the eyes, don't think of the flowers, don't think of the girl on the noose. Don't think of the eyes, don't think of the flowers, don't think of the girl on the noose...*

Her first sob cut through the cottage's absolute stillness. It echoed. The sound made Layla feel more alone than she thought possible. It hurt. Everything hurt. Her body, her lungs, her heart. Why did all of this have to happen?

She cried harder, resting her forehead on her knees, hopeless against the strength of her own sadness. She rocked back and forth in the empty cottage. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Hazel Moriarty dreamt of falling. She awoke before she hit the ground, blinking with a heaving chest. Panic lingered in her stomach, seemed to surround her with invisible tendrils as long as her hair. It pulled her terribly. She rubbed her eyes in the darkness of the living room, surprised for a moment to find herself outside of her own bedroom. Moonlight streamed in through the lace curtains. Hazel found the silhouette of William's favorite armchair, her father's bouquets pinned upon the wall, the curved candlesticks sitting atop the mantle. She could hear Maxwell snoring quietly on the floor beside her.

And Layla was gone.

"Maxwell," Hazel whispered, careful not to let her voice travel to her father's room across the hall, "wake up." She kicked her brother's shoulder, not altogether lightly.

“What?” He jolted awake, dreary-eyed. “What is it, Haze?”

“Layla’s gone.” She followed Max’s gaze to the Layla’s pillow. “We have to go.”

“What do you mean, she’s gone?” Max said. Hazel had already begun to dress and slip on her shoes.

“I mean,” Hazel whispered, “she’s gone. She must’ve snuck out.” Hazel moved rather frantically around the room, stepping lightly so as not to wake her father, hands shaking slightly. Her hair grew steadily behind her.

“Haze—“

“—we have to go find her.” Hazel finished tying her worn leather shoes. She looked about the room, and her hair twisted around her feet. Maxwell wiped some spit from his cheek and stood up.

“Haze, your hair—“

“Now is not the time, Maxwell,” Hazel whispered angrily.

“No, I mean...” Max stepped over and grabbed Hazel’s shoulders before she could tangle herself any further. She slowly stopped fidgeting, though her heart was still pounding. Her hair grew another several paces as she stood still. “You should cut it before we leave,” Max whispered. Hazel nodded. “I’ll grab the scissors.”

He moved quietly in the moonlight, pulling the golden shears from the woven basket on the mantle, taking care to avoid the squeaky floorboard in front of William’s armchair. He handed them to Hazel and dressed quickly, gathering two lanterns from a glass cabinet in the corner and checking to make sure they each had enough oil. Hazel tied her hair with a blue ribbon and cut it to just below her chin. The golden shears grew warm in her hands. She hurried

into her room and hid the bundle of hair beneath her bed. Max stood by the front door when she returned to the living room, two unlit lanterns in his hands.

“My cloak is gone,” Hazel whispered.

“Here, take William’s,” Max said as he threw her a cloak from the wooden rack by the door. It was worn thin, and far too long for Hazel’s frame—the black fabric bunched by her feet. She’d have to take care not to trip.

“Papa’s going to be furious,” Hazel said.

“Not if he doesn’t know we’ve left,” said Max. They both looked outside, through the window’s lace curtains. The sky was still endless dark blue, inky and infinite. But the promise of grey morning light was on the horizon, beyond the silhouettes of the trees that lined the path into the cottage square.

“I’ll leave him a note,” Hazel turned to Max, “just to let him know we’re alright.” Max didn’t object. She scrawled quickly on an old piece of parchment from her notebook. *Layla couldn’t sleep—went for a walk in the fields.*

“Goddammit, Layla,” Max muttered after they’d closed the front door behind them. “We’re not really going to the fields, are we?”

“No, we’re not,” Hazel said, tucking her hair into the loose neck of William’s cloak. Already it had jumped to tickle her shoulders. “Where was the first place you wanted to go after Mama died?”

Max furrowed his brow. “Mrs. Raine isn’t dead, Haze—“

“I know that,” Hazel said. “I just... where did you want to go?”

Max thought for a long moment. “Home,” he said. “I wanted to go home.”

Hazel nodded. “Come on,” she said, raising her lantern to the night, feet crunching on the tree-lined path towards the center of town.

About a hundred paces from the cottage, Hazel suddenly went pale. A jolt of panic rose to her throat, and she felt her hair tickle the back of her neck as it grew further towards the ground. She stopped walking.

“Maxwell,” Hazel breathed, “I forgot my scissors.”

“What?” Max turned around. The moon was bright enough that they needn’t have brought their lanterns; it cast an eerie glow on the dirt path towards town. Max’s shadow seemed to move on its own.

“My scissors—I must have left them on the bedside table.”

“Shite, Hazel, how long do you think we’re going to be gone for?”

“I don’t know, Max,” Hazel said, starting to feel a bit dizzy, “But I can’t leave without my scissors. I *can’t*.” Her voice seemed much louder in the dark. Tucked beneath her cloak, her hair jumped to her belt, then to her knees, almost as if it were taunting her.

“Please, I need to run back and get them,” she said, throat tight. “I’ll only be a second.”

“Okay, fine,” Max said. “I’ll be here. But we don’t have much time.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Hazel snapped. She turned around and ran back towards the cottage, trying not to trip on William’s long cloak. When she returned a few minutes later, satchel at her hip and hairline cut jagged again, Max said nothing. She brushed past him and strode down the path once more. Max followed.

Layla never wanted to move from the corner of her cottage. She sat beneath Mama's favorite decorative table, knees still to her chest. Above her head, a red vase held Mr. Moriarty's sweet-smelling bouquet that he'd given Mama before the festival. The bright green windflowers had already begun to wilt.

A pair of bound hands, a veil of mangy black hair, a bronze badged engraved with a weasel. It all blurred behind her eyelids. *Madness. Madness. Madness.* The word echoed in her head like a pulse.

"Layla!" There came muffled shouts from outside. "*Layla!*" She heard the knocks on the cottage front door as though through a cavernous mountain tunnel. She looked up from her knees.

"Layla, if you're in there and you're alive, we're going to kill you." Layla recognized Max's voice.

"Don't listen to him, Layla—Maxwell, I can't believe you just tried to crack a joke right now." Hazel's voice. "Layla, open up! We just want to make sure you're safe. We aren't angry."

"What, we can't make jokes anymore? Layla will never stand for that. Save me from this humorless beast, Layla!" Max said. "First, she doesn't let me make jokes, next, she poisons my food. I've read this story before."

"You'd have to read a book for that to be true," Hazel snapped.

"I'm *coming*," Layla said, wiping her eyes and moving towards the door. She opened it to find Hazel and Max standing on the stoop. They fell silent as soon as they saw her. Layla realized she must have looked rather nightmarish herself. Her eyes always grew puffy and red when she cried, even if it was only for a few moments. She had no idea how long she'd been

crying. She was still wearing one of Hazel's old tunics; she must've changed into it just after the festival. It was close to sunrise, now.

The three of them stood in silence for a long moment. For once, none of them knew what to say.

"Well, you're alive," Max said eventually. "Didn't have to fish you face-down out of the brook, or anything."

"*Maxwell,*" Hazel scolded. "Shut *up.*"

"What?" Max said, "I was worried! We had some time to think walking up here. I thought of some ugly things." He looked up at Layla with a surprising kind of seriousness. "We're just glad you're alright."

Layla blinked and looked out towards the mountains. Orange light had begun to break through the grey on the horizon. "You can come in if you want." She turned quickly back into the cottage without waiting for Hazel and Max to answer. They followed and closed the door behind them.

Layla retreated to her place beneath the sitting room table, knees drawn back up close to her chest. Hazel dropped her oversized cloak to the floor and sat beside Layla without saying a word. She rested her head on Layla's shoulder. Her hair had already begun to brush her shoulders. Hazel smelled faintly like ginger and pine, warm and green and clean—the familiarity of it made Layla's chest tighten. She relaxed her head against Hazel's and tried to ignore the hot pinpricks of tears in her eyes.

“You stole my cloak, you little witch,” Hazel said with a smile, lacing her fingers through Layla’s. “That’s my favorite one. I had to wear William’s all the way up here. I tripped so much I shouldn’t have even bothered cutting my hair.”

“But she made us go back and get the damned scissors,” Max said, standing awkwardly in the middle of the Raine’s sitting room. “I hate those scissors,” he muttered to himself.

Layla chuckled and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry I snuck out on you,” she said. “I just... needed to get out.”

“You scared the shite out of us,” Max said, untying his cloak and hanging it on the rack.

“But you don’t need to apologize,” Hazel said, shooting Max a sharp look.

“You don’t have to do that, Haze,” said Layla. “Don’t talk to me like I’m some child lost in the bookshop, okay?” Layla looked around the room. Mama’s paintings lined the walls. Scenes of the village in all seasons, bursting with color and movement even as they stood still in their frames. The village square at sunrise, orange light spreading across the quiet shops and closed cottage shutters. The Lessons hut at midday, straw-thatched and standing in front of the shining blue brook. The fields bright with windflowers in every color, crowded with small figures dancing at a distance, happily frozen in front of purple mountains and an endless deep blue sky. “I’m not some lost child,” Layla said quietly.

“I know you aren’t,” Hazel said. “But we still want to be here for you.”

“I’d rather be back in bed, to be perfectly honest,” Max said. Layla smiled half-heartedly. “Last time I was awake this early I was sneaking out to meet Arianna Harmon by the marble quarries.” His joke fell into uncomfortable silence. Hazel shot him another fiery look. “Okay,” Max said slowly, “still not quite in the laughing mood, are we? Noted.”

The thought of Maxwell and Arianna together at the marble quarries did nothing to ease the knot in Layla's stomach. She pushed away the thought and focused on the colors in Mama's paintings. Orange. Green. Purple. Blue.

Having Hazel and Max here helped. It helped more than Layla could say. So how come she couldn't say anything? If she tried to put it to words, the dam would break. Words and tears and purple flowers would come tumbling out. So she kept her mouth shut. But her mind didn't slow down.

Darkness and black eyes and wretched hands. Wretched hands reaching for her and Hazel's hand in hers. Blue vials and purple flowers and a headless horse and a sour smell. Max's jokes. Hazel's head on her shoulder. Ginger and pine and black cloaks bunch around the ankles.

"There's something I want to show you," Layla said. She paused. "It's not very pretty."

"Pretty is overrated," Max said with a smile. Hazel nodded. Layla lead them towards Mama's bedroom door.

They stared out at the sea of grey and black and purple and red. The details of the paintings seemed sharper now, Layla thought—the room was much brighter after sunrise. But it still felt more like a graveyard than a bedroom.

"Wow," Hazel said quietly. Max said nothing.

"This is Mama's room," said Layla.

"What's that smell?" Hazel asked.

"Rotten honeyflowers, I think," Layla looked at the broken petals on the floor.

"And...something else."

There was a canvas still propped up on the easel by the window that Layla hadn't noticed before. Thick, black stripes cut the frame into pieces. Like bars. Behind the bars there seemed to be a mountain landscape—something like Mama's old paintings. Max walked towards it.

"Is this the last one she was working on?" He said, studying the grey canvas.

"Probably," said Layla. "She likes to work by the window. She likes to look outside and see the colors." Layla realized how crazy that must have sounded even before her words fell on the room full of colorless paintings. Mama's bedroom window had the same view of the village, the fields, and the mountains as the windows by the cottage's front door, only Mama's was better—there weren't any sunblossoms obstructing her view.

Mama loved colors. She lived them, breathed them, left them on dirt roads and cobblestone streets of the village with every step she took. She was vibrant and irreverent and infuriating and wise and alive.

Out of all the paintings in Mama's room, it wasn't the headless horse or the bottomless black eyes that unsettled Layla the most—it was the overwhelming greyness. Black and purple and red and blue dotted the room like dark spots on a bruise, but the grey spilled onto everything. The room *felt* grey.

Where had Mama's colors gone?

"There's a face here," Max said, still standing by the canvas at the window.

"There are faces on all of them," Layla said quickly.

"No, this one's different," said Max. "Come here." Layla and Hazel went to the painting. Max was right. Behind the thick black bars, Mama had painted a face—a young girl's face. Her eyes were blue all the way around; Mama hadn't even given her black pupils. Just blank, blue ovals. Freckles dotted her nose, and her honey-colored hair was tied with a blue ribbon at the

nape of her neck. Her head, small and exquisitely detailed, floated in the empty grey space beside what appeared to be a tiny cottage in the woods. Thick tree trunks surrounded the cottage's leaning wooden walls, and the sky loomed purple behind its thatched roof. The whole scene seemed to sit behind the bars of a cage.

"Do you know who that is?" Max asked.

"No," said Layla. "I have no idea."

Three loud knocks on the cottage's front door made all three of them jump.

"Layla! If you're in there, open up," a man bellowed from outside. "I don't have much time."

"Who is that?" Hazel said, shaken. Layla shook her head.

"I'm coming in," the man said again. Monty Brownstone stepped into the cottage without waiting for a response.

"Monty?" Layla said in surprise, catching sight of the Enforcer with a cream-colored arm sling through Mama's open bedroom door.

Monty heard her and began to walk towards Mama's room smothered in black and grey.

"Layla—"

"No." She stepped outside and slammed the door shut behind her with Hazel and Max still inside. Layla couldn't stand anyone else seeing inside Mama's madness. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Are Hazel and Max in there?" Monty said.

"So what if they are?" said Layla.

"The three of you need to leave. *Now.*" Monty looked red in the face, angry like he was that night at the Cages.

“Hazel and Max don’t need your permission—“

“Yes, they do,” Monty said impatiently. “This is the most dangerous place any of you could be right now, especially you.”

“What are you talking about?” Layla said. Anger rose in her cheeks. “This is my cottage. There’s nothing dangerous about it.” She resented Monty’s implication.

“The other Enforcers will be here soon,” Monty said. “They tried to give me duty today—every Enforcer in the village was at Chief Parker’s meeting last night. But I told them my arm was hurting too badly and I’d be more of a nuisance than a help.” He squirmed uncomfortably in his sling.

“Well you’re certainly not doing your reputation any favors—“ Layla spat.

“Don’t you *get* it, Layla,” Monty interrupted. “I came here to *help* you. The Enforcers are scared, Chief Parker is scared... they want some way to deal with all of this. They want to make sure it doesn’t spread. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I... no...” Layla’s words slowed. Hazel opened Mama’s bedroom door behind her.

“Layla, what’s—“

“—get out here,” Monty commanded, looking at Hazel and Max. They did as they were told. Hazel closed Mama’s door behind her.

“Listen. In a few minutes, a group of Enforcers will finish getting their orders from Chief Parker down at the hut, and then they’re going to make their way up here.

“But why—“ Layla tried to interject.

“I said *listen*,” Monty growled. “There is real fear in this village right now, Layla, and that fear is powerful. It can make people do terrible things. As far as the Enforcers can see,

there's madness in this house. They know that you're staying with the Moriartys, so they'll be knocking on their door soon, too."

"What?" Layla shook her head. But she knew exactly what Monty meant. She'd known right away.

"You're being watched, Layla," Monty said. "They're going to look for any excuse they can to..." He drifted off.

"To what?" Layla snapped. "Show me my noose? Hurl me down the water well? Shoot an arrow through my heart?"

"Layla—" Max interrupted.

"No Max, let Monty tell the truth," Layla said, trying to keep her voice steady. "They want to throw me in the Cages too, don't they? Before my eyes turn black?" She held Monty's gaze.

"I don't know," said Monty quietly. He glanced towards Mama's bedroom door. "All I know is, you don't want them to find you here." Monty adjusted his cream-colored sling. "I can't stay here either. But I knew I was the only person who could warn you."

"What about Erik?" Layla said.

"I don't think they're as worried about him—he's young enough that he likely won't be a hassle. And they seem to think the Madness is less likely to affect men," he added uncomfortably.

Layla studied the Enforcer with red hair. Without his uniform on, he looked unnervingly young. Freckles on his nose, his arms, his hands. He had a scar just below his right ear. His eyes were two different colors.

“Why are you doing this for us?” Layla couldn’t help but feel suspicious. “You could lose your badge for this.” She felt Max fold his arms beside her.

“Your mother gave my mother a painting once,” Monty said. “She called it ‘Waterflowers After Rain.’ Waterflowers were my mother’s favorite.” He gave a slight nod and headed towards the door. “The Enforcers are planning on walking up the front side of the hill. Use the back door when you leave.”

The heavy wooden door slammed shut behind him.

Edgar Raine was once a beloved man. He’d taken his daughters swimming in the brook, threw them up above the clear blue water and watched them land with a splash and the ghost of a giggle. Sarah, with her constant questions and her defiant eyes. Abigail, with her purple honeysuckles and her games. Edgar could still hear his daughters’ voices, if he closed his eyes.

“Sarah!” Abigail shouted across the brook, waving to her sister from a rock near the waterfall, wet hair stuck to her chin. “Sarah, you have to come see this!” Abigail had been born six years before her sister. Edgar couldn’t believe that his eldest daughter was nearly halfway through her Lessons; her limbs were long and pointed, flailing a bit as she tried to gain her balance on the rock. She’d grown so tall since the summer before.

“Papa, can I go?” Sarah said, squirming in his arms. “Please, Papa, we’ve been swimming all day! I can get to Bee-Bee myself.”

“Yes,” Edgar said, turning Sarah so he could see the silver shine in her eyes, “but I’ll be watching the whole time.” He raised his eyebrows. “Remember what we said about biting.” Sarah had been having a little biting problem lately.

“Okay, Papa okay!” She wriggled out of his arms. Edgar’s silver mustache curled into a smile as he watched Abigail wave excitedly, cheering for Sarah as she paddled towards the waterfall.

It was the first warm day of the summer. Sunflowers, crushed and colorful, were still scattered in the fields after the Harvest Festival. It seemed like every family in the village had taken to the brook in a celebration of the sun. Aphra and Jack Moriarty waded in the brook’s shallowest end, splashing with William and little Sampson. Edgar watched Sampson catch sight of Sarah and tap his brother on the shoulder.

“Look at Sarah swim, William! She’s doing it by herself!”

Pride swelled in Edgar’s chest. Sarah reached the rock, and her sister helped her climb to the top so they stood side-by-side.

“Papa!” Abigail shouted. “Papa, look!” She and Sarah waved their arms. They danced a bit and giggled loudly. Jack and Aphra laughed too, waving to the girls and then to Edgar. Fields of sunflowers, strawberry plants, and apple orchards sprawled out behind the girls. The purple, jagged outline of the mountains—visible nearly everywhere in the village—stood tall behind them.

Abigail—long-limbed, freckled, laughing Abigail—called out to him to watch her jump. Her radiant skin was smooth, unblemished. She pushed off from the rock, hands reaching for the clear sky, and plunged into the cold water feet-first.

A growl from the room’s darkest corner pulled Edgar from his reverie.

“Hush, Sammy,” he said gruffly, and the growl quieted. The dog then began to whine instead. Edgar sometimes wondered if something in her animal instincts could sense Abigail’s memory.

Edgar sat in his rocking chair, looking around his small wooden shack without really seeing. How long ago had he built this place? Too long. One room. Fireplace, its ashes smoldering in front of his chair. His bed—if you could even call it that—sat unmade against the wall, blankets tangled atop a low wooden frame. No hay to soften the frame’s wooden beams. A small rug covered in wood shavings by the crooked kitchen table. Pots and pans stacked neatly next to the icebox.

He was still thinking of clear skies and freckled noses. The memories had grown soft around the edges through the haze of honeywhiskey. Edgar stood and grabbed the ax that he kept next to his chair. The sun was nearly set outside—orange fire lit up the horizon, shrouded in purple and blue. The rainy season was rapidly approaching, and soon the spring nights would be filled with the sound of raindrops pelting his small, wooden roof. The rain always seemed to make the world a little darker. He staggered slightly where he stood.

Sammy padded out next to him, panting as she sat. Edgar’s ax hung by his side.

“The rains are coming soon, girl,” Edgar said. Sammy whined. “I know, you hate them even more than I do.” He walked slowly into the trees of the Wetted Wood, whose leaves held the colors of the elixirs inside their trunks. The fairie nests high above reminded him of his wife, pale and lifeless on the forest ground. Freckles and clear skies turned to storm clouds and black eyes, and he felt a familiar pain pulse in his chest. Abigail plunging into cold water. Her body hanging from dark rafters where the rain never stopped. The sweet smell of honey stinging his nose.

Another swig from the flask in his pocket, and the Wetted Wood grew hazy. Sammy’s whines behind him grow louder. Edgar staggers further into the dark forest, hand clenched around his heavy wooden ax. He didn’t have much longer before the rains came.

Mama lay contorted on the hard floor of her cell. The Cages didn't look much different from when Layla had seen them a fortnight earlier—could it really have been only a fortnight? She remembered the sharp floor of the cells, and felt the ghost of sharp pricks on her skin for Mama's sake. As if Mama's skin had become her own.

The place smelled spoiled now, like an animal carcass turned rotten. The cave walls trickled with water and the air felt thick and damp—*raining inside*. Mama's body lay curled away from her, the bones of her spine visible beneath the blue festival dress she still wore. Yellow light from the candle cast the whole Cage in a strange, eerie glow. Mama's skin had grown grey and blotchy, with angry red blisters oozing on her arms and legs. Layla stepped closer to the Cage. Was it the Madness that was cutting into Mama? Or the Enforcers' cold hands?

Mama's chest rose and fell without rhythm. Her breath sounded strangled, somewhere between a gasp and a wheeze. Layla stepped quietly. She stopped at the cell bars, wrapping a hand around the cold metal as she gazed inside at Mama's monstrous, sleeping body.

Does the Madness let you sleep? Or does it steal your dreams, too?

"Mama," Layla whispered. Her heart pounded in her chest at the thought of waking the ghoulish figure, but part of her yearned for Mama to wake up and look at her, even just for a moment. Everything had become so dark, so heavy. She craved Mama's arms around her.

"Why is this happening to you?" A tear ran down Layla's cheek, falling from her chin to the cold, rocky floor. Her skin felt clammy beneath Hazel's heavy cloak. The dim candlelight shook in her hand. She clutched the cold bar between her and Mama until her knuckles turned white. Mama stirred, hissing as her strange new body shifted further into contortion. Layla didn't

back away. She willed Mama to wake up, reach for her, stare at her with empty black eyes. She felt spiteful and angry.

“Have you done the nightly walks yet, sir?” Layla heard a nasally voice from outside the cave.

“No.” Enforcer Warren’s voice seemed unnaturally deep—Layla immediately thought of the evil ogre from Mr. Moriarty’s bedtime stories. “I like to wait until the moon is highest for this one.”

Layla’s stomach rose in her chest as she searched the cave for a place to hide. The shadows seemed to move around her. In the candle’s strange glow, walls seemed to become corners. Her own shadow grew impossibly long. She could see the Enforcers’ shadows moving outside—one brutish and broad, the other spindly and tall—and she knew they’d be inside at any moment. Even with the candle in her hand, Layla had to feel along the dark, wet wall to be sure of where she was.

“Do you mind if I accompany you, sir?” said the nasally voice again. “I’ve been hoping to see the beast myself.”

“This isn’t a place for spectators, Godfrey,” said Warren. Layla’s hip bumped something sharp—a chunk of hardened rock in the cave’s corner. She cast her candlelight into the corner and saw a small opening between the rock and the cave wall; quickly she crawled into the space and blew out the candle’s flame.

“I know sir, that isn’t what I mean—only that I am curious to see the workings of this most unorthodox situation,” Godfrey sputtered outside.

Warren was silent for a moment. He rarely spoke at village meetings. His stoic silences made his words boom even louder when he did choose to speak. “You’ll join me as a fellow

Enforcer, and will follow guidelines as if they were witchcraft. I was given this post for a reason.”

The Enforcers’ shadows grew shorter as they moved towards the mouth of the cave, shrinking and shrinking. Their footsteps echoed in the damp, dripping darkness as they came into Layla’s view.

“Do you think it was like this the last time, sir?” Godfrey said, more quietly than before. From her hiding place, Layla saw Warren’s face turn grim—even grimmer than it had already been. “The girl all holed up in the Cages? Everyone afraid to leave their cottages at night, eyeing their neighbors for suns on their chests?”

“That isn’t to be discussed Godfrey, especially not here, of all places.” Warren and Godfrey stood close to Mama’s cage. They spoke to each other, but seemed unable to peel their eyes away from the slow rise and fall of Mama’s chest.

“Yes, you’re right, sir.” Godfrey was still for a moment, nervously adjusting his badge. The big-beaked bird etched in gold glinted in the light of Warren’s candle.

“But do you think it’s something in the blood, sir?” Godfrey said again, quickly this time, unable to help himself. “Something that makes the shape appear on one’s chest? Or turns it... black?” His beady eyes stayed on Mama.

Warren said nothing. His face remained hard, unwavering, although it was difficult for Layla to see in the darkness.

“My sister had the Sadness once, before either of us had entered the Lessons hut. My father made us both swear never to tell anyone. The shape went away in about a fortnight, and Old Nona kept visiting us for a few months after that. But we never did tell anyone, not even our grandparents. Except I’m telling you now, of course.” Godfrey shifted uncomfortably. “She’s no

monster though, my sister. She keeps the town books now. Getting married to the oldest Moriarty fellow soon, actually,” Godfrey said, mostly to himself. Warren seemed to have decided that letting him talk would be easier than not. The larger Enforcer began pacing slowly around the cave, checking for... Layla wasn't sure what. She could make out Warren's figure in the darkness if she squinted out from behind her boulder. He moved slowly, deliberately.

“Not a monster,” Godfrey muttered, still standing by the cold metal bars, “not a monster at all.” Layla wasn't sure if he was talking about his sister or Mama. Enforcer Warren reached the far corner of the cave, studying the sloped, dripping ceiling. He then turned around, walking slowly towards the rock where Layla hid. She was already shivering from the cave's damp cold, but now she began to shake in earnest.

“It was the sister last time, wasn't it?” Godfrey said suddenly. His voice had taken on a kind of squeak, and something about his tone made the hair on Layla's arms stand beneath the length of Hazel's cloak. *The sister*. Warren stopped in his tracks.

“Godfrey,” he said quietly. A warning.

“Isn't it true that Edgar Raine—“

A ghoulisn roar tore through the Cages. Godfrey jerked back from where he stood, and Layla recoiled deeper into her dark corner.

Mama was awake.

“Warren!” Godfrey shrieked.

“Stay back!” Warren ordered, rooted to where he stood several paces from the cold metal bars. “How *dare* you say that name in here,” he said, eyes still on Mama.

Mama's erratic breathing had given way to a manic, twitching growl. She rammed herself against the metal of her Cage and reached through the bars with her greying, blistered arms,

shrieking and hissing at the Enforcers. Her sharp, triangular teeth gnawed at the Cage bars, yellowed and cracked from chewing their metal. Mama's strangled noises joined with the cave's steady dripping echo, and her inky black eyes set their angry, unblinking gaze upon the Enforcers. The Madness had awoken.

Layla couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't pull her eyes away from her mother's wild, twisted body.

"I'm sorry!" Godfrey squeaked, his hands above his shoulders as he cowered behind Warren. "I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have said the name!"

Mama's body clanged against her Cage. She reached a shaking hand towards the Enforcers, ramming herself against the metal bars with such force that Layla feared her ribs would snap. "You're a fool, Godfrey," Warren said.

The two men stood just out of Mama's reach, unmoving, watching the struggling figure before them as if in a trance. Layla wondered if there was any blue elixir around—if the Enforcers would even think to try such a remedy. She imagined all the nights in Mama's bedroom, all the nightmares that had left her struggling against her quilt, tangled in the arms of ghosts that Layla couldn't see. Mama had twitched and moaned then, too.

Mama's arms slowly lost their strength, and she stopped reaching for the men with the gold badges. She held the metal bars and leaned heavily against them, black eyes still wide and unblinking. Layla held her breath. The dripping echo of the cave was all she could hear. The Enforcers relaxed where they stood.

"I think she's tired herself," Warren whispered. "She did this last night before she laid down as well."

Then Mama let out a low, terrible moan, and sunk to her knees. The hissing and shrieking grew louder than before—sadder, somehow. Layla felt sick to her stomach.

“Did this happen too, sir?” whispered Godfrey. Mama was... sobbing, the most terrible noise Layla had ever heard. Her tears streamed thick and black down her sunken, grey face. Layla had begun to cry, too.

“No,” said Warren.

Slowly, Mama raised her own arm, studying it as though seeing it for the first time. Then she brought her forearm to her mouth and began mashing it with her own jagged teeth.

“No!” Layla cried. Warren and Godfrey turned in surprise as she ran out from her shadowed hiding place. “Stop her! She’s hurting herself!” Layla ran and kneeled beside Mama, clutching the metal bars in desperation. “Mama—Mama, look at me. You have to stop, you have to stop...” Tears streaked Layla’s face.

For a moment, Mama seemed to hear her. She pulled her arm—now raw and bloodied where her teeth had broken skin—away from her sour mouth. Mama looked through the bars at Layla, straight into her daughter’s silvery eyes. The darkness, the unending depth of Mama’s black gaze turned Layla’s skin cold, but she didn’t look away. She breathed the scent of Mama’s rotten skin, felt the rust of the metal bars clutched in her hands. Something inside of her felt rotten. Layla pleaded with her eyes, with her whole body, studying this black-eyed monster in a shredded blue dress for any sign of her mother. A sliver of greying hair. The clean smell of rainflower soap. Purple paint specked behind her ear.

Come back to me, Mama. Come back.

“Monty!” Layla pounded her fist on the Withers’ front door. “Monty, open up. I need to talk to you.” A Streetkeeper passed behind Layla, an old woman with a hunchback and a set of matches. She struck a match at each shop’s lantern, leaving a trail of warm light along the street. Layla felt a shake in her hands—the steady shiver that seemed to have settled into her bones after the Festival of Spring. A sharp wind blew through the cobblestone street, rocking the wooden shop signs and extinguishing several of the Streetkeeper’s lanterns. Layla heard the old hunchback swear behind her. “Open this door, Monty,” Layla half-shouted over the wind. “*Now.*”

The red-headed Enforcer swung open the wooden door. The movement startled Layla. She jumped and took a small step backwards, pulling her cloak tighter around her chest. As Monty looked upon her with a mixture of surprise and confusion, Layla felt acutely aware of how she must look to the Enforcer. A girl of seventeen years, shivering alone in her cloak, frightened by the sound of a creaky door. Shame rose to her cheeks.

“Layla, what—“ Monty began. He wore red flannel pajamas that Layla thought looked a lot like Erik’s. In any other situation, the image might have struck her as funny.

“Please, Monty,” Layla said, “I need your help.” She could feel her cheeks burning and her hands shaking.

“Come inside,” Monty said. “Quickly, before anyone sees you here.”

“I want to leave the village,” Layla said. Monty choked on his tea and began to cough. They sat on opposite sides of the tiny sofa in Monty’s small bedroom. Everything in the room seemed miniature—the hearth, the wooden desk beside them with scattered parchment, even the

bed in the corner piled high with wool blankets. The sound of plates clinking bubbled up from downstairs as Mrs. Withers cleaned up after dinner.

“What? That’s impossible,” Monty said.

“No it isn’t,” Layla answered quickly. “The Woodcutters do it once a season.”

“Yes, but that’s precisely what they’re trained to do.”

“Well, maybe I could be trained to leave as well. It doesn’t seem to require much besides a walk outside of the gates.” Layla reached for her tea, feigning calm.

Monty watched her closely. “Why do you want to leave the village?”

Layla took a sip from her cracked mug. The tea was too bitter. She tried not to grimace and put the tea back down on its table.

“I want to find my grandfather,” she said.

“Edgar?” Monty said slowly.

“Yes,” Layla said. “How did you know his name?”

“Your mother mentioned it to me once. At the market.”

“No she didn’t. She couldn’t have,” Layla said.

“She did.”

“But my mother never talks about her family,” Layla said. “I only found out my grandfather’s name a fortnight ago. How could you have known it already?”

“That’s not really my problem, is it?” Monty said quickly. There was a beat of heavy silence. Monty swore and stood up, turning his back to Layla and running his hands through his hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean that—“

“I’m leaving whether you help me or not,” Layla said. “I’m going to walk straight out of those gates, just like the Woodcutters do four times each year. It’s possible, and it’s dangerous, but I don’t care.” Layla stood up from the sofa. “And in case you forgot, my mother is being held like an animal in the Cages and treated like something even less. Your Enforcers have her bound up like some kind of monster—“

“Layla, you know that’s for her own good—“

“For *her* own good? You really think Chief Parker has my mother’s best interest in mind? That man has evil in his eyes. He just wants power over everyone and everything and if you don’t already know that, you’re even more daft than you look,” Layla spat.

“But it’s not safe for her to be among us, Layla, even you have to see—“

“—I don’t care about the Village Laws or Chief Finch’s speeches or whatever nonsense Chief Parker has told you since the festival. It’s horsedung, all of it. They dragged her by the wrists to a prison unfit for a feral dog, and you just watched as they went. No one *moved*.” Layla looked around at the empty walls. Faces with black eyes and sharp teeth spun in her head. She tried to catch her breath.

“Listen,” Monty said slowly, waiting to be interrupted. Layla just looked at him. “I understand this must be hard for you, but you can’t leave the village. Chief Parker simply won’t allow it. It will only make things worse.”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? I’m done listening to Chief Parker,” Layla said.

“Obeying the Head Chief’s orders hasn’t suddenly become optional,” Monty said.

“Oh yes, you’ve been just a model citizen, haven’t you?” said Layla. “You’ll sneak up to the cottage on the hill to help the monster’s daughter at dawn, but you’re too cowardly to be seen with her in the daylight.” Something dark and angry bubbled up inside of her. “You know what

people say about you, don't you? The rodent Enforcer, youngest and least-capable badge in Illyria." The words spilled out before Layla could stop to look at them. "The only reason Chief Parker even let you get your badge is because his wife had a soft spot for your sickly mother—"

"Don't you *dare* talk about my mother, Layla," Monty growled, suddenly looking much older than when he first opened the Withers' front door.

"Yet you're free to talk about mine?" Layla said. "They treated your mother like some sort of angel when she was sick. Flowers around her bed, visitors tending to her as long as the sun was in the sky."

"You were just a child then, you can't possibly remember that."

"I've heard stories. I know that Mrs. Parker was at her bedside the day she died—got some kind of kick out of caring for the village's most useless woman. She threatened to leave the Chief if he didn't give you an Enforcer's badge." Layla's words hung in the air and she tried to catch her breath. The shake in her hands grew uncontrollable, she tried to hide them in her cloak so Monty wouldn't see. The Enforcer's blue eyes had grown impossibly dark. Layla knew she had said too much.

"I came here because I thought you would understand," Layla said quietly.

"Get out," said Monty.

"My mother may have a sun on her chest, Monty, but I'm not going to let her rot alone in those Cages."

"I think she's doing a fine job of rotting alone without your help," Monty said. The air in the miniature room felt thick and angry.

Layla stood up and wished she could change everything. She hated Monty and Mama and Chief Parker. But most of all, she hated herself.

“Your tea was bitter,” Layla said. She hurried down the stairs and out the door to be alone in the dark.