
AUTHOR OF *UNHALLOWED HALLS*
LILI WILKINSON
LAVENDER & HEMLOCK

LAVENDER
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LAVENDER & HEMLOCK



LILI WILKINSON

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Every time I give a school talk and use the word ‘sapphic’, there’s a handful of delightful queer nerds whose heads snap up like I’ve uttered the shibboleth they’ve been waiting for.

This book is for you.

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The backside of heroism is often rather sad; women and servants know that. They know also that the heroism may be no less real for that. But achievement is smaller than men think. What is large is the sky, the earth, the sea, the soul.

– URSULA K LE GUIN

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1
TANSY

Wild marjoram: Steep fresh leaves in boiling water for a tea that will dispel melancholy and bring peaceful sleep.

THE CAT WOKE her up, batting an insistent paw against her cheek.

‘You horrid thing,’ she said to it. ‘I was having a perfectly nice dream.’

Grey light was only just starting to seep in through Tansy’s little attic window as she pulled on her linen shift and petticoat, the cat watching with luminous yellow eyes. A brown woollen overdress came next, the hem embroidered with a motif of marigolds, and a white kerchief for her neck

and shoulders. Then a pinafore and white cap, and finally stockings and a pair of sturdy brown boots.

Outside, the goose honked.

The cat sprang from her bed with a gentle thump and led the way down the narrow attic stairs.

Tansy lit the fire in the kitchen, her cold fingers clumsy as she fumbled for the tinderbox, then went out into the damp morning to fetch water from the well.

The cat followed her, picking its way down the garden path. It was soot-black, with lamplike golden eyes that seemed to watch her every move.

‘Don’t you have anything better to do?’ she asked it. ‘Surely there are mice to be caught.’

But she was grateful for the company.

Back inside, Tansy filled the black iron kettle from the water pail and hung it over the fire to boil for Lady Aster’s tea. She took the crock of milk from the larder and splashed a little into a dish for the cat, who lapped it up.

‘You’re welcome,’ she told it.

Lady Aster’s bedroom was stuffy, the dusty scent of old lavender hanging heavy in the air. Tansy set down the tea tray, and Lady Aster stirred in her sleep, muttering a word that sounded like *anhelion*.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ Tansy said brightly.

She opened the curtains and the room was washed with morning light. It was very much an old lady’s room. Lace doilies. Mahogany furniture. Gilt-framed paintings of rolling hills and meadows on the walls.

Nearly everything was embroidered with leaves and flowers and vines. It was how Tansy passed the long evenings after Lady Aster retired to her room; she stitched neat rows of greenery on every piece of fabric she could find. She brought real plants inside from the garden, too, flowers and bunches of herbs. Nothing made a house feel more like a home than the presence of green, growing things.

Lady Aster’s eyes snapped open, watery but sharp. She lay still, taking in her surroundings, then sat up in bed. Tansy rearranged the pillows to make her more comfortable.

Her mistress was a small woman, shrunken with age. Her white hair was escaping from the silk bonnet that she slept in, giving her a slightly loose, dishevelled look. Tansy poured the tea and passed the cup and saucer to Lady Aster, who took it with a brief nod of acknowledgement.

‘I’ll be back in a bit to help you dress, ma’am,’ Tansy said.

Lady Aster didn’t respond, just sipped her tea and stared moodily out the window at the grassy meadow and, beyond it, the wide stretch of ocean, grey in the morning light.

Tansy bobbed a curtsey and returned to the kitchen.

‘She’s not feeling chatty today,’ she remarked to the cat.

The cat ignored her.

Tansy sighed. ‘Neither are you.’

The chickens were more talkative, loudly demanding their breakfast while the goose watched from its nest under the blueberry bushes. Tansy fed them, then collected six brown-speckled eggs from the nesting boxes and stowed them in the larder.

Bread dough on to prove. More water over the fire for washing up. Then back upstairs to help Lady Aster dress in her whalebone corset and stiff dark brocade skirts. The old lady said nothing during the process, just sat still and expressionless as Tansy pulled her hair back into a somewhat severe-looking bun and pinned a black velvet cap to her head.

‘I don’t know who she’s trying to impress,’ Tansy told the cat later on as she stood on the back step, brushing her teeth with a rosemary twig dipped in salt. ‘It’s not like we ever get visitors.’

But she felt guilty for saying it.

The rest of the morning was spent on the usual chores. Tansy emptied the chamber pots. Scored the bread and popped it in the oven to bake, soaking the thick wooden oven door in water and sealing it closed with leftover dough. Once Lady Aster was settled in the sitting room, Tansy went back upstairs and stripped the old lady’s bed and turned the horsehair mattress, sprinkling the underside with wormwood and chamomile to keep the bugs away. She took clean sheets from the linen chest and remade the bed, then carried the old sheets outside and washed them in a giant kettle with hot water and lye soap, bashed them with a wooden beetle, then spun the water out on a post before hanging everything up to dry on the hawthorn bushes.

She spent a pleasant half-hour tending to her herb garden and gathering plants to make a new batch of dyes for her embroidery thread. Sorrel root

and madder for red, buckthorn and agrimony for yellow, nettles for green, and privet berries mixed with alum and salt for blue. Toadweed made a better blue dye, but she only ever found it growing among the wild grasses that surrounded the cottage, and try as she might, Tansy had been unable to cultivate it in her own garden.

She had a melancholic feeling, as if she was missing something she couldn't quite remember. She felt that way quite often – the feeling was so familiar to her it had become comforting.

The scent of crushed greenery seemed to fill her lungs until she thought she might burst.

Perhaps she was homesick.

Don't be ridiculous, said a dry voice inside her head. *This is your home*.

Tansy put a fond hand on the grey stone of the cottage as she went back inside, and heard the house creak gently in response.

She dusted Lady Aster's collections. The shell room first, glass cases filled with seashells of all shapes, colours and sizes. They were beautiful, but the room felt sad in a way Tansy couldn't quite explain.

Probably because these shells all come from places you will never visit, the dry voice observed.

The doll room next, all glass eyes and painted faces, stiff and expressionless and stuffed with sawdust. Tansy never lingered here – the eyes seemed to follow her around the room.

A bell rang from the sitting room.

It was time for Lady Aster's walk.

The third collection would have to wait.

Lady Aster firmly believed in the power of fresh sea air, and every day she walked slowly from the front door to the garden gate and back again, an exercise that usually took all of three minutes.

Tansy accompanied her, although she wasn't sure why her presence was necessary.

It's certainly not for your conversational skills, the dry voice in her head commented.

Tansy cleared her throat. 'It's … it's a lovely day,' she ventured.

Lady Aster sniffed dismissively. 'Rain is coming,' she said.

Tansy gazed up at the blue skies and fluffy white clouds. It didn't look like rain to her, but what did she know?

The goose burst from the blueberry bushes and rushed at Lady Aster, honking and beating its wings, its neck arched aggressively.

'Shoo!' Lady Aster said, frowning at it.

The goose hissed at her and bobbed its head, but retreated back into the blueberry bushes, glaring at the old woman with baleful eyes.

Lady Aster pinched her lips and disappeared into the house.

Tansy secretly admired the goose. She would never dream of standing up to Lady Aster like that.

Lady Aster always took a nap after her walk, slowly ascending the creaking stairs to her bedroom. She wouldn't be down again until teatime.

Tansy finished washing the dishes, hung up her apron, and slipped out the kitchen door into the afternoon sunshine.

The goose watched her from the blueberry bushes, but it didn't hiss or honk. It always saved its rage for Lady Aster.

She followed the garden path to the low stone wall and opened the little white picket gate, which groaned on its hinges as she stepped through. She turned to look back at the stone cottage, draped in ivy. Windows peeked out from under the thatched roof, and the bright green door was cheerful and welcoming. It was utterly charming, surrounded by foxgloves and marigolds nodding in the breeze, under a brilliant blue sky smudged with snowy clouds.

The cottage was her home. A comfortable home. A fine home.

So why does it feel so good to walk away from it? the voice inside her head asked.

The black cat leaped onto the gatepost to watch her go.

'I won't be long,' she assured it.

It turned away from her and disdainfully licked a paw, as if to communicate that it did not care if she came or went.

The cliffs were a short walk away, through wild green grasses undulating in the strong ocean breeze. Buttercups, corn cockles and harebells nodded

their prettily coloured heads, and a kind of peace spread through Tansy, despite the ache in her chest.

The meadow ended abruptly, as if it had been cut with a knife, revealing white cliffs and, far below, foaming white waves and deep blue ocean. There were no paths down. No sandy beaches or hidden coves. Just cliffs, on and on, as far as the eye could see.

Brisk, brine-scented winds came sweeping up from the sea to buffet her. She didn't dare get too close to the edge – the very thought of it made her stomach plunge. But it was exhilarating just to be close.

Wisps of hair came loose from her bun, and she turned her face up to the sky, feeling the warmth of the sun as the salt-drenched air filled her lungs.

A perfect day.

The ache in her chest grew stronger.

What good is a perfect day if you have nobody to share it with?

Tansy gazed up at the clouds sailing overhead like white fluffy castles and wondered what it would be like to explore them.

Would they feel soft underfoot? Like a dandelion puffball?

What kinds of people would live in such castles?

How wonderful it would be to talk to someone about it. But there was only Lady Aster, and she was never interested in conversation.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Tansy scolded herself. 'Nobody lives in the clouds.'

She took another deep breath and felt a hitch in her chest.

She wouldn't cry. Not on a beautiful day like today.

'I can talk to the cat,' she reminded herself. 'That's something.'

The faintest scent of lavender reached her, and she felt a familiar tugging inside, as if an invisible thread connected her to Lady Aster and the cottage, and it was reeling her back in. But something deep and wild inside her urged her to stay, just for a little longer. She closed her eyes, feeling the push and pull of it.

The air grew cold and damp, and the wind picked up.

Blinking, Tansy realised that the sky had turned dark, with heavy clouds threatening rain. Weather could be so changeable by the sea.

A fat drop landed on her cheek.

'The linen!' she gasped, and turned, hitching up her skirts as she raced back to the cottage.

She made it just in time, yanking the sun-scented fabric from the hawthorn bushes and stumbling towards the front door with it all bundled in

her arms.

As she crossed the threshold, Tansy glanced up at the brass plaque mounted on the green front door.

THE OUBLIETTE

It was a strange name for a house. Why had she never asked Lady Aster what it meant? Perhaps she would tomorrow.

The cottage felt even cosier with the rain thundering down outside, welcoming her in with its familiar dusty lavender scent. Tansy cut up onions, carrots and turnips to serve with a joint of mutton for supper, humming quietly to herself as she added fresh tarragon and dill to the pot. She was pleasantly tired from her walk, and it felt good to be warm and dry. The house creaked and settled around her, as if it were glad that she had returned.

Lady Aster wasn't up from her nap yet, and once the vegetables were bubbling on the stove, Tansy went into the sitting room, armed with her feather duster.

The fire crackled and popped gently in the grate. The room was gloomy and dim now that the weather had turned, but she held off lighting the lamps – the oil had a sharp smell that gave her a headache.

She ran a finger along the spines of books, feeling their leather bindings and embossed gold letters. There were no novels, or plays, or volumes of poetry. The shelves contained mostly dry histories of wars between various kingdoms Tansy had never heard of, going back hundreds and hundreds of years.

Still, buried deep in one of these dreary historical tomes, she had discovered something. A tale of a brave knight who had rescued a princess from a tyrannical overlord.

Tansy thought often of this knight. About how grateful the princess must have been. About the conversations they might have had on their long journey back to his kingdom.

A particularly loud pop from the fireplace made Tansy check that no sparks had leaped out onto the hearthrug, but there was nothing there except the cat. It yawned, displaying sharp white teeth.

The old lady would be awake soon, and Tansy still hadn't dusted the third collection room.

It was her favourite.

Wooden shelves lined this room, holding neatly positioned glass globes. Each one was about the size of a small cabbage and had a solid wooden base

to stop it from rolling around.

Inside each globe was a tiny world, perfect and precise.

Some featured a building, or a street. Others just a room. Some were whole sweeping landscapes, with mountains and rivers. One showed crooked streets opening onto a crowded marketplace, and Tansy could almost hear the hustle and bustle of it – the cries of vendors, the smells of strange and wonderful foods.

She didn't know who had made the globes – it could well have been Lady Aster in her younger days. Tansy didn't dare ask, even though she longed to know more about them.

Not all the globes had people in them, but most did, tiny faceless figures. One of her favourites was a sunny seashore, with a low seawall and cheerful little boats bobbing on the water. A woman in colourful petticoats was selling strange pink fruits from a painted cart, and Tansy had spent many hours wondering what they tasted like.

She always saved the third collection room for last, taking her time dusting each globe. What would it be like to visit such a world, meeting new people and making friends? It had been so long since she went anywhere. She couldn't remember anything other than the cottage, and the meadow and cliffs nearby.

One shelf held multiple replicas of the cottage – the Oubliette. They were all slightly different. One had an unfamiliar garden, and another was surrounded by close forests. But there was one that was identical to the real Oubliette. It looked so real, in fact, Tansy often found herself looking for the white goose or waiting for the black cat to appear.

She picked up the globe. It was surprisingly light, the glass so thin she was afraid of crushing it in her hand. Tiny specks of foxglove and marigold were scattered around the garden. Holding it up to the light, she tried to peer into the house through one of the little windows, but all she could see inside were shadows.

Every globe had a brass plaque on the base with a number engraved on it. This Oubliette globe was *#1*.

She put it back and examined a different one. A throne room hung with banners, with knights in shining armour lined up along the walls. (Was one of them the knight who had rescued the princess?) The brass plaque on the bottom was engraved with *#22*.

Floorboards creaked overhead, and Tansy started. The globe slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor.

Miraculously, the glass didn't shatter.

She bent down to retrieve it from the woven rug, her heart pounding.

'Is it broken?'

Lady Aster stood in the doorway, her mouth a thin, pale line. The cat was there too, winding around the hems of Lady Aster's skirts.

'N-no, ma'am,' Tansy stammered.

'Are you sure?' Lady Aster's voice was cracked with age and cold as stone.

'I'm sure, ma'am. I'm so sorry.'

'Foolish girl. Your head is full of straw.' The old woman's eyes were fixed on Tansy, cold and glittering.

Tansy bit her lip, trying not to cry. For a moment, she wished with all her heart that a knight in shining armour would come and whisk her away.

She took a deep breath and carefully replaced the globe on the shelf.

Ridiculous. She wasn't a princess, and she didn't need rescuing.

But it would be nice to have someone to talk to.

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2
MERIT

Mistletoe: Can reopen old wounds. Wear a garland of mistletoe to open the gates to the underworld.

THE AIR WAS thick with smoke and the coppery smell of blood. It got in under Merit's helmet, making her eyes sting. The ramshackle guard tower at the edge of the village had fallen, and Commander Hale wheeled his horse around to face the squadron.

'You know the drill,' he barked. 'Find new recruits, and kill all who resist. No mercy.'

The night was cold, and Merit's breath came in clouds. She felt sick with dread. Would she ever get used to this? Her brothers and sisters seemed to

relish these recruitment raids, spoke of them with eager anticipation.

She swallowed, her mouth dry.

‘In the name of the Unmaker!’ roared Commander Hale, clashing his sword against his shield.

‘The Unmaker!’ the other knights shouted in response.

Merit heard the waver in her voice and hoped nobody else had.

Cries of alarm sounded as people woke from sleep. There was a salty, fishy scent in the air – this seaside village was known for its oysters and pearls.

They’re here. The Carrion Knights are here.

Merit touched her fingers to her helmet, felt the smooth ridges of the skull mounted on it.

Monsters. That was what they were.

She could see it in the eyes of the people whose villages they raided. Terror. The Carrion Knights were the stuff of nightmares, clad in black iron and leather, skull-helmets leering.

Villagers, with children clutched in their arms, fled to hide in the nearby forest as smoke began to curl from thatched roofs.

Merit headed for a house with an open door, knowing its inhabitants would have already gone. She ducked under the lintel where a bundle of herbs hung to ward off bad spirits.

Inside, she half-heartedly looked in cupboards and under beds. There was no one there, but she went through the motions of searching. She tried not to look at the pile of mending, abandoned on the dirt floor by the hearth. At the child’s toy on the windowsill.

Other knights enjoyed this. They sought out those who tried to run and made them pay. They smashed windows and overturned tables, laughing as homes burned and the new recruits sobbed.

Merit gritted her teeth. It’d be over soon. Then they would go back to Crow Hall. The new recruits would be sent to the crèche, and the knights would have double rations to celebrate a successful raid. She would sit side by side with her brothers and sisters, listening as the others boasted of their courage and ruthlessness.

Eventually, they would all sleep, satisfied that they had honoured the Unmaker the best way they knew how. And Merit would lie awake, deep into the night, darkness and silence eating away at her until there was nothing left.

Through the screams and clashing of swords and crackling of flames, she heard a noise. Something small, but close. An intake of breath, very nearly a sob.

‘Unmaker’s balls,’ Merit cursed under her breath.

She thought about leaving. About slashing an *X* on the front door with her sword to indicate that the house had been successfully searched.

But if someone checked … If another knight discovered that she had let a recruit escape …

Merit closed her eyes. It was not worth thinking about.

She yanked aside the curtain that separated the two small rooms of the hut.

The child couldn’t have been more than five years old.

His face smeared with soot, eyes wide with terror. Dressed in a grey nightshirt that had been patched and mended many times. In a clenched fist, he held a knife – a small one, the kind that was used for shucking oysters.

‘Get back, fiend!’ the child yelled, brandishing the knife.

Merit had to admire his courage. There weren’t many who would face a fully armoured Carrion Knight, and he was just a little slip of a thing. She could kill him with a single blow.

He would make a good knight.

She remembered another child, many years ago, crouching by the muddy bank of a river by a pile of stones, looking up at her with frightened eyes.

Are we monsters?

Merit felt bile rise in her throat as she readjusted her grip on her sword.

She didn’t remember her own recruitment. The training program helped them forget. All she knew was Crow Hall. It was easier that way.

The knife trembled in the child’s hand, but he pinched his lips together, jaw set.

Take him, she told herself. *In the name of the Unmaker.*

But she could not. Shame crept into her heart, and she stepped away from the door.

‘Run,’ she whispered.

The child did not move.

Merit swallowed and reached up to pull off her skull-shaped helmet. Cool night air touched the sweat-soaked plait coiled on her head, and she suppressed a shiver.

The child didn’t look comforted to see her without her helmet. His eyes grew even wider as he took in the crooked scar that ran from Merit’s brow to her chin – a souvenir from a childhood sparring accident.

Merit saw herself reflected in the child’s eyes.

Monstrous.

‘I said *run*,’ she growled, and feinted forward, startling the child into action.

The knife clattered to the floor, and the child turned, quick as a rabbit, and scurried for the door.

A black-gloved hand caught him by the scruff of the neck.

‘Not so fast, little brother,’ said the knight in the doorway.

The point of Merit’s sword hit the floor. Her heart was pounding, and she was afraid she might be sick. Who was this other knight? With their skull-shaped helmets on, they all looked the same. How much had he seen? Did he know she had tried to spare the child?

The child squirmed in the knight’s grasp. ‘Sir Merit,’ the knight said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

Relief flooded Merit.

Sir Valiant.

How long had it been? His little boy’s face had broadened into that of a man – strong-jawed, with flinty eyes. But Merit would know him anywhere.

Valiant had arrived at Crow Hall shortly after Merit. It was Merit who had showed Valiant how to be a good recruit. He was the closest thing Merit had ever had to a friend. When Merit woke in the darkness, sweating and trembling from another nightmare, it was Valiant who had spoken words of comfort to her, whispering so as not to wake the other children in their dormitory. He told her secret stories of bravery and adventure, chasing away her visions of a dark lord laying waste to everything. Of course, as soon as the preceptors had realised their closeness, Valiant had been sent away to train at Wolf Hall.

Valiant wouldn’t tell anyone about her moment of weakness. She could trust him.

‘Portentous times,’ he said, almost conversationally. ‘The blood moon. The salt-rain. The augurs say the Unmaker will return soon.’

Merit nodded, her mouth dry.

‘A war is coming,’ Valiant said. ‘Sooner than you think. Finally, we will make those false lords in the Bright City pay for their heresy.’

A shiver ran over Merit. The Carrion Knights only ever raided small villages in order to recruit new soldiers. But she too had heard rumblings of an assault on the Bright City, Valla's capital. She had hoped they were just rumours. But Valiant wore the black armbands of a junior commander. He would know if there was any truth to it.

'This is no time for weakness, Sir Merit,' Valiant continued. 'The augurs predict another blood moon in a matter of weeks. They say that a great sacrifice in the name of the Unmaker is required to enable him to return to us.'

Weeks. They were going to attack the Bright City within weeks. Merit glanced at the small boy, still struggling to escape. He would give in, eventually. They always did.

'Valiant, he's just a child,' she said softly.

'So were you,' Valiant said. 'So was I. So are all the recruits. But look at us now, Merit. We are strong, steeped in the glory of the Unmaker. Don't you feel his presence?'

Merit suppressed a shudder. She felt it. She hated it.

Valiant watched her for a long moment, his expression hidden by the leering skull helmet. 'You're weak,' he said at last. 'You were always weak.'

His words stung, but she knew he was right.

'You won't tell Commander Hale, will you?' she asked, pulling her own helmet back over her head. It felt like climbing inside a cage.

Sir Valiant gazed at her for a long moment before he spoke. 'I won't have to,' he said at last. 'I am strong. I am loyal.'

Merit sighed. 'I'm trying,' she said. 'I just—'

Valiant interrupted her. 'You are weak.'

She didn't believe he'd do it. She didn't bother adopting a guard stance, not even when he lurched forward. She didn't raise her sword or even brace herself against Valiant's thrusting blade. He knew the exact point where her armour was vulnerable. Of course he did. He was wearing it too.

The black sword sank deep into her gut, as cold as ice. Sir Valiant froze, his blade still buried inside Merit. She could hear the hitch in his breath. Could feel the tremble in his sword arm.

Then he withdrew, the sword sliding out of her with a sickening wet sound.

'I am loyal to the Unmaker,' he said in a low voice.

'Valiant,' she gasped, tasting blood in her throat.

She looked down to see sticky darkness soaking through her black surcoat. She suddenly felt very cold.

Her legs went out from under her, and she sank into nothing.

She woke sometime later, surprised to discover that she wasn't dead. Her mouth tasted of blood and ash. Everything was quiet. She sat up and glanced down at the place where Sir Valiant had stabbed her, her vision limited by her black helmet. Her tunic was wet with blood. The room spun around her, and she closed her eyes, taking deep breaths.

The village was silent, save for the crackling of flames and the distant lapping of waves on the nearby seashore.

They were gone. The knights had taken what children they could find, and left.

Carrion Knights were trained to look out for one another. They were brothers and sisters in arms. Nobody ever got left behind, unless …

Shame flooded through Merit, her heart thudding dull and uneven in her chest.

Unless you weren't a knight anymore. Unless you betrayed your brothers and sisters. Disobeyed an order.

Let a potential recruit escape.

She should have taken the child.

But she knew in her unsteady heart that if she were given the chance again, she still wouldn't go through with it.

Couldn't.

She was no Carrion Knight.

Valiant had left her to die, and she deserved it.

Through the scent of smoke and blood, Merit could smell something else. Something musky and earthy, like the bottom of a compost heap.

She opened her eyes.

A little dog was sitting in the doorway of the hut.

It was not a fierce-looking dog. It was grey and scruffy, its fur matted into spikes. Dark eyes watched her curiously from beneath tangled eyebrows.

'Bugger off,' she said, her voice weak in the silence.

The dog wagged its tail.

What kind of Carrion Knight was she? Even a mangy dog did not fear her.

It was too small to be a wild dog or a hunting dog. Someone's pet, perhaps, although it didn't look at all well cared for. A stray scavenger, without a pack.

Just like her.

Merit's mouth was dry. She didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. But the villagers would be returning soon, to grieve their lost children and try to piece their lives back together. If they found her, a wounded lone Carrion Knight, they would show her no mercy.

She had to leave.

And go where? asked a jeering voice in her head. *The Halls of Order are closed to you now. Better to die at the end of a blade, even if it is a reaping hook or an oyster knife.*

The dog whined and sprang to its feet. Probably hoping for an easy meal.

Merit gritted her teeth. She wasn't ready to die. Not today. She reached for her sword and used it as a crutch, levering herself to her feet. She needed to find somewhere safe, away from other people. The beach was too exposed. A stream, perhaps, to bathe her wound. Somewhere she could rest. She knew how to survive in the woods; it was part of her training.

She staggered outside, coughing from the smoke of the burning huts, and headed for the cover of trees.

The dog followed, trotting patiently at her heels.

'I'm not dead yet,' she muttered to it. 'So back off.'

As she pushed through dense undergrowth, Merit was keenly aware of how much blood she was losing and how unsteady she was on her feet. She felt grey and hollow, her fingers and toes numb, her vision blurred at the edges.

She stopped and leaned heavily against a tree as her head spun.

The dog grew agitated, trotting away, looking over its shoulder at her and returning.

'Great news,' she told it. 'You might get your dinner after all.'

The dog nipped her gently on the ankle.

'Have some manners,' she said. 'Wait until I'm properly dead.'

It barked, loud and insistent. The part of Merit's brain that had been taught to unquestioningly follow orders sparked into life.

'Okay, okay,' she said. 'Just a bit further.'

The dog led the way this time, finding a trail that was easier to walk along. The forest around them grew thicker and more tangled as they headed

away from the sea, and the scent of dark loam and wet boughs cleared Merit's head a little. A slice of moon overhead filtered silvery light down through the forest canopy, illuminating the dog on the path, although everything else was shadows.

What was she doing, following a stray beast through a forest at night?

But she kept going as the undergrowth became dark and thorny, turning from green and brown to black and grey. The rustling sounds of night creatures faded into silence.

'Where are you taking me?' she asked the dog.

The dog, predictably, didn't answer.

They passed a jumble of mossy stones, too smooth and evenly spaced to be natural. An old wall, now in ruins. The wound in Merit's side throbbed sickeningly, and her vision blurred for a moment.

There was a house in the forest.

Something that had once been a house, anyway.

It looked like no one had been near it for centuries.

Thorned vines choked the grey stone, penetrating paned glass windows. The thatched roof had long since disintegrated, leaving a ragged skeleton of rotting wooden rafters.

Merit shivered. She could smell sulphur and gravedust.

The front door was completely rotten, dissolving under Merit's hand into spongey wet splinters and ancient flakes of green paint. The dog's ears lay flat against its head, and it let out a little whine as it sprang over the remains of the door and vanished into the gloom.

'Wait,' Merit said, staggering through the debris.

Inside, the stone floor was uneven and slimy with age and muck. Some kind of bioluminescent fungus emitted a dim, greenish glow, revealing nothing but shadows.

'If you think this a good place to recuperate from a mortal wound,' Merit said to the dog, 'then you are sorely mistaken. On the other hand, if you are looking for a place to stash my body so you can consume it at your leisure, then congratulations.'

She could have sworn the dog rolled its eyes at her before trotting up a crumbling stone staircase.

After a moment's hesitation, Merit followed.

She made it to the first floor and peered down a dark passage. The plaster walls were sagging and spattered with mould, the woven rug underfoot

waterlogged and rotten. The scent of mildew was so strong it even drowned out the dog's compost-heap odour.

They went up another flight of stone stairs. Here, a part of the building had collapsed and moonlight poured in, washing everything pale and colourless. The light glinted off something in a corner, and Merit bit back a yelp as she saw two eyes staring at her, unblinking.

Glass. They were just glass. Belonging to a rag doll, its face crusted with lichen, its chest split open and leaking sludge that might once have been sawdust.

'You have terrible taste in houses,' Merit informed the dog.

The dog whined, its tail tucked between its legs.

'Then why did you bring me here?' Merit demanded.

The dog slunk down the passage and stopped before a door, letting out a sharp, high-pitched bark.

This door was swollen with moisture, but it was still recognisably a door. Merit put her shoulder against it and shoved hard.

The impact made her wound explode with pain, and for a moment she saw stars.

But the door swung open, revealing a room that was, miraculously, mostly dry.

It appeared to be a workshop. Piles of ancient books and charts. A long bench cluttered with strange pieces of equipment, things with dials and notches and gears. Odd things in clouded jars. A glass globe on a wooden stand. A human skull, the pale, leering twin to Merit's helmet.

And another door.

This one was made of stone and had no keyhole or handle. Its surface was pitted and scarred with age, but she could still make out the symbol carved on its surface.

A sunburst.

Merit's heart quickened.

The mark of the Unmaker.

She carried the same mark on her left palm. It was smeared with blood and filth, but the raised white scar almost glowed in the moonlight.

Every Carrion Knight was given the Unmaker's mark when they became a full-fledged knight. It was a badge of honour. Of courage.

Merit could still remember the heat of the iron brand, the scent and sizzle of burning flesh. She remembered tears welling in her eyes and biting down

hard on the inside of her cheek to stop them from falling.

She'd been a coward, even then.

She balled her hand into a fist.

The dog scratched at the door and let out a whine.

'It doesn't go anywhere,' she told it. 'This is the external wall of the house, and we're on the second floor.'

The dog ignored her and scratched again.

Merit sighed. 'Look,' she said, reaching out to push against the door. It didn't budge.

'See?' she said to the dog.

The dog barked, a sharp command.

A wave of dizziness came over Merit, and she put out her other hand – her left hand – to brace herself against the door. Her pulse throbbed in the scar on her palm, and the huge stone slab made a grinding sound as it swung inward on invisible hinges. Crumbling plaster and lichen showered down from above it, revealing only blackness beyond.

The door bore the mark of the Unmaker, and she had opened it with the matching mark on her hand.

A cold, hollow feeling grew inside her.

'Why did you bring me here?' she asked the dog in a trembling voice.

All her life, she had dreamed of the Unmaker's return.

Not the way the other knights did. They longed for it, spoke of it in reverent tones. When the Unmaker returned, the Carrion Knights would become lords of Valla, ruling over all. It would be a time of greatness and glory.

But Merit wasn't like the other knights.

Her dreams were haunted by a dark shadow, tall and robed, with a spiked crown rising from its brow. In Merit's dreams, the Unmaker returned and everything fell to ruin. The air was filled with the scent of burning flesh and the wails of the dying.

The doorway yawned before her.

Was it a test? A trial?

Could she prove herself here? Win back a place in the Carrion Knights alongside her brothers and sisters?

Was that what she wanted?

Of course it was. The only other option was death.

The dog trotted through the door and vanished.

‘Wait,’ Merit called after it, then felt foolish.

She couldn’t go back to the Halls of Order, and she wasn’t ready to die.

What other choice was there?

She took a deep breath, then plunged into the darkness.

Beyond the door, there was coldness. Not the damp cold that came with ice or snow. It was the dry cold of ancient stone. The cold of an empty tomb, the bitter scent of corroded metal heavy in the air.

‘Hello?’ Merit called. Her voice sounded strangely muffled, like she had her face down in a pillow. There was no echo, and she couldn’t get any sense of the size of the space she was in. She looked back over her shoulder, but there was no sign of the doorway she’d come through or the rotting house she’d left behind.

She scuffed a foot against the ground. It didn’t feel like dirt, or grass, or stone. It was solid, but it felt like … nothing. Stretching her hands out in front of her, she took a few tentative steps forward, feeling for walls or trees – anything.

But her hands met only black emptiness.

Was she in a tunnel?

Maybe it’s not a test, she thought. *Maybe I’m dead. I lost too much blood and I died.*

Merit felt oddly calm at the notion. Carrion Knights were no strangers to death – she had watched her brothers and sisters fall during raids and even in training sessions. Death was inevitable.

She stood still, her senses straining for … anything.

But all was blackness. The only sound was the regular hush of her breath and the softer, faster breathing of the dog.

The dog. Where was the dog?

She sank to her knees and groped around in the dark for it, growing more and more panicked.

‘Dog?’ she said, her voice shaking in the suffocating silence.

Something cold and wet touched her palm, and she flinched before realising it was the dog pressing its quivering nose against her fingers. She let her hand move along its coat, the wiry matted fur strangely comforting.

She could feel the dog's heart beating. Feel its lungs expand and contract with each breath. Could smell its pungent, musky odour.

'You're alive,' Merit said, the darkness swallowing each word as she spoke it.

Maybe she was too.

The dog let out a little huffing sound and took a few steps before stopping. Merit leaned forward to keep her hand on its fur. The dog moved again.

'Okay, okay,' Merit muttered. 'You seem to know where you're going. Lead the way.'

The dog led her through the darkness for what could have been minutes, or hours, or days. Time didn't seem to work normally anymore.

Then the dog stopped, a tremor rippling over its body.

Something was different. At first, Merit couldn't pinpoint what it was. Had it grown colder?

And then she heard it.

A third breath.

Rasping, trembling.

She couldn't tell if it was close or far away. At first it seemed to be ahead of her, but then she heard it again coming from the other direction. Had she somehow got turned around?

The dog whimpered, and Merit felt her childhood nightmares crowd in around her.

She unsheathed her sword, holding it out before her and turning in a circle. But the blade connected with nothing.

The breath was right by her ear, so close that she could feel the movement of air against her skin. It was soft, shuddering and freezing cold. Merit's skin broke out into gooseflesh at the closeness of it. She could feel the *longing* in the breath. The hunger. Icy fingers brushed her jaw, guiding her head towards it. It felt intimate, almost gentle.

A low, rumbling growl sounded from the dog. A warning.

Instinctively, Merit jerked her head away and heard the swift *snap* of teeth closing, right where her face had been just a moment ago.

Something snarled in the darkness. Not the dog. Something else. Something wild and broken and ravenous.

She ran.

Carrion Knights were not trained to flee. Merit had been taught to fight. To face every challenge without fear. To choose death over defeat.

But how could you fight darkness itself?

She could hear the panting of the dog ahead of her and followed blindly. There was something ahead. Merit didn't know what it was, but it wasn't darkness. The dog quickened its pace, and Merit stumbled after it, her fingers finally connecting with a stone door, and she staggered through it.

Did the creature in the darkness slip out with her? Shadows crowded the corners of her vision, but they cleared quickly.

She was back in the old house, except this time everything was different.

It felt like another world.

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3
MERIT

Snapdragon: Crush the flowers and smear on brow to stay hidden from prying eyes.

IT WAS DAYTIME, bright light pouring in through a high window, outside of which Merit could see blue sky and scudding white clouds.

Perhaps she was dead after all.

Although the wound in her side was still pulsing with pain.

The dog looked significantly more cheerful, its ears perked up and tail held high. It glanced over its shoulder at Merit, expectant.

The passage was the same, but different. It was dry now, and bright, and smelling faintly of lavender.

‘Huh,’ Merit said.

There were other doors, all closed, each with a numbered brass plaque on it. She turned to look at the door she had come from, but behind her was just bare wall, clean and white-washed.

More than anything, though, this house *felt* different. Merit knew that houses couldn’t be alive, but she couldn’t think of a better way to describe the feeling. It was as if the house were somehow aware of her presence.

‘Did you put a spell on me?’ she hissed at the dog.

The dog didn’t respond, just shook itself, then trotted off down the passage. Merit followed, moving silently the way only a Carrion Knight could.

A floorboard creaked on the storey below her, and she heard a muffled voice.

Wherever she was, Merit knew she wouldn’t be welcomed.

Carrion Knights never were.

She stumbled down the stone staircase, which now had a polished timber banister. Her wound throbbed, and she gasped in pain.

Another flight of stairs, and then the dog led her through a rather quaint kitchen hung with drying herbs and out into blinding brightness.

Merit tasted the salt on the air before she could see anything. It wasn’t like the copper-salt of blood, or even the sulphurous scent that came with portentous salt-rain. It was fresh and sweet, and for the first time she really hoped that she wasn’t dead.

She sank to her knees and felt soft grass beneath her palms.

The dog licked her cheek, and Merit blinked as her eyes adjusted.

A neat garden, with rows of vegetables, chickens scratching contentedly, and a small orchard behind the cottage.

It wasn’t the same house. This one was neat and charming, ivy-clad with a thatched roof and smoke curling from the chimney.

But it was the same general shape as the gloomy damp ruin Merit had come from. It had the same bones, the same grey stone.

There was no dark tangled forest here, just a rolling meadow of wildflowers, undulating in the stiff sea breeze. Beyond that were sheer white cliffs, and the ocean, far below. A sparkling deep blue, moving like a live thing, it somehow made her feel calm and terrified at the same time. She felt a prickling in her eyes and turned away from it.

She saw no roads. No settlements. Just this one little cottage, all on its own.

What was she going to do? She wasn't strong enough to travel. And she couldn't exactly knock on the cottage door and ask for food and shelter.

Carrion Knights didn't knock on doors. They broke them down and took what they wanted.

When whoever lived in that cottage saw her, recognised her for what she was, they would scream and flee. Or maybe, seeing how weak she was from her injury, they would attempt to finish her off.

The dog let out a little yip of encouragement.

'I can't,' Merit told it. She suddenly felt overcome with weariness.

There was a small collection of outbuildings crouched behind the orchard. Perhaps there was somewhere she could rest for a while, without being noticed by the inhabitants of the cottage.

'Fine,' she said to the dog. 'But you have to stay quiet.'

The dog wagged its tail.

The adrenaline that had fuelled Merit's journey through the dark void had drained away, leaving her weak and trembling. The wound in her side felt slippery and agonisingly painful, and her knees kept threatening to go out from under her. One of the outbuildings was a shed, dilapidated and clearly unused. It would have to do.

Just as she reached it, the back door of the cottage swung open, and Merit dived into the shed so as not to be seen, suppressing a grunt of pain. The dog trotted calmly after her.

The shed was empty, and it was clear no one had been inside it for a long time. Merit put her eye to a crack between two wooden boards to see a girl emerging from the cottage. She looked similar in age to Merit, not yet twenty, and freckle-cheeked, brown eyes sparkling with life under a russet bun that was threatening to escape its pins. Merit felt herself mesmerised by the way the girl's simple skirts swirled and swung about her ankles as she marched up to the white gate and out into the meadow.

A black cat followed her outside, jumping onto the gatepost to watch her go. The dog let out a little rumble of excitement at the sight of it.

'I won't be long,' the girl told the cat in a sweet, musical voice.

The cat turned to look straight at Merit, who shrank back from the crack in the wall. The scruffy dog made an indignant noise. She peered out again and watched the girl stride across the undulating meadow, surrounded by

lush green grasses that rippled in the sea breeze. Merit crept out of the shed to see better, the dog slinking after her, its eyes not straying from the cat on the gatepost.

As the girl approached the cliff's edge, dark clouds came rolling in, faster than Merit had ever seen before. Was this a normal thing to happen by the sea? The sunny, breezy afternoon turned sullen and oppressive, the wind shifting to a promise of rain and thunder.

The girl turned from the cliffs and raced back to the cottage, holding her skirts above her knees. Her bun had come completely loose by now, and she looked like a wild thing, galloping through the flowers, red hair streaming behind her, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

Merit ducked back into the low shed, the dog slipping in after her.

Through the crack in the wall, she saw the girl snatch up the linen from the bushes, then dash in through the front door of the cottage and out of sight, just as the heavens opened and the rain began thundering down.

The shed was small but dry, and there was a pile of ancient straw in one corner onto which Merit wearily collapsed. The dog turned around three times before curling up by her uninjured side, and the drumming of rain on the shingled roof lulled them both to sleep.

Merit woke to the loud honking of a goose, and grey morning light seeping in through the cracks in the shed. The wound in her gut felt hot and prickly, yet she couldn't stop shivering.

She heard the cottage door open and pressed an eye to the crack in the wall. It was the girl, her face still a little rumpled from sleep. She carried a bucket to a stone well in the garden and drew up a pail of water.

The black cat slipped out of the kitchen and followed her, winding silkily around her ankles with its tail in the air.

'Don't you have anything better to do?' the girl asked it as she went back inside. 'Surely there are mice to be caught.'

It turned its yellow eyes to the shed where Merit was hiding and flicked an ear. The dog stirred in its sleep, paws twitching.

Merit slumped back onto the straw and waited for the girl to come out again, which she did, crossing right by Merit's hiding place to feed the chickens.

There was something sweet and fragile about her. A hidden melancholy that never quite rose to the surface. Merit found herself fantasising about calling out. Talking to her. What was her name? What was she doing here, in this remote cottage by the sea?

Merit longed for those gentle eyes to turn on her.

To be seen.

It was just a fantasy, though. Merit knew that if she showed herself, the girl would see only a monster.

The girl came out again after a short while with armfuls of white linen, and Merit watched as she washed it all in a big copper tub, spun the water out, and then hung it out to dry on spiky bushes. She chatted occasionally to the cat, then spent some time in the garden, humming contentedly as she snipped and weeded.

A while later, a second figure appeared, an old lady in a stiff, very old-fashioned gown. The lady of the house, clearly. The girl must be her servant. The old woman only got as far as the gate before turning back. Merit thought she looked pinched and humourless, and she bristled as the woman dismissed the servant girl's timid attempt at conversation. She almost laughed out loud when a white goose burst from the bushes, hissing and honking aggressively at the old woman.

Served her right.

The girl went for a walk on her own in the afternoon, just as she had done the day before.

'I won't be long,' she told the cat as she left.

The dog turned piteous eyes on Merit and whined. 'We need food,' she agreed. 'And water.'

It did a little dance of expectation, shifting its weight from one paw to the other.

'Stay here,' Merit said. 'I mean it.'

The dog sank to the ground and laid its head on its paws.

Standing up made her head swim, but she steadied herself against the wall of the shed and then ducked out into the garden. She pressed her ear to the kitchen door, aware that the old woman was inside the house. Merit hoped she was too fancy to ever go near the kitchen.

It was a neat and bright room, if rather primitive. Merit didn't spend much time in kitchens, but the ones she saw in villages and the large mess kitchen in the Halls of Order had proper stoves and cool-boxes and gas lighting. This

one had an open hearth with hooks for hanging pots. A strange stone oven was built into the wall, with a thick, blackened wood door that looked as if it could be completely removed. Herbs hung in bunches from the low rafters, filling the air with a dry botanical scent that Merit found strangely calming.

She crept into the larder, past rows of little pots and jars containing what looked like more dried herbs, oils and pastes. She found a crock of milk and took a great greedy slurp. Then she helped herself to a heel of old bread and a hunk of white cheese. She noticed a ham bone wrapped in wax paper and took it for the dog. Then she slipped back outside and into her shed, noticing that the clouds were gathering once more, rolling in impossibly fast over the ocean.

The dog greeted her as if she had been away for hours, its tail wagging so furiously it wriggled all over.

'Get a hold of yourself,' Merit muttered to it, but she felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth.

The girl came sprinting back, gathering the linen from the hedges, leaving Merit with the peculiar sense that the day was repeating itself.

The dog was delighted with its bone, but Merit's food sat uneasily in her stomach. Her abdomen cramped and her brow grew damp with sweat. Waves of nausea grew stronger as the night drew on, and she barely made it outside in time to vomit.

Her sleep was troubled, and she slipped in and out of a memory that felt more like a dream.

She was six years old, and a preceptor sent her out to find a new recruit who had run away from his lessons. It wasn't uncommon – it took a while for recruits to settle in and forget their old lives.

She found him crouching by the riverbank, hidden from view by tall rushes. His dirty blond hair was tangled, and mud was smeared on his cheeks.

'I don't like it in there,' he said quietly.

Merit nodded. 'Sir Able is boring,' she agreed.

'Do you want to play with me?' the boy asked.

Merit hesitated. Acolytes didn't play. They trained. She glanced over her shoulder. She had found the new recruit pretty easily. Sir Able wouldn't be expecting them to return straightaway.

'Maybe just for a moment,' she said.

The boy had shaped the mud on the riverbank into towers and fortifications and had arranged two groups of river stones – white and dark grey.

'These are the good ones,' he told her, pointing to the white stones. 'The Bright Guard. They're the heroes. And over here are the monsters.'

He glanced sidelong at her, taking in her dark hair, pulled into its tight bun, and her black tunic and hose. He glanced down at his own muddy uniform.

'Are … are we monsters?' he asked, his voice small.

'No,' Merit lied.

The boy seemed to accept this and looked relieved.

'So what happens?' Merit asked, crouching down to examine the miniature battle.

'The Bright Guard battle the Unmaker and his legions of evil monsters,' the new recruit explained.

Merit frowned. 'I thought the Unmaker was good,' she said.

That was what she had been taught in Sir Able's lessons.

The boy snorted. 'With a name like "the Unmaker"? I don't think so.'

He had a point.

'The good ones don't have legions of evil monsters,' the child said, picking up a dark stone. 'See? This one has horns and fangs and claws.'

Merit frowned. It was just a stone. 'No, it doesn't.'

'You have to imagine the horns and fangs and claws.'

'Oh.'

Merit glanced over her shoulder again. Imagining wasn't encouraged in Crow Hall.

'This is the final battle,' the new recruit said. 'It decides the fate of the world.'

'Who wins?' Merit asked.

'Oh, the Bright Guard always win,' the child said.

'Why?'

'Because they're the good ones. Good always triumphs over evil. Don't you know that?'

Merit shook her head. 'That's just how stories work. The bad ones all die, the good ones win, and then there's a big party with flower garlands and spice cake.'

‘What’s spice cake?’ The new recruit stared at her flatly, as if he thought she was making fun of him.

‘Never mind,’ Merit said hastily. ‘So the white rocks win the battle?’

‘Not yet. First, the Bright Guard have to almost lose. They get overwhelmed by the evil monsters. The sky overhead grows dark, and all hope is lost.’

Merit leaned forward, entranced. ‘Then what happens?’

‘Then the Maid comes.’

The Maid. Merit had heard her mentioned in lessons. The preceptors made her sound like some kind of demon.

‘The Maid is the best of all of them,’ the new recruit said. ‘She is brave and strong and good. She has a magic stone that drives away the darkness, and all the monsters cower before her.’

The child handed Merit a white stone, smooth and glittering in the sunlight.

Merit stared at it. ‘What does the Maid do?’

The new recruit shrugged. ‘She saves the day.’

A voice called out nearby, and Merit stiffened, dropping the stone into the mud. ‘We have to go,’ she hissed, and yanked the boy to his feet.

The new recruit was punished severely for shirking his lessons. Merit found him later, hunched over on his bed, shaking with silent sobs.

‘Valiant,’ she whispered. ‘That’s your name, isn’t it? Valiant?’

The boy turned to look at her. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut.

‘Here.’ Merit checked to see no one was watching, then pulled a piece of hardtack from her pocket. She knew that reduced rations would be part of his punishment.

‘It isn’t spice cake,’ she said. ‘But … maybe you can imagine it is.’

The new recruit didn’t say anything, but his fingers closed around the hardtack. Merit turned to go.

‘My name isn’t Valiant,’ the boy said softly. ‘It’s Jude.’

Dawn came again, relentless and dull. The girl came out once more to draw water from the well, the cat following.

‘Don’t you have anything better to do?’ she remarked to it. ‘Surely there are mice to be caught.’

Hadn’t she said that the previous day? Or perhaps Merit had dreamed it.

Her stomach felt hollow, the sour taste of bile still at the back of her throat. Everything ached, and she moved restlessly on her straw pile, trying to get comfortable. Her tongue felt too big for her mouth, and she wished she had the strength to fetch some water from the well.

She dreamed of Valiant – his frightened eyes by the riverbank. Whispering to her in the dormitory at night. His warm hand, reaching out for hers.

The sickening wet sound of his sword in her gut.

She couldn’t blame him. She was the one who’d disobeyed orders. She was a coward, and cowards didn’t deserve to be Carrion Knights.

A low, ragged noise escaped from her lips, and she wished Valiant had stayed to finish her off. It would have been easier than this.

But maybe this was what she deserved. A slow, agonising death.

The dog laid its head on her arm, its chin in the crook of her elbow.

Outside, the girl washed the sheets. Spun the water out. Hung them up to dry on the spiky bushes. Picked herbs in the garden.

The old lady came out and was chased back inside by the goose.

Merit told herself she’d get up when the girl went on her walk. She’d get water from the well, and more food. Find something to clean and pack her wound with.

But when she woke from troubled dreams, the sheets were gone from the bushes, and the rain was already falling steadily.

The world grew smaller, until all that seemed to exist was the hot, pulsing pain in her gut. The sickly itch and pull of it. Shadows descended on her once again, and she felt a touch of ice on her hand. She flinched away, afraid it was the creature from the void.

But it was just the dog, its tongue soft and cool.

‘I’m sorry,’ Merit mumbled, and slipped into blackness.

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4
TANSY

Bay: Shelter will be given to those who wear a garland of leaves.

THERE WAS A DOG in the kitchen.

It had slipped in when she opened the back door to go to the well, a scruffy creature that was not quite brown and not quite grey. Its fur was matted and filthy, but its beady eyes were bright, its black nose quivering.

It smelled terrible.

'Shoo!' Tansy said to it experimentally.

The dog wagged its tail and looked meaningfully at the larder.

The cat sauntered in, expecting its usual dish of milk. Its gaze fell upon the dog, and it leaped onto the wooden bench, arching its back, its fur standing on end.

The dog seemed greatly intrigued by this development, surging forward in a blur of tangled fur and tail, standing up on its hind legs to sniff at the cat, pink tongue lolling out.

‘Control yourself,’ Tansy told it sternly. ‘You’re making a scene.’

The dog dropped obediently to all fours again and shot Tansy a reproachful look. Its eyes turned longingly back up to the cat, who glared down with undisguised contempt.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Tansy said to the dog. ‘If you get in a fight, the cat *will* win. Now sit down while I figure out what to do with you.’

The dog sat, politely.

Tansy considered it, hands on her hips.

She’d been out of sorts for the last few days. Her dreams were troubled, and she woke deep in the night, her heart pounding, feeling overwhelmed with a loneliness so acute it made it hard to breathe. In the mornings she felt cold, and struggled to warm up, no matter how much she stoked the fire. The house felt unsettled too. Its usual creaks and cracks seemed sharp and somehow off-key.

To make things worse, food was missing from the larder – a heel of old bread, a ham bone she’d been saving to make soup. There was milk splashed on the stone floor, and an unfamiliar, sour smell that reminded her of woodsmoke and rotting meat.

And now there was a dog. Where had it come from?

‘I think you’d better leave,’ she said to it. ‘We have no need of a dog.’

The dog’s tail thumped on the flagstones. It didn’t seem aggressive, or frightened of her. It wasn’t at all what she would have expected from a stray dog.

‘I’m not going to feed you,’ she told it firmly.

Perhaps it was the dog who had taken food from the pantry?

But how did it reach the high shelf? Surely a dog couldn’t climb the way a cat could. Not *this* dog, anyway.

Tansy hoped it would just go away on its own.

It was still there the next morning, waiting patiently in the kitchen.

‘Enough,’ she said at last. ‘You really do have to leave.’

She took up her broom and gently nudged it. She didn’t want to hurt the creature.

It scrambled backwards away from the broom and looked extremely offended, then trotted to the back door and scratched at it.

‘Yes,’ Tansy said with a sigh of relief. ‘That’s right.’

She opened the door and the dog went out into the yard, then stopped and stared at her, expectant.

‘Off you go,’ she said encouragingly.

The dog did a little dance of anticipation, shifting from one paw to the other as if waiting for her to do something.

‘Keep going,’ she urged. ‘And don’t come back.’

The dog let out a long, weary sigh, then trotted off down the garden path, not towards the gate, but down the side towards the orchard where the chickens scratched.

Could a dog that size attack a chicken?

Tansy followed the dog through the small orchard, still gripping the broom.

‘Don’t you dare,’ she warned it, picking up her pace.

But the dog ignored the chickens. Instead it veered right and disappeared into the old pigsty. They kept no pigs at the cottage, and so the shed was dilapidated, the door almost hanging off its hinges.

Was the dog living in there?

It couldn’t stay. She didn’t trust a dog around the chickens, and it would surely dig up her herb garden. The cat would never tolerate having it inside, and that wasn’t even taking Lady Aster into consideration.

The dog poked its nose out of the gap in the door and yapped, sharp and insistent. Tansy tilted her head, curious, and approached carefully. The scruffy creature backed into the dark shed, and she stuck her head in after it.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. Stale smoke and sour sweat and rot, strong enough to overpower the rubbish-bin odour of the dog. It made her eyes water, and she shrank back, gasping for fresh air.

Then she noticed the body.

It was lying on a pile of old straw in the corner of the shed.

Tansy’s heart nearly leaped out of her throat, and she bit back a scream.

A young woman. Dressed entirely in black, with a hard leather chest plate and leather bracers. A black iron sword lay on the dirt floor, beside an ugly helmet, spiked black iron wrapped around what appeared to be the front part of a human skull, leering and vacant.

Tansy shuddered.

The dog let out a whine and did its little shuffling dance again.

Tansy didn't move, her eyes not straying from the figure. At first she thought the girl was dead, but then she saw movement, the fluttering of eyelashes, the rise and fall of the stranger's chest.

A pink scar ran from the stranger's brow, over her right eye and down to her chin. She was clearly a soldier. A warrior. She was dangerous, and Tansy didn't want to be around when she woke up.

Tansy crept out of the shed and hurried back to the cottage.

Lady Aster was sitting up in bed, waiting for her.

'Ma'am—' Tansy broke off, unsure of how to go on.

'Where's my tea?' the old woman snapped. She looked small, surrounded by linen and pillows, her nightcap slightly askew. Wrinkles lay deep in her cheeks and under her eyes.

'Um …' Tansy wrung her hands. 'I'm sorry, ma'am, but—'

'Do not speak to me until I've had my tea.'

The words were like a spell, locking Tansy's jaw. She bobbed a curtsey and backed out of the room.

Tea. She had to make tea. Then she would tell Lady Aster about the stranger.

She splashed water into the black iron kettle and hung it over the stove. Lady Aster preferred milk in the morning, and lemon in the afternoon.

When the water was boiling, she warmed the pot, then sprinkled in two spoonfuls of tea-leaves from the black caddy. Lady Aster didn't like her tea over-steeped, but if it was too weak, Tansy would hear about it.

The cup and saucer rattled on the tray as she set it down before Lady Aster, milk splashing from the little jug.

'What is wrong with you, girl?' the old woman demanded with a scowl.

'Ma'am, I—'

Lady Aster held up a hand. 'Not today,' she said. 'I have a headache.'

Maybe the stranger would wake up and leave quietly.

Or maybe she would come inside and kill Tansy, and Lady Aster.

But if the stranger was intent on murder, surely she would have done it already. Then she could have taken her nap in a comfortable bed instead of in the pigsty.

And why *was* the stranger sleeping in the middle of the day?

Tansy frowned, remembering the foul smell in the shed. ‘Oh,’ she said softly to herself. ‘She’s hurt.’

It had been the smell of bad blood, of infection.

Tansy bit her lip. She knew about wounds. About what herbs could staunch bleeding or bring down a fever. Could fight the spreading rot.

She could help.

But the stranger didn’t look like the kind of person who should be helped. That armour, that skull helmet.

Tansy put the bread on to bake while she thought about it.

The dog was back, watching her every move. There was a soulfulness to its expression. An understanding. It seemed to be … pleading with her.

Surely if the stranger were *very* bad, they wouldn’t have inspired the loyalty of a dog?

Tansy didn’t really know about dogs.

But this seemed like a good sort of dog.

‘I’ll go and see,’ she told it. ‘I’m not making any promises. I’ll just … assess the situation.’

Up close, Tansy realised that the strange woman was about her own age.

This made her feel better somehow.

Her skin was pale, like marble, her pointed features made all the more severe by the pink scar. Her long, dark hair was sweat-soaked, knotted on top of her head and held in place with a scrap of leather.

A faint moan escaped the girl’s chapped lips.

Tansy crouched down beside her and laid a hand on the pale forehead, feeling a burning heat there.

The stranger’s eyes flickered open, and Tansy saw black irises swirling with tiny specks, like staring into the night sky.

The stranger grabbed Tansy’s wrist with a claw-like grip, and Tansy felt as though she were tumbling into the stars.

‘Brave … and strong … and good,’ the girl mumbled, voice slurred.

The dog did its little anticipatory shuffle again.

‘All right,’ Tansy told it. ‘I’ll help.’

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5
TANSY

Yarrow: Make a tea with elderflower and peppermint to break a fever.

SHE NEEDED TO inspect the wound.

‘I’m very sorry,’ she said to the stranger. ‘But I have to get your shirt off so I can see what we’re dealing with.’

She hesitated, hoping that the girl would respond in some way. But she seemed to have slipped back into unconsciousness.

Gingerly, Tansy undid the ties that fastened the stranger’s black leather breastplate. Then she took her pruning knife and cut away the black shift she

wore underneath, and a tight black wrap under that, revealing a slight, soft curve of breast.

Heat flooded Tansy's cheeks as her eyes slid over the smooth skin. She hastily drew the shredded edges of the shift together to protect the girl's modesty, then turned her attention to the wound in her gut.

It was deep and ugly, weeping a cloudy yellow fluid that had dried at the edges to a brownish crust. The flesh around it was swollen, with red streaks spreading out from the deep gouge, vibrant against the pale skin.

'Well,' Tansy told the girl, 'it's definitely infected. First step is to get it clean.'

She hurried back inside and put on the kettle to boil, then began to fill a basket with the supplies she'd need. Clean linen rags. Honey. Her sharpest scissors. Her embroidery needle and thread.

She spooned dried mistletoe, feverfew and marigold into a bowl and poured boiling water over it all, then left it to steep while she went out to the garden. She snipped chamomile, coneflowers and dandelions, then returned to the kitchen where she pounded them to a paste along with a clove of garlic.

Then she returned to the shed, and knelt by the stranger's side.

She was still unconscious.

The dog had curled up at her feet, head on its paws.

Tansy soaked a rag in the herbal tincture she had made and applied it to the wound, squeezing the liquid out and letting it run over the stranger's skin, where it immediately stained red with blood. The girl flinched and whimpered.

'Shh,' Tansy said in what she hoped was a soothing voice. 'I have to get it clean.'

She washed the wound carefully, wiping away blood and gunk so she could see it more clearly. The wet cloth glided across the stranger's pale skin, making it gleam like polished stone.

'Now comes the hard part,' Tansy murmured.

Using her sharpest knife, she cut away at the rotting flesh. The girl cried out the first time the knife bit into her, and Tansy felt sympathetic tears spring to her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'But if I don't do this, the infection will spread.'

The stranger's eyes were closed, but she seemed a little calmer when Tansy talked to her, so she explained each step of what she was doing.

‘I’ve cleaned the wound,’ she said. ‘And cut the rotten part away. Now I’m applying a poultice to stop the bleeding. Does it sting? That’s the garlic. Some people don’t like the smell, but it’s certainly better than what this place smelled like when I first came in here. Not that I’m blaming you, of course. I know you didn’t *mean* to come in here and stink up the old pigsty. And the dog is at least partially responsible. Right, now I’m sealing the wound with honey – that’ll keep it clean. Then I’ll stitch it up with a needle and thread.’

It was not quite the same as embroidering a handkerchief, but Tansy was pleased with the results. Her stitches were neat and even, and the wound looked significantly less angry.

‘I’m going to have to roll you over now,’ she told the stranger. ‘So I can wrap the bandage around your waist. I hope you don’t mind!’

The stranger was solidly built and let out a wheezing cry as Tansy struggled to move her.

The dog scrambled away and let out a little worried growl.

‘I know, I know,’ Tansy grunted. ‘But she’s rather heavy, and there’s no one here to help. It’s just me and old Lady Aster, and the cat. But of course the cat is of no use at all, because it’s a cat. Cats are never useful. And you’re not exactly helping either.’

She managed to slip the bandage under the girl’s back and settled her down once more, fastening the bandage. Tansy ran her needle and thread through the ruined black shift, tacking it together again to cover the girl’s bare breasts.

‘Hmm,’ she said critically. ‘I think we can find something a little less … blood-soaked.’

It was nothing like dressing Lady Aster in the morning. There was a strange intimacy to this, her hands on bare skin. The soft rise and fall of the stranger’s chest and the steady beating of her heart. Tansy found her mouth was dry, and the stream of chatter pouring from her suddenly ran out.

‘Th-there,’ she stammered. ‘All done.’

The dog resettled itself, and the girl’s long, dark eyelashes fluttered.

‘Valiant?’ she murmured. ‘Is that you?’

She groped for Tansy’s hand. Her skin was still hot from fever, fingers clutching desperately.

‘I’m here,’ Tansy said soothingly. ‘You’re going to be all right.’

The girl laced her fingers into Tansy's, and Tansy's heart stuttered at the sweet familiarity of the gesture.

'I'm scared,' the girl whimpered.

'I know,' Tansy said.

'Don't leave me.'

'I won't,' she promised. 'I'm right here.'

She could feel the raised edges of a scar on the stranger's palm and turned her hand over to inspect it. It was a brand. A sunburst. Tansy frowned.

You've seen that sign before, said the dry voice inside her head. *Do you remember?*

Her thoughts kept sliding away from her. Dizziness made her stomach lurch, and she shook her head to clear it.

'Who *are* you?' she whispered to the stranger.

The reek of something burning reached her nostrils, and she leaped to her feet.

'The bread!' she gasped, and ran back to the house.

She was late getting Lady Aster's dinner ready, and Lady Aster was sulky and mean as a result. She retired early to her bedchamber, and Tansy crept outside with a lantern to check on her patient.

The stranger was still sleeping, twitching and murmuring restlessly.

Tansy hung a small bundle of vetiver and hemlock from the doorway to keep the girl hidden from prying eyes. She had never kept a secret from Lady Aster before.

Had she?

The grassy scent of the hemlock stirred something deep within her, a faint memory of a stone in her hand, and the warmth of sunlight on her face as she ran a needle and thread through soft linen.

The next morning, Tansy woke with her head full of sawdust. She looked around, expecting to find the cat demanding its breakfast as always. But it was nowhere to be seen. Daylight was streaming in through her little window.

She'd overslept.

Tansy frowned. She *never* overslept. She glared up at the rafters.

‘Why didn’t you wake me?’ she asked the house, although she didn’t expect it to answer.

She must have been exhausted after all the drama with the dog and the girl.

The girl!

She scrambled into her day clothes, shoving her hair under its white cap as she raced down the stairs.

‘Please don’t be dead, please don’t be dead,’ she whispered as she flung open the back door and raced across the yard to the pigsty.

The dog lifted its head as she entered, its tail thumping on the dirt floor.

It was so hard to tell, with that pale skin. But then the stranger shifted a little, and Tansy let out a sigh of relief.

She sank to her knees and laid a hand on the girl’s brow.

It was cool to the touch. The fever had broken.

The girl opened her eyes, and Tansy felt her heart pound as she saw them again.

Her irises were darker than the midnight sky, scattered with tiny coloured flecks. Like galaxies, deep and strange and beautiful.

They stared at each other, and Tansy could tell the girl was really seeing her, for the first time, not through fever-crazed eyes.

The stranger moistened her lips with her tongue.

‘Here,’ Tansy said, helping the girl to raise her head and holding a cup of water to her mouth. The girl gulped thirstily, and Tansy had to remove the cup before she could finish.

‘Not too much,’ she warned. ‘You’ll make yourself sick.’

The ghost of a smile appeared on the stranger’s lips. It was like glimpsing the sun behind a thundercloud, the girl’s face transforming from something pointed and severe to something utterly beautiful.

It took Tansy’s breath away.

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6
MERIT

Juniper: Apply oil on exposed wounds to prevent infection.

HER NAME WAS Tansy, and Merit was drowning in her.

Her fresh scent of sweet salt and something green and peppery. Her small hands on Merit's skin. The way she hummed softly to herself as she worked.

Merit couldn't remember the last time she'd been touched, outside of combat.

The closeness of her was overwhelming. Tansy chattered away as she applied fresh poultices and changed bandages, and Merit couldn't say a word in response.

‘Nobody ever comes in here,’ Tansy said. ‘If it wasn’t for your dog, I never would have found you. How long have you been here? Was it you who took the bread from the larder? I’m assuming the dog had the ham bone. He seems like a good dog. Does he have a name?’

Her fingers brushed bare skin, and Merit shivered.

Tansy broke off, her hands trembling a little. Merit noticed her cheeks were flushed.

Tansy’s eyes strayed to the black sword in the corner.

‘I won’t hurt you,’ Merit reassured her.

Tansy rocked back on her heels, the ghost of a smile dancing over her face. ‘You could try,’ she said. ‘But I don’t think you’d have much luck. It’ll take a while for your strength to return.’

Merit didn’t know what to say in response to this.

‘Do you have a name?’ Tansy asked.

This, she could answer. ‘Sir Merit, of Crow Hall.’

‘That’s an impressive name, Sir Merit of Crow Hall.’

Merit couldn’t tell if Tansy was making fun of her or not. Her cheeks grew warm under Tansy’s gaze. ‘Just Merit is fine,’ she mumbled, remembering that she wasn’t *actually* of Crow Hall anymore.

‘And how did you end up in the pigsty?’

How could she answer this? She remembered the recruitment raid. The child clutching the tiny oyster knife. Sir Valiant’s sword, cold and hard in her gut. The ruined, waterlogged house. The door, and the darkness beyond. The dog’s matted fur in her fist.

‘I … I’m a knight,’ she explained, which wasn’t really an answer at all.

Something in Tansy’s face seemed to brighten at this. ‘You don’t *look* like a knight,’ she observed. ‘Or at least … not what I thought a knight looked like.’ She glanced over at the black sword again, and at the grinning skull helmet.

The warmth that had been building in Merit’s chest fizzled out. Tansy saw her as a monster, just like everyone did.

For a moment, she wished she could be someone else. Anyone.

‘Thank you for your help,’ she said abruptly.

She tried to sit up, but Tansy put out cool hands and gently pushed her back down.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ she cautioned. ‘You’re in no state to go anywhere. You nearly died.’

‘I’m fine,’ Merit responded through gritted teeth, although her head was swimming from pain and the distracting sensation of Tansy’s fingers on her skin.

‘You are anything but,’ Tansy responded. ‘Now stop being such a ninny.’

Nobody had ever called her a ninny before. Merit wasn’t sure she liked it. She glanced at the dog, who gave her a look that suggested that it, too, thought she was being a ninny.

‘But truly, where *did* you come from?’ Tansy asked. ‘We don’t get many visitors here.’

There didn’t seem to be an acceptable way of answering this question.

‘Um,’ Merit said. ‘I … I got lost. I found the dog, or perhaps it found me. I followed it here.’

She knew how foolish it sounded. But what else could she say? *I refused to steal a child, got stabbed by my best friend, followed a dog to a much, much creepier version of your house, got chased through a void by a hissing monster, then ended up here?*

A puzzled frown crinkled Tansy’s brow, but there was no revulsion in her gaze. Astonished, Merit realised this girl wasn’t afraid of her.

It had been a long time since anyone outside of the Halls had looked at her without terror, or disgust, or dread in their eyes. She felt something enormous rising inside, filling her chest and clawing its way out through her throat.

A sob.

‘Oh,’ Tansy said, leaning forward and putting her hand on Merit’s. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

The feeling of her cool fingers was too much. ‘It isn’t mine,’ Merit blurted out. ‘The helmet. Or the sword. Any of this. It’s a disguise. I … I took it from a Carrion Knight.’

‘A what?’

Merit blinked. ‘A Carrion Knight. A servant of Astaroth, the Unmaker.’

‘Who?’

They stared at each other.

How could Tansy not have heard of the Unmaker?

‘Where *is* this place?’ she asked. ‘Am I … in a different country? Is this Valla?’

Tansy frowned, uncertain. ‘This is the Oubliette.’

‘The what?’

‘The Oubliette. It’s where I live with Lady Aster. What’s an Unmaker?’

Merit glanced over at the leering skull helmet. She knew what people thought about the Unmaker. She heard them whispering in their houses. Shouting defiantly as their children were dragged away.

She licked her lips. ‘He … he was a dark lord, long ago. King Elior the Wise’s most trusted adviser. You’ve heard of King Elior, right?’

Tansy bit her lip. ‘Er …’

‘King Elior was the last king of Valla. The Unmaker destroyed him.’

‘How?’

‘Astaroth mastered the power of a great jewel. Anhelion, the stone of Unmaking. When he wielded it, entire armies just … vanished. The king was jealous of his power, and the Unmaker was forced to destroy him.’

It was a story Merit knew too well. As an acolyte in the Halls of Order, she had grown up listening to tales of the Unmaker’s might.

She remembered the fervour in Valiant’s eyes as he spoke of the Unmaker’s impending return. He longed for it.

Merit couldn’t think of anything more terrifying.

‘He made the king disappear?’

‘He *unmade* the king. Into nothing.’

‘Using his magic stone.’

‘Anhelion.’

‘Anhelion,’ Tansy repeated thoughtfully.

‘The Unmaker …’ Merit swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. ‘He used the stone to make an army of monsters, stitched together from the corpses of his enemies.’

Tansy tilted her head. ‘I thought all his enemies got *unmade*.’

Merit had to admire her boldness. If an acolyte had dared to ask such a question, the punishment would have been severe.

‘Not all of them,’ she said. ‘Some were slain the old-fashioned way.’

‘Hmm,’ Tansy said, looking unconvinced. ‘And you say he *sewed together* an army of dead people? Sounds like nonsense to me. Is that who you stole the helmet from? One of these reanimated corpses?’

‘No,’ Merit explained. ‘This all happened a very long time ago.’

‘How long?’

‘Five hundred years.’

‘Is this Unmaker still around?’ Tansy asked.

Merit shook her head. ‘He was defeated. But we – I mean, the Carrion Knights – believe that he will one day return and lead them to victory.’

‘Who defeated him?’ Tansy asked.

Merit had been raised to think of her as the greatest enemy of the Carrion Knights. When they trained against dummies stuffed with horsehair, her face was painted on them in rough daubs. Her name was the vilest curse imaginable.

But Merit couldn’t help thinking of that day, crouching on the muddy bank of a stream while Valiant explained to her about stories, about good and evil.

Brave and strong and good.

‘The Maid,’ she said.

Tansy snorted. ‘A *maid*? The Unmaker can’t have been *that* formidable.’

Merit felt herself clenching her fists, the bitter loyalty of her training rising to defend the Unmaker. ‘He was the greatest sorcerer this world has ever known.’

‘If you say so. How did she defeat him? With a wooden spoon? A feather duster?’

Tansy was laughing. At her. At the Unmaker. At the Carrion Knights. Merit didn’t know whether to be outraged or impressed. Tansy didn’t seem to be bluffing, though. She genuinely had never heard the story before. And that didn’t make sense at all.

‘Why aren’t you afraid of me?’ Merit asked suddenly.

Tansy let out a soft huff of laughter. ‘I’m sure you’re usually very intimidating,’ she said. ‘But right now, you’re as weak as a kitten. I could defeat you with a feather duster myself.’

She was probably right.

‘In any case,’ Tansy continued, ‘you’re not a Carrion Knight. You’re … a good knight. Right?’

‘Y-yes.’

Brave and strong and good.

‘Disguised as an evil knight.’

Merit cleared her throat. ‘I … I was on a mission.’

‘Doesn’t look like it went very well.’

She shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No, it didn’t.’

‘You said that Elior was the last king. Is there a queen now?’

Merit stared at her. ‘How do you not *know*?’

‘I … I don’t get out much,’ Tansy said, shifting uncomfortably.

Merit thought back to the waterlogged, ruined house. The stench of rot. The sprouting fungi. The glittering glass eyes of the discarded doll.

‘Valla is ruled by the Council of Stars in the Bright City,’ she told Tansy. ‘It has been ever since the Unmaker was defeated.’

She heard Valiant’s voice in her head.

A war is coming.

‘How long has it been?’ Merit asked, uneasiness creeping over her. ‘Since you came here?’

Tansy put a hand to her temple, as if trying to draw something out. Thunder rolled overhead, and it was as if a veil were being drawn over her face. Merit felt Tansy’s attention shift, away from the pigsty and back to the cottage. Merit felt suddenly cold, like the sunshine warmth of Tansy had been hidden behind a cloud.

‘I … I’d better go,’ Tansy said. ‘I need to get Lady Aster’s tea ready, and you need to rest. I’ll bring you some broth later. And something for your dog.’

Merit found she could think more clearly once Tansy was gone. Once her senses weren’t overwhelmed by her – her fresh green scent, her gentle touch on Merit’s skin, the shock of that clear-eyed gaze connecting with her own.

The problem wasn’t Tansy – Merit had watched her long enough to realise that this wasn’t just a simple matter of a faulty memory. There was something about this place. Something … wrong.

The dog laid its head on her ankle, and she slipped back into sleep.

‘What’s it like?’ Tansy asked the next day as she dabbed a strong-smelling herbal salve onto Merit’s wound.

‘What’s what like?’

‘The Bright City. That’s where you live, right?’

The salve was stinging the raw edges of the wound. Merit tried not to wince. She’d never been to the Bright City – any Carrion Knight who went within a mile of it would be slain on sight. But she had heard stories, and dreamed of it, sometimes. Of a place so different to the Halls of Order. Crow Hall was dark and dour, stark and utilitarian. There was no ornamentation, no soft furnishings or comfort. Windows were high slits, designed for

withstanding sieges, not presenting pleasant views of the surrounding landscape or letting sunshine stream in.

Tansy was watching her, waiting for an answer.

‘It … it’s very grand,’ she said slowly. ‘Everything is made of white stone and gold. There are … towers and spires that soar up into the sky, defying the very notion of gravity. There is a wide river with an arched bridge, and banners flying from every rampart.’

‘It sounds beautiful,’ Tansy murmured.

Merit felt a jolt of pure sunshine in her gut as Tansy smiled at her, and she turned her head away.

Tansy wouldn’t look at her like that once she learned who Merit truly was.

Tansy cleared her throat and busied herself with wrapping a fresh bandage around Merit’s waist, those slender arms encircling her. Merit held her breath, overwhelmed by the sensation.

‘I brought you something,’ Tansy said, fastening the bandage and rummaging in her basket. She pulled out a neatly folded garment. ‘A fresh shirt, since I cut your old one to shreds.’

It was white linen. Merit shook it out, and Tansy helped her pull it over her head, the fabric soft against her skin. Long sleeves fell to her wrists, and she noticed a ring of yellow flowers embroidered on the cuffs.

‘I used one of Lady Aster’s old nightgowns,’ Tansy explained. ‘Remade it into a shirt.’

Merit felt herself smile. A Carrion Knight, wearing a white shirt embroidered with daisies. Who would have believed it?

‘Um,’ she said, feeling suddenly emboldened. ‘You know this place isn’t … normal. Right?’

Tansy looked puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The house. It’s … wrong.’

‘It’s just a house,’ Tansy replied, packing supplies back into the basket.

‘Really?’ Merit said. ‘Where does the food come from?’

‘I cook it,’ Tansy replied, like this should have been obvious.

‘What about the ingredients?’

Tansy shook her head, confused. ‘I bake bread every morning,’ she said. ‘And I grow herbs and vegetables in the garden. There’s a small orchard for fruit.’

Merit pushed her further. ‘What about the milk?’ she asked. ‘Where did it come from?’

‘A cow, I hope.’

‘But how did it *get here*?’ Merit asked. ‘And the meat in the larder. The flour for the bread. The salt and sugar and cheese.’

Tansy stared at her for a long moment. ‘I … I …’ She faltered. ‘Someone delivers them.’

‘Who? How often? From where?’

Merit could hear how harsh her voice was. Too harsh, perhaps, but she had to make Tansy *understand*. But perhaps she’d pushed too far. Tansy got to her feet, a frown creasing her brow. ‘I have to get on with Lady Aster’s tea,’ she said, snatching up her basket.

‘Wait,’ Merit said. She felt untethered and reckless. ‘Just *concentrate*.’

‘I *can’t*.’ Tansy’s eyes were brimming with tears, and Merit immediately felt wretched for upsetting her. She could see that the girl’s attention had shifted again, as if something was pulling her back to the house. Something beyond her control.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything.’

Tansy’s hand shot out and gripped Merit’s wrist. ‘Keep trying,’ she said in a low, urgent voice. ‘I … I need …’ She shook her head, then took a deep breath. ‘Lady Aster’s tea.’

She fled, leaving Merit with more questions than ever.

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7
MERIT

Buttercup: Place freshly picked flowers on a windowsill to bring back memories of childhood.

AFTER THREE DAYS of broth and poultices, Tansy declared Merit well enough to leave the pigsty. She arrived with her wicker basket over one arm, the contents covered with a linen cloth.

‘We’re going on a picnic,’ she said firmly. ‘You need some fresh air.’

The dog sniffed the basket, then sat right at Tansy’s feet and stared at her with soulful eyes.

She laughed. ‘Yes, there’s something in there for you.’

The thought of returning to the world outside the pigsty filled Merit with equal parts longing and fear. After all, where would she go once she left this place?

She stood carefully, wincing as the healing wound in her side pulled a little. The dog let out a small whine.

'Are you all right?' Tansy hovered by her side, one hand poised as if ready to catch her if she swooned.

Merit gritted her teeth and nodded. 'I'm fine.'

They stepped out into the garden, and Merit squinted against the blinding light of the day. The little cottage was wreathed in golden sunlight, the endless blue sky swooping overhead, dotted with fluffy white clouds. The dog followed them.

The goose poked its head out of its blueberry bush and hissed at them but didn't approach.

Merit glanced up at the windows on the first floor. 'What if the old lady sees me?'

'She won't,' Tansy assured her. 'She always takes a nap in the afternoon.'

She offered Merit her elbow and, hesitantly, Merit took it, marvelling at her physical ease. Merit towered over her – she could have crushed Tansy with her bare hands – and yet the other girl didn't flinch away.

They slipped out the white wooden gate and began to walk through the meadow. Merit glanced back over her shoulder at the little cottage, so similar to the grim ruin she'd encountered in the forest, and yet so different.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

She turned away from it, breathing in the salty sea air and turning her face up to the sun.

It felt good.

The dog bounded off, chasing butterflies and letting out happy yaps.

'You should give him a name,' Tansy said.

'Why me?'

'He's your dog.'

'No, he isn't.' Merit hadn't even known the dog was a *he*.

'He hasn't left your side since you arrived. He's the one who brought you here. He fetched me to come and heal you. He's your dog.'

Merit watched the scruffy grey thing, leaping and twisting in the air, jaws snapping. He glanced over his shoulder at her as if to check she was okay, tail wagging and tongue lolling out.

Carrion Knights didn't have pets.

You're not a Carrion Knight anymore.

'I don't know how to name a dog,' she said helplessly.

Merit thought of the smoke rising from the village. How could she possibly care for an innocent creature when all she had ever known was death and destruction?

'Just say the first name that comes into your head.'

Merit's head was completely empty. 'Does the cat have a name?' she asked, stalling for time.

Tansy shrugged. 'Probably,' she said. 'But I don't know what it is.'

'The dog probably has a name too.'

'But the cat doesn't belong to me. She's her own creature.'

It was too much responsibility. How could Merit choose a name, from all the millions of possible options out there?

A soft, warm breeze ruffled the wild grasses, making the flowers bob gently. 'Tell me *their* names,' Merit said. 'The flowers.'

Tansy's expression softened as she pointed out different blooms. 'Teasel,' she said. 'Sea holly. Maiden's tears. Thrift. Cow parsley.'

'Who taught you?' Merit asked. 'About plants?'

Tansy looked thoughtful. 'I feel like I've always known. Like they're a part of me.'

'How long have you been here?' Merit had asked before, but had not got a proper answer.

'I'm not really sure,' Tansy confessed. 'A very long time, I think.'

Her voice wobbled, and Merit hastened to distract her.

'Wh-what if we named the dog after one of these flowers?' she suggested timidly. 'He certainly appears to be enjoying them.'

Tansy's face broke into a smile, and Merit felt absurdly proud to have been the one who had caused it.

'What's this one?' She pointed to a cluster of small whitish-pinkish flowers.

'Squinancywort. You use it to cure the quinsy.'

'Well, that's settled, then,' Merit said, trying to keep a straight face. 'Squinancywort the dog.'

'You can't call him Squinancywort!' Tansy giggled. 'Imagine calling him in for dinner!'

Merit sighed and feigned disappointment. ‘Fine,’ she said, and pointed to another flower. ‘What’s this one?’

Tansy followed Merit’s gaze to some white daisyish blooms and shook her head. ‘They’re asters,’ she said. ‘And we already have Lady Aster.’

‘This one is pretty.’ Merit touched a finger to a dainty blue flower.

‘It’s my favourite,’ Tansy said. ‘Toadweed. It makes the most brilliant blue dye, but I can never find enough to make a proper batch. And I’ve tried to grow it in my garden, but the seeds never take root.’

Merit gazed down at the flower. ‘Maybe some things just need to be free in order to grow.’

Saying it out loud felt like the bravest thing she’d ever done.

‘Maybe,’ Tansy said. ‘But we can’t call the dog Toadweed.’

‘No,’ Merit agreed.

The dog came bounding back, its matted grey coat all tangled with fronds of bracken. Merit looked at Tansy, eyebrows raised in a silent question.

Tansy nodded firmly.

‘Bracken,’ they said together, and Merit felt like she could fly.

She bent down to ruffle the dog’s sun-warmed fur. Maybe naming things wasn’t so hard after all.

‘What do you think, Bracken?’ she said.

Bracken wagged his tail, then raced off again.

Merit turned her face up to the sun, gazing at the fluffy white clouds overhead. ‘There aren’t any birds,’ she observed.

‘There are chickens,’ Tansy replied. ‘And the goose.’

‘Wild birds, I mean. You’d think there would be gulls or something.’

Tansy raised her head and scanned the sky. ‘You’re right,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘There should be birds.’

‘No insects, either.’

Merit didn’t know much about gardening, but she knew that you needed bees to pollinate the flowers and worms to turn the earth.

Tansy was silent, her lower lip caught between her teeth. Merit didn’t press her any further, and they walked on in silence for a while, listening to the distant crashing of waves against the white cliffs.

‘How did she do it?’ Tansy asked at last. ‘The Maid. How did she defeat the Unmaker?’

Merit thought of the stories she’d been told as a child. How the Maid had betrayed the Unmaker, had turned her feminine wiles upon him, stolen his

power. How she had been too weak to control it. How Anhelion had destroyed them both.

How would a member of the Bright Guard tell the story?

‘She … she took up Anhelion, the stone of Unmaking,’ she said. ‘She was very … brave. She turned it upon the Unmaker, but he fought back. She ended up sacrificing herself in order to destroy him.’

‘They both died?’

Merit nodded. ‘Not a scrap of either of them was ever found.’

‘But the Carrion Knights believe the Unmaker will return.’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened to Anhelion?’

‘Nobody knows.’

Tansy looked up at her through thick lashes. Merit could see how curious she was.

I have to be honest with her.

The idea was terrifying. But Merit couldn’t keep lying to her. Not after all Tansy had done to save her.

She took a deep breath. ‘I’m not actually from the Bright City,’ she blurted. ‘I’m a Carrion Knight.’

Self-loathing flooded through her like sickly bile. Everything she had been. Everything she had done.

She had hurt people. Too many to count.

Her words hung in the air, and she wished she could take them back. But Tansy didn’t shrink away. She didn’t look at Merit with horror or disgust.

‘I know,’ she said simply.

‘You … you *know*?’

Tansy shrugged. ‘You’re not a very good liar.’

‘Aren’t you afraid of me?’ Merit asked. ‘I was telling the truth about the Carrion Knights. They take *children*. They’re cruel. Violent. Merciless.’

Tansy just smiled. ‘But *you* aren’t any of those things.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because you’re here. You left.’

Bitterness coiled inside her. ‘I’m a coward.’

Tansy stopped walking, grabbing her arm so Merit turned to face her. ‘I can’t imagine what it must be like, being stolen away from your family. Growing up in a place like that. But you *left*. Despite everything you’d ever been told, you *knew* that it was wrong. You knew that there was something

better out there for you. Leaving doesn't make you a coward. It makes you *brave*.'

Merit couldn't bear the fierceness in Tansy's gaze. She was so *sure*.

Yet so wrong.

She pulled away. 'You couldn't possibly understand.'

Tansy let out a little noise of frustration. 'Why, because I'm just a kitchen maid? Not a fancy knight like you?'

Merit shook her head. 'I'm not a fancy knight,' she retorted. 'I'm a *monster*. You should have just let me die.'

Tansy recoiled from her. 'What an awful thing to say. I *saved* you. And you're saying … what? That saving a life was a waste of my time?'

Her expression was intense, eyes blazing and lips pressed together. Her hands balled into fists, and she stamped the ground with her small foot. She was genuinely angry, and Merit had made it so.

'I … I don't want to upset you,' Merit said. 'Maybe I should leave.'

'Don't you *dare*.' Merit seemed to have made Tansy even angrier.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Tansy seemed to be trying to work something out, as if she were reading Merit's thoughts right out of her head. Merit wasn't sure whether she should turn around and walk away or not.

This kind of thing never happened in the Halls of Order.

There were rules to follow.

'I don't know what you want from me,' she said helplessly.

Tansy's eyes narrowed slightly; then the fury in her expression suddenly melted, and she burst out laughing.

Merit was taken aback. Was Tansy laughing *at* her? 'What's so funny?' she asked, folding her arms.

'You've never had a quarrel before, have you?' Tansy's eyes sparkled.

'A what?'

'A quarrel. A tiff. A minor argument.'

Merit shook her head. 'I don't understand.'

Was this why friendship had been forbidden in the Halls?

Was it always so confusing? How did anyone *manage*?

'What do you do when you're with your fellow knights?' Tansy asked. 'If one of you wants to do something and the other doesn't?'

'I … I don't know. We don't … *want* things. There are rules. And if you break the rules …'

She put a hand to her side, wincing. Tansy nodded, as if she understood. Except she could never. Not really.

‘If you break the rules, you get punished, right?’ Tansy said. ‘Or worse. That’s no way to live.’

It was the only way to live. There was no other choice.

‘Who do *you* quarrel with?’ Merit asked. ‘The old lady?’

‘Goodness, no,’ Tansy said. ‘I wouldn’t dare.’

‘Then who?’

‘The cat, mostly. Except she isn’t very good at it. I’d give anything for a good quarrel.’

‘Why? Why do you want to fight with someone?’

Tansy shrugged, her mouth curving in a smile that seemed slightly wicked. ‘It’s fun,’ she explained. ‘The back-and-forth. There’s a rhythm to it. And it’s only a quarrel, so you know it doesn’t *really* matter.’

‘Who did you quarrel with, before you came here?’

Tansy’s expression clouded. ‘I … I’m not sure …’ She glanced back at the cottage.

Merit hastened to distract her, to keep her attention. ‘I don’t know how to have fun,’ she admitted.

She expected Tansy to laugh, but instead she just gazed at Merit thoughtfully.

‘Maybe I can teach you,’ she suggested.

Merit grinned despite herself. It was hard to feel despair out here, knee-deep in buttercups with this fascinating girl.

Tansy unrolled the blanket and spread it on the grass before them.

‘First lesson,’ she said. ‘Picnics. Picnics are fun. Sit.’

Her tone was officious, and Merit sat obediently. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was to follow an order.

Tansy unpacked the contents of the basket. Freshly baked bread. A pat of butter and a little crock of something dark and sticky. Plump berries. Sliced ham.

Merit’s mouth began to water. All she’d had since arriving at the cottage was that heel of bread, some milk, and Tansy’s medicinal broth.

Bracken reappeared from the grass and sat, his gaze fixed firmly on the basket. Tansy solemnly presented him with a chicken leg. He took it from her, gently and politely, then bounded back into the flowers to enjoy his lunch.

The sun shone down on them. Flowers danced in the breeze.

‘What else happens on a picnic?’ Merit asked.

Tansy shrugged. ‘Whatever you want. What do you want to do, Sir Merit?’

Merit opened her mouth to reply, but no words emerged.

What *did* she want to do?

It was a question she’d never asked herself before. It seemed too big to answer.

‘We could play a game,’ Tansy suggested. ‘Like … hide-and-seek, or graces. Or we could just talk.’

‘Or quarrel?’ Merit suggested.

Tansy laughed. It was such a carefree sound. Merit couldn’t imagine being so relaxed.

‘That can be the second lesson, if you like,’ Tansy said. ‘Do you want to learn to quarrel?’

Merit bit her lip. She didn’t know how to want things. ‘I … suppose so?’

‘Very well. Sometimes, we might have a disagreement over something. It could be a really big thing, or even something small and silly, like …’ She looked around and picked up a bowl. ‘Whether blueberries taste better than raspberries.’

Merit stared at her. ‘Why would anyone argue over something so unimportant?’

‘For fun! People enjoy sparring. Surely you knights know about sparring?’

Merit nodded. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I know about sparring.’

‘Well, you can spar with words, too.’

You were always weak.

Tansy held out the bowl. ‘Which are better, blueberries or raspberries?’

‘I don’t know,’ Merit said. ‘I’ve never eaten a blueberry *or* a raspberry.’

Tansy’s jaw dropped. ‘You’re joking.’

Merit shook her head.

‘What do they feed you, then? At Carrion Knight School?’

‘The Halls of Order,’ she corrected. ‘And they feed us rations. Usually hardtack or gruel.’

Tansy shook her head disapprovingly, then took a berry, fat and dark indigo, and held it out to Merit. ‘Blueberry first,’ she instructed.

Merit took it, the tips of her fingers meeting Tansy's and sending an electric current through her.

'Why is it called a blueberry?' she asked. 'It isn't blue at all. More of a dark purple.'

'Darkpurpleberry doesn't exactly roll off the tongue.'

Merit put the berry into her mouth and bit down. It broke open with a satisfying pop, flooding her mouth with sweet juice.

It was *delightful*.

She chewed slowly, enjoying the flavour and texture. 'It's amazing,' she said at last. 'I love how the skin is a bit sour.'

'Right? They're also very good when baked into a pie.'

She selected a raspberry from the bowl, plump scarlet, and held it out. This time, instead of taking it from her, Merit let Tansy hold it up to her mouth, swallowing nervously as she bent closer. Tansy's fingers brushed Merit's lips, and something went through her, like a spear made of pure sunshine.

She bit into the raspberry.

Sweet and tart flooded her tastebuds. She tasted flowers and spring rain and serene wooded glades. Her eyes grew wide, and Tansy burst out laughing.

'You like it,' she said, delighted.

Merit shook her head. '*Like?* No. I don't *like* it. *Like* is far too … small a word to describe this.'

She closed her eyes and chewed, savouring every morsel.

'May I have another one?' she asked.

'Not yet,' Tansy said. 'We're going to practise quarrelling first.'

Merit shook her head, feeling a smile spread across her face. The raspberry flavour still danced on her tongue. She saw a grey tail waving above the grasses as Bracken explored.

She felt … happy? It was an unfamiliar sensation, and she didn't want to let it go.

'I don't think I can do it,' she said. 'I don't want to quarrel with you. Not on a day like today.'

'Blueberries are better than raspberries.' Tansy said it so calmly.

Merit couldn't help herself. 'Well, now, come *on*.'

'They are.'

Merit spluttered. 'Obviously you're completely wrong.'

Tansy grinned at her. ‘Tell me why I’m completely wrong.’

‘Because blueberries are nice, but raspberries are *life-changing*.’

‘Blueberries are hardier. More versatile. They’re easier to grow.’

‘Irrelevant.’

‘Raspberry bushes have thorns.’

‘One raspberry is worth a thousand prickles.’

Tansy clapped her hands together, laughing. ‘That’s it! That’s quarrelling. You’re doing a great job.’

Merit didn’t feel angry, or aggressive. There was a kind of tension in the air, a crackling energy. She found she couldn’t look away from Tansy’s bright eyes, from the flush that was spreading under her freckles.

Merit wished she could stay in this moment forever. To never return to barked orders and blood-soaked raids and the wide, frightened eyes of strangers.

‘How does it end?’ she asked. ‘We don’t agree, so what happens?’

Tansy shrugged. ‘Maybe we find something we *do* agree on,’ she said, and held up a blackberry.

Merit had seen blackberries before, of course, in the forests around Crow Hall. But those blackberries had been small, sour things that acolytes used to lure birds or rabbits into traps. This berry was fat and juicy, with a dark, sweet flavour. The seeds were larger than in the raspberry and got stuck in Merit’s teeth. ‘It’s good,’ she said, chewing thoughtfully. ‘But not as good as the raspberry or the blueberry.’

‘I agree.’ Tansy nodded. ‘You see? That’s how we end a quarrel. We find some common ground.’

‘What if we can’t?’

‘Then … we find something else to talk about.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

It seemed so simple.

‘So what happens now?’ Merit asked.

Tansy grinned. ‘Now I introduce you to the concept of *jam*.’

‘Do you remember anything?’ Tansy asked after they had finished their meal and were stretched out in the sunshine. ‘From before you became a Carrion

Knight? Your real family?'

Merit shook her head. 'As acolytes, we're told that the Unmaker made us. That he took the bodies of great fallen warriors from the battlefield and bound them together to make the knights.'

'You said that before,' Tansy replied. 'But obviously that's just a story. You all know where the new recruits really come from.'

If someone in the Halls of Order had said this, they would have been thoroughly beaten. Sentenced to solitary for a month. Possibly even executed. There were many rules in the Halls, but the first among them was that the Unmaker's name was sacred.

'I don't want to seem indelicate,' Tansy continued, a flush of colour spreading over her cheeks again. 'But I've seen you without a shirt on. You are quite obviously *not* some ghoul stitched together from bits of—' Her eyes widened. 'Oh, I see, that's why you call yourselves Carrion Knights. Very clever. It's not *true*, though. You're as alive as I am.'

She laid two fingers on Merit's wrist to feel her pulse, and Merit wondered if Tansy could feel it speed up at her touch.

'Of course we all know,' she said slowly. 'But … it's complicated. When you get told something often enough … eventually you just start to believe it.'

'So who raised you?' Tansy asked.

'The preceptors,' Merit said. 'They instruct the acolytes.'

'Were they kind?' Tansy asked. 'Did they love you?'

Merit shook her head. 'Of course not.'

Tansy plucked a pale pink flower and twirled it between her fingers, her expression clouded.

'I know we seem like monsters,' Merit said quietly. 'To everyone from outside.'

Tansy shook her head. 'I … I wasn't thinking that at all. I was thinking that your Halls of Order sound like a very lonely place to grow up.'

'No,' said Merit. 'Not lonely. In fact, you're never alone. Not ever.'

'You can be lonely when you're not alone,' Tansy said, and there was a sadness to her tone that made Merit's heart ache.

She thought of lying awake at night in the dormitory in Crow Hall. Of sitting in the mess hall after a raid, while her brothers and sisters celebrated around her.

'That's … true,' she agreed.

‘Did you have friends there?’ Tansy asked. ‘In your hall?’

‘I had brothers and sisters,’ Merit said. ‘Not friends.’

‘What about Valiant?’

The name sent a current of ice through Merit’s veins, and the wound in her gut throbbed.

‘You said their name,’ Tansy explained. ‘When you were sick. You called out for them. I thought … they were someone special to you.’

Merit closed her eyes for a moment. She had thought that too.

‘We were close as acolytes,’ she said slowly. ‘But there are no friends in the Halls of Order. We are bound by our duty to the Unmaker.’

‘What happened?’

‘When the preceptors saw that Valiant and I had a connection, they moved him to Wolf Hall. I didn’t see him again until …’

You were always weak.

‘Until what?’ Tansy asked.

Merit didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she put a hand to the wound in her side. ‘Until he did this.’

‘Your best friend stabbed you?’

‘I told you, he’s not my friend. I don’t have friends.’

Tansy hesitated, then offered Merit the pink flower. ‘You have me,’ she said shyly.

Bracken appeared again, wagging his tail, tongue lolling out of his mouth.

‘And Bracken,’ Tansy added.

Merit took the flower, looking down at it and frowning furiously to stop herself from crying.

‘What about you?’ she said thickly, desperate to change the subject. ‘Do you really not remember anything about your childhood?’

Tansy bit her lip. ‘Sometimes I tell myself stories,’ she admitted. ‘About my family. But I don’t actually remember them. I don’t remember coming here, or how long ago it was. The only thing I know for certain …’

‘What?’ Merit asked, leaning forward. ‘What do you know?’

Tansy hesitated. ‘Lady Aster. I know I have to take care of her. I think … I think she’s important, somehow. Looking after her … it’s my duty.’

Guilt flooded Merit, dark and ugly as poison. She had abandoned her duty. She’d been too much of a coward to follow orders. Too much of a coward to question them.

Tansy's eyes were on her, and Merit wanted to shrink away from that clear-eyed gaze.

'I don't know what to do next,' Merit admitted. 'When I walked away from that village, I didn't really expect to live.'

Tansy tipped her head to the side as she considered Merit. 'What do you want?' she asked at last.

She had asked the question earlier, and Merit still didn't know how to answer it. Carrion Knights didn't *want*. She shook her head helplessly.

'Let's try it another way,' Tansy suggested gently. 'Imagine there's a character in a story. Not you, but perhaps someone like you. Someone *good*, but who has been brought up by … by an evil witch. Forced to do terrible things. How does her story end?'

Merit remembered Valiant, crouching by the riverbank, the white stone in his fist.

Good always triumphs over evil. Don't you know that? That's just how stories work.

'Um,' she said. 'She defeats the evil witch?'

Brave and strong and good.

Tansy smiled. 'That sounds like a good ending.'

But Merit couldn't defeat anyone. She was no hero. She was nobody.

So was the Maid, a voice inside her said. *But she did it anyway.*

Merit remembered Valiant's words in the little hut. The blood moon and the salt-rain. The augurs had declared that a great battle would call the Unmaker back.

'There's going to be an attack on the Bright City,' Merit said. 'Soon, I think. And there's … a prophecy. That the Unmaker will return.'

Tansy gazed at her, long and intense. 'Somebody needs to warn them,' she said.

'M-me?' Merit asked.

Tansy nodded. 'You could save lives.'

Save lives. Instead of steal them. The idea lit a candle inside Merit, burning away the hollow darkness of despair. Was it really possible? Could she do some good in the world, something that might balance out some of the harm?

She had a vision of herself, clad in gold and silver armour, a cream-coloured cloak billowing from her shoulders.

A hero.

She stared at Tansy in wonder. The girl had just changed Merit's entire life with only a few words. It was the greatest gift she'd ever been given.

'You're right,' she said. 'I have to go to the Bright City and warn them.'

Maybe they would reward her. Maybe they would invite her to join the Bright Guard and be a true hero.

The storm clouds were starting to roll in, just as they did every day. Tansy glanced over her shoulder.

'We should go back,' she said, seeming suddenly disoriented.

Merit felt Tansy's attention snap back to the house. To Lady Aster. There was something unnatural about the way it happened. Like Tansy became an entirely different person.

'When was the last time you left this place?' Merit asked, trying to keep her voice gentle.

'Every day,' Tansy said as she loaded picnic things back into the basket. 'I go for a walk—'

'No,' Merit interrupted. 'I mean *really* leave. Do you ever go to a village market? Have a day off?'

The little crease in Tansy's forehead deepened, and Merit saw her struggling with tangled, long-buried memories. Tears welled in her eyes, and Merit suddenly knew she would do anything to stop them from falling.

'Never mind,' she said. 'Forget I said anything. Here, let me help you pack up.'

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8
TANSY

Clover: Crush and apply to the temples to help face something you've been avoiding.

FIVE DAYS PASSED. Tansy was very satisfied with Merit's healing progress. The wound had closed up, and Tansy was confident it would heal completely.

Something had changed in the knight since that first picnic. There was a kind of wonder in her eyes, a curiousness about the world that hadn't been there before. And a restlessness to leave the Oubliette and begin her new life as a hero.

‘The attack has to be coming soon,’ she said when Tansy appeared with her wicker basket. ‘I can’t stay any longer.’

‘Not today,’ Tansy pleaded. ‘Tomorrow. Let’s have one last picnic today.’

Merit nodded and smiled. ‘One last picnic.’

The sun shone overhead, and Merit seemed cheerful, almost carefree. She had been so guarded at first, so wary of sharing anything about her life, as if she was afraid that Tansy would turn away from her in disgust.

Today, as they started out across the undulating grassy meadow, everything felt easy.

Tansy snuck a look at Merit. The knight seemed relaxed. Happy, even. She met Tansy’s eyes and responded with a grin.

A *grin*.

A few days ago, Tansy would have believed Merit incapable of grinning. It transformed her face into something so beautiful and radiant that Tansy couldn’t look away.

What would she do when Merit left? How could she bear being alone again?

‘Look,’ Merit said, pointing. ‘There *are* birds.’

A flock of gulls was winging through the sky, heading for the sea. Tansy felt a thrill of exhilaration at the thought of that kind of freedom.

They spread the picnic blanket in the flowers and basked in the sunshine. Merit enthused at length about raspberries, and Tansy introduced her to apple turnovers and roast chestnuts. Bracken had an entire pork pie to himself and was utterly delighted.

Towering white clouds sailed past, and Tansy pointed up to them. ‘What do they make you think of?’ she asked.

‘Castles,’ Merit replied promptly.

‘Me too!’ Tansy cried, and joy warmed her heart. ‘Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to explore one.’

‘Very soft, I imagine. Who do you think lives up there?’

‘Cloud people,’ Tansy said dreamily. ‘They’re sort of translucent, like they’re made of raindrops. With wispy cloud hair.’

‘And their clothes are made of rainbows.’

‘Yes!’ Tansy gasped. ‘They sail on cloud ships from castle to castle.’

Merit took another bite of apple turnover. ‘This is delicious,’ she said. ‘But I’d love to taste a cloud-cake.’

Tansy could imagine it dissolving on her tongue, sweet and light and airy. Her heart was singing, and for a moment, she forgot that Merit was leaving.

‘I look at those clouds so often,’ she told Merit. ‘And imagine things about them. But I didn’t realise how much more fun it is with someone else.’

There was a warmth in the knight’s eyes. An understanding. Tansy felt like Merit truly saw her, in a way she’d never been seen before.

The cat woke her up the next morning, batting an insistent paw against her cheek.

For a moment, it was just an ordinary morning. Grey light filtered in through the little attic window. The day stretched ahead, soothing in its mundanity.

Boil water. Warm the pot.

Milk in the morning, lemon in the afternoon.

But today was different.

Today, Merit was leaving.

Tansy found her in the wildflower meadow, running drills with her black sword.

She watched, entranced as Merit moved the blade in a series of controlled movements, thrusting and lunging. She was surprisingly light on her feet, and the whole sequence was graceful, almost like a dance. But Tansy could see the power behind each slash and swing. She did not doubt that Merit was an experienced warrior. If all the Carrion Knights were as strong as her, then they must be a dangerous force indeed.

Bracken appeared, chasing a butterfly through the long grass. Tansy blinked. Were there usually butterflies in the meadow?

There must be. Butterflies loved flowers. She just hadn’t noticed them before.

‘Careful,’ she called to Merit. ‘You don’t want to pull your stitches.’

‘I need to build my strength back up,’ Merit replied as she ducked an invisible blow and spun out of the way.

Tansy swallowed down a lump in her throat.

Don't be ridiculous, the dry voice inside her head said. *You've barely known her a week.*

But it felt like longer.

'I think I'm ready,' Merit said, and Tansy felt a tightness in her chest, a thread pulled so taut she was afraid it might snap at any moment. She turned abruptly and began to march back towards the house.

'Where are you going?' Merit called.

Tansy stopped. There was nowhere to go. 'To … to feed the chickens,' she replied, feeling utterly defeated.

'May I come with you?'

Tansy shoved her misery away and smiled over her shoulder at Merit. 'Of course.'

Merit was delighted by the chickens and the way they came running over when Tansy appeared with the scrap bucket. So was Bracken, who galloped around the yard letting out joyful yaps as the birds scattered before him. Tansy cast an uneasy eye up to the windows of the cottage. She hoped Lady Aster wouldn't be disturbed by the commotion.

'Don't they have chickens where you come from?'

Merit shrugged. 'Sure,' she said. 'But I never got to spend time with them.'

Tansy poured seeds into Merit's hand and stood back as the knight crouched in the dirt and let the hens peck at her outstretched palm. She grinned up at Tansy, the sharp corners of her face softening. Tansy couldn't help but grin back, even though she felt like crying.

The goose decided to grace them with its presence, parading around the chickens with its head held high.

'It thinks it's a rooster,' Tansy explained, and Merit laughed.

Tansy marvelled at how the knight's severe face lit up when she smiled. Even the jagged scar seemed to fade.

'I don't know where I'm going to end up,' Merit said, half to herself. 'But I hope wherever it is, there are chickens.'

Tansy watched silently as the knight picked up her black sword. The skull helmet was staying behind in the pigsty. Tansy handed Merit a satchel containing a loaf of bread, some raspberry jam and a waterskin.

'And there's a jar of ointment in there for your wound,' she said. 'Make sure you apply it twice a day.'

‘Will you look after Bracken?’ Merit asked.

‘Are you sure you want to leave him here?’

Merit looked down at the little dog. ‘I’m sure,’ she said, though Tansy could see it had been a difficult decision.

‘I’ll spoil him rotten,’ Tansy said in a small but determined voice. ‘Bones and walks every day.’

She’d figure out a way to explain the little dog to Lady Aster.

Merit hesitated, as if she didn’t know how to say goodbye. ‘Will you walk with me for a bit?’ she said at last. ‘Across the meadow?’

‘Of course,’ Tansy said, too quickly.

They set out for the clifftop as the gulls wheeled overhead and bees hung lazily over bobbing flowers. Bracken raced ahead, bounding joyfully through the wild grasses.

‘You could come with me,’ Merit said suddenly, and there was a rawness to her voice – a vulnerability Tansy hadn’t heard before.

Tansy bit back her automatic refusal and allowed herself to play along, for a moment. It wasn’t a betrayal of Lady Aster if it was just pretending.

‘Where would we go?’ she asked.

She saw a shadow pass over Merit’s face, a twinge of doubt. ‘Anywhere,’ she said with false confidence. ‘We could see the world. Maybe not cloud castles, but real castles. We could find somewhere … somewhere to belong.’

Her gaze slid away from Tansy’s, and Tansy knew that Merit didn’t really believe this any more than she did. Was it that Merit couldn’t imagine belonging anywhere? Or was it that she couldn’t imagine belonging anywhere *together*?

They didn’t get far before dark clouds began to roll in. ‘Maybe we should turn back,’ Tansy said hopefully. ‘Wait until tomorrow for better weather.’

But Merit’s brow was creased. ‘This happens every day,’ she said. ‘Whenever you go for a walk.’

The rain began in earnest as they approached the edge of the cliff, and Bracken slunk close to Tansy’s ankles, his tail tucked firmly between his legs and his fur bedraggled.

Tansy’s stomach lurched as she looked down to the crashing waves and the dark, swirling sea.

‘Merit,’ she yelled over the roar of the rain. ‘Let’s go back.’

She felt like she was drowning. In secrets. In forbidden thoughts. Everything felt wrong, wrong, wrong.

Lightning forked through the sky as the air shook and rolled with thunder. Bracken let out a yelp, the whites of his eyes showing.

But Merit kept going, her face a grim mask of determination. Tansy glanced over her shoulder at the cottage, barely visible through the curtain of rain. Light glowed cheerfully in the windows, promising warmth and comfort.

Come back, it said. *Forget.*

The wind threatened to whisk her off the cliff and into the sea, but she gritted her teeth and followed Merit.

The rain fell harder and stronger, like tiny daggers plunging from the sky. The wind howled, battering the white cliffs.

Bracken's ears lay flat, the wet fur along his spine sticking up in a spiked ridge.

'Merit!' she called. She could barely make her out through the rain.

Tansy's skirts were sodden, her boots sliding in the thick mud. Wind whipped her hair into her face, and the rain turned to hail. She threw up her arms to protect herself.

'Make it stop,' she gasped.

And it did, as suddenly as it had begun. The clouds still churned, dark and ominous overhead, but Tansy could hear herself think again.

Merit was a few feet ahead, standing still, with hands reaching out to touch something Tansy couldn't see. 'There's … something,' she said, her voice low.

Tansy stepped forward and felt it too.

A barrier.

Something she couldn't see but could *feel*. It wasn't exactly solid, but it was … something. Not spongey or hard or wet. Just … something more than nothing.

Bracken nudged her, his nose wet on her ankle.

It was a kind of wall, like an invisible curtain. Beyond it, Tansy could see more meadow, more cliffs, more sea, stretching off into the distance. But she couldn't reach it.

'It feels like … glass,' Merit said.

Tansy shook her head. It didn't feel like glass at all. It was soft and familiar, like old linen. Like Lady Aster's bedsheets.

'Come on,' Merit said. 'Let's see how far it goes.'

They walked away from the cliff across the wildflower meadow, heading towards the blue mountains in the distance. Tansy kept one hand on the invisible fabric, feeling its smooth texture under her fingers.

‘Have you felt it before?’ Merit asked.

‘No,’ Tansy replied. ‘Or at least, not that I remember. I don’t think I’ve ever come this far before.’

‘You realise what this means, don’t you?’ Merit asked, and there was a fear in her eyes that Tansy had never seen before.

Tansy shook her head.

Merit’s expression was grim. ‘I can’t leave.’

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9
TANSY

Marigold: Sow seeds on a doorstep to resolve misunderstandings and see magical barriers.

MERIT'S DARK HAIR was wet from the rain, her galaxy eyes wild and desperate.

'There must be a way through,' she said, beating her fists against the barrier.

Tansy dug her fingers into the invisible fabric, picking and prodding at it. If she pushed it too far, it went taut, like stretched cloth. It almost felt like she could make a hole …

Bracken barked – a short, sharp warning – and Tansy let her hands drop.

‘Come on,’ she said to Merit. ‘Let’s go back.’

The knight turned to her, despair on her face. ‘Why aren’t you panicking?’

Why are you so horrified at the thought of being stuck here with me? Tansy wanted to reply.

Instead, she led the knight away from the strange barrier and back across the wildflower meadow. There was no rain this time, no storm. The cottage reeled her back in, like thread winding onto a bobbin. She could already smell its familiar lavender scent.

Why *wasn’t* she more concerned that they were trapped in the Oubliette?

Was it because a part of her had known all along?

Tansy felt tangled up inside. Duty and longing and fear, all pulling in different directions, creating a great ugly knot. She strode towards the cottage door. She wanted to do … *something*. To run as fast as she could. To break something. To scream at the vast dark swirl of the ocean.

But she couldn’t. The knot had her bound so tight, she couldn’t do anything at all.

The goose honked in welcome as they came back through the little white gate. Merit moved to return to the pigsty, but Tansy shook her head. Huddling wet and cold in a shed was *not* going to aid the knight’s recovery.

‘Come into the house for a bit and get warm by the fire,’ she said.

‘What about the old lady?’

‘She won’t come down for another hour or so.’

The house’s usual creaks and groans took on a curious tone as Merit stepped over the threshold. Tansy supposed it didn’t get many visitors.

Bracken followed them in through the back door and shook himself, spraying droplets all over the kitchen floor.

‘You’d better not do that on Lady Aster’s tapestry rug,’ Tansy warned him as she led Merit through the house.

The knight had seemed so graceful that morning in the meadow, black sword in hand. But in the Oubliette, she was large and awkward, stooping to fit under the low doorframes.

‘Try not to make too much noise,’ Tansy cautioned in a low voice.

Merit smiled as if Tansy had said something funny. ‘Carrion Knights are trained to move silently,’ she said. ‘We’re kind of known for it.’

‘Must be useful.’

‘Occasionally.’

Once in the sitting room, Bracken made a beeline for the fireplace, curling up on the hearthrug. He seemed to be half his usual size, his fur clinging wetly to his little shivering body.

Tansy drew two chairs close to the fire, then left Merit while she went to put the kettle on in the kitchen.

Her fingers trembled as she spooned black leaves into the teapot and added a pinch of orange rind for flavour.

Her entire world was turned upside down. The vague, undefined longing she had felt before Merit arrived had sharpened into something piercing.

A part of her wished that things could just go back to how they were before. But she knew that was impossible. There was no going back.

She should probably hate Merit. The knight was the cause of all this, after all. Before she arrived, Tansy hadn't *known* how much she was missing. How much she'd forgotten. She wasn't plagued with questions, with doubts, with ghosts of memories that taunted her every waking moment and stalked through her dreams.

Merit made her *feel* things. It was like everything around her was a lie, and Merit was the only thing that was truly real.

And now Merit was trapped here too.

What would they do? Merit couldn't stay in the pigsty forever.

Lady Aster was going to be so angry when she found out Tansy had been keeping secrets from her …

Merit was facing the fire when Tansy returned to the study, her back to Tansy. She'd taken the scrap of leather out of her hair and was working at the dark plait, her hair falling loose down her back in damp waves.

'It's so long,' Tansy said, unable to look away from the tumbling black masses.

'Cutting it is forbidden,' Merit explained. 'We must respect the Unmaker's creation.'

Are they allowed to cut their toenails? asked the dry voice in Tansy's head.

Merit tilted her head towards the fire and started to rake her fingers through her hair to get the tangles out.

'Let me get you a brush,' Tansy said, and dashed upstairs to her little attic room, careful to tread quietly as she passed the floor where Lady Aster was sleeping.

The cat was on her bed, a silent black puddle, its golden eyes gazing out the window towards the cliffs. Tansy had the oddest feeling that the cat had been watching her and Merit. That it had observed them encountering the strange invisible barrier that seemed to encircle the Oubliette.

‘I suppose you don’t mind being trapped here,’ she said to it. ‘Cats like to stay close to home.’

The cat ignored her.

Tansy returned to the study, noticing the strong smell of wet dog as she entered. She made a mental note to give Bracken a proper bath and a brush.

Merit looked completely different with her hair loose. Softer, somehow, her face framed by a flowing mane, the tips of her ears poking out through the dark waves.

‘May I?’ Tansy asked, holding out the brush.

Merit turned her eyes up to Tansy’s, and inside the swirling galaxy, Tansy could see she was frightened.

Of her?

Of this?

Merit’s head bobbed in the faintest nod, and Tansy swallowed, reaching out to smooth the dark softness of Merit’s hair, then drawing the brush gently through.

It was like silk and smelled faintly of woodsmoke and cloves.

Somehow this felt far more intimate than when she had seen Merit half naked, or when she had literally reached inside Merit’s body, clearing out the wound.

Silence hung between them, and Tansy thought she might burst if she didn’t break it.

‘You’ve really never cut it?’ she asked. ‘Not even when you were a child?’

‘Never.’

Tansy paused her brushing, her fingers lingering in Merit’s silky hair. She had a sudden urge to trace the line of Merit’s jaw. Her brow. The jagged scar that ran across her face.

The floorboards above her creaked, and she dropped her hands.

Guilt surged through her. What was she *doing*?

‘That’s Lady Aster,’ she said. ‘You’d better go. I’ll bring you some supper once she’s in bed and … and we can talk about what to do next.’

Tansy fried haddock fillets for supper, keeping one aside for Merit. For the first time, she wondered where they had come from. The fish seemed fresh, wrapped up in brown paper in the larder. Had it been there yesterday?

The cat emerged and watched with great interest as she filleted the fish.

‘Yes, you can have one of the heads,’ she told it. ‘But the other one is for Bracken.’

The cat flicked its tail in displeasure.

‘I bet you have all the answers,’ Tansy said to it. ‘Would you tell me, if you could talk?’

The cat licked a paw dismissively.

‘I didn’t think so.’

The cat gave her a flat look, then quite deliberately turned its back on her and began to groom itself.

‘Suit yourself,’ Tansy told it, picking up the supper tray.

‘I have to go back the way I came in,’ Merit said when Tansy appeared in the pigsty later that evening, a lamp in one hand and a plate in the other.

Tansy nodded. ‘I was thinking the same thing. You said you appeared in the house?’

‘Upstairs,’ Merit said through a mouthful of haddock.

‘You said that before.’ Tansy frowned. ‘But the only rooms upstairs are Lady Aster’s bedroom and an empty guestroom.’

‘Not on that floor. The next one up.’

Tansy blinked. ‘You mean the attic? That’s where my room is.’

Merit shook her head. ‘There’s a floor in between.’

‘No, there isn’t.’

Tansy would know. She spent every day going over the entire house with her feather duster. She scrubbed every floorboard. Merit must be mistaken.

‘Tomorrow,’ Merit said with a yawn, ‘I’ll show you the exact spot.’

The next morning, Tansy woke distracted and out of sorts. She burned the bread, scalded the back of her hand with steam from the kettle, and trod on

the cat’s tail.

Upstairs, the scent of lavender was stifling. She felt an urge to throw open the windows in Lady Aster’s room and breathe the fresh salty air. But she didn’t.

She helped the old lady out of bed and began the lengthy process of getting her dressed.

Yesterday, all she had wanted was for Merit to stay.

But today she felt trapped in the little house. Why hadn’t she ever tried to leave before? Why hadn’t she been more curious?

A framed sketch sat on Lady Aster’s dressing table. A proud-looking young woman, chin raised defiantly, skin gleaming and a roguish smile on her face.

‘Is that your daughter?’ Tansy pointed.

She had never asked before. It felt daring. Dangerous.

Lady Aster’s eyes slid over the portrait, her lips pinching slightly. But she said nothing.

She has forgotten too, the dry voice said.

Who *was* Lady Aster?

Tansy shivered and accidentally stabbed Lady Aster with a hairpin.

The old woman let out a grunt of pain. ‘What’s wrong with you today, girl?’ she snapped.

Tansy had nothing but questions. But when she opened her mouth, all that came out was, ‘Nothing, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.’

As soon as Lady Aster had gone upstairs for her nap, Tansy raced to the pigsty, only to find Merit still lounging in the straw with no boots on.

Bracken leaped to his feet, wagging his tail and doing his little dance of anticipation.

‘Another picnic?’ Merit asked, smiling up at her.

Tansy stared at her. There was no sign of the haunted, terrified Merit she’d seen last night.

‘No picnic,’ she said. ‘You were going to show me the place where you first appeared.’

Merit made a face. ‘It’s such a nice afternoon,’ she said. ‘What’s the rush?’

‘What’s the *rush*?’ Tansy replied, astonished. ‘I thought this is what you wanted.’

Merit blinked. ‘Are we quarrelling again?’

She’s forgetting, the dry voice informed her. *Like you and Lady Aster.*

The words washed over Tansy like icy water.

‘Tell me about Valiant,’ she said suddenly. ‘Did you play? Talk? Share secrets?’

Merit turned to Tansy, puzzled. ‘Valiant?’ she asked.

Tansy’s mouth was dry. ‘Valiant,’ she repeated. ‘Your friend, back in the Halls of Order. Don’t you remember?’

‘Valiant,’ Merit said again. ‘Yes, I remember.’

But Tansy could tell she didn’t, not really. The knight looked open and easy, without her usual awkwardness. Like she didn’t have a care in the world.

A selfish part of Tansy was glad that Merit was forgetting. Maybe then she’d stay forever. Perhaps Lady Aster would welcome her. Merit could chop firewood and help around the house. They would go for long walks among the wildflowers every day and talk and quarrel and imagine castles in the sky.

She remembered the smoothness of Merit’s pale skin as Tansy tended her wound.

The silken flow of her black hair.

Those eyes, deep and glorious and full of grief and wonder.

Merit had already been through so much. Perhaps letting her forget her past life would be a kindness. Perhaps she would be glad of a home here, with Tansy and Lady Aster.

What about the attack on the Bright City? the dry voice asked. *Doesn’t she deserve a chance to make things right?*

For the first time in Merit’s life, she was free to decide what she wanted. Tansy couldn’t let the Oubliette take that away from her.

‘Come upstairs,’ she said, her tone more gentle. ‘Please.’

Merit smiled softly at her. ‘If it makes you happy.’

Tansy gave Bracken a bone and told him to wait in the kitchen, then led Merit up the central staircase to the first floor, pointing to a white door.

‘*Lady Aster’s room*,’ she mouthed, and Merit nodded, then looked back at the staircase, frowning.

She climbed up the ladder to Tansy’s attic bedroom, looking around at her little straw mattress and few meagre belongings. Then back down again, bafflement written all over her face. Tansy followed the knight down the stairs to the ground floor.

‘I’m sure there were more stairs before,’ Merit said, shaking her head. ‘And a long passage of doors …’

‘You’re confused,’ Tansy said soothingly. ‘Come on, I’ll make us some tea.’

‘What’s in there?’ Merit asked as they passed the first collection room.

‘Lady Aster’s doll collection,’ Tansy replied with a grimace.

‘You don’t like dolls?’

Tansy shook her head. ‘They make my skin crawl.’

She hesitated. Maybe seeing the glass globes would help. Maybe Merit would remember something. ‘This way,’ she said.

Merit stared open-mouthed at the rows of glass globes. ‘What are they?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Tansy replied. ‘I think Lady Aster made them.’

She picked up a globe showing a throne room hung with elaborate tapestries, turning it over to see the small brass plaque attached to the base:

#22

Merit leaned forward to peer at another globe, a bustling covered market. ‘They’re extraordinary,’ she said. ‘Look at the detail – I can see every little thing.’

Tansy felt oddly proud of the little room and its globes. ‘I like to come in here sometimes,’ she admitted. ‘And imagine myself in all those different little worlds. Meeting all those people.’

‘Even this one?’ asked Merit, pointing at a globe containing what appeared to be a blasted and desolate wasteland.

Tansy shuddered. Of all the glass globes, that was the one she avoided. It looked like a ruined battlefield, totally devoid of life. ‘Not that one.’

Merit glanced at her, then moved on to examine more globes – the ancient dusty library, the messy workshop covered in scrolls and tools. Then she

frowned and peered more closely at the globe containing a large, stark grey building surrounded by dense forest.

‘What is it?’ Tansy asked.

Merit didn’t answer, staring at the building and the cleared area around it.

Tansy went over to the shelf containing the different models of the Oubliette. She reached up and took one in her hands, turning it over and looking at the brass number on the base. She had a sudden, powerful urge to hurl the globe to the floor and watch it shatter.

Merit gazed at her, eyes unreadable. ‘What’s the third collection?’ she asked abruptly. ‘Dolls, globes, and …’

‘Seashells,’ Tansy replied. ‘Would you like to see?’

She watched Merit take in the tiny, honeycomb-like alcoves and the thousands of pale, perfect shells.

Her heart stilled, and she took a deep breath, closing her eyes.

The room felt sad, like it always did, but it was a calm, familiar sadness. A well-worn grief, without any sting.

‘They’re beautiful,’ Merit said, reaching out and touching a finger to one of the shells. ‘I’ve seen seashells before – people sometimes have them in their houses. But not like this. Did you collect them?’

Tansy shook her head. She’d remember, wouldn’t she? Her feet in the sea, scouring the sand for shells.

‘I think Lady Aster collected them,’ she said.

But Lady Aster didn’t go for long walks on the beach. Lady Aster never went further than the front gate.

Was there even a beach?

Tansy closed her eyes and tried to focus, but there was nothing but knots in her mind. She couldn’t remember where she had lived before she came to the Oubliette. Couldn’t remember anything, other than her daily routine.

Until Merit had arrived, and everything changed.

‘What’s *wrong* with me?’ she whispered.

Merit looked at her with those galaxy eyes, and Tansy wanted to disappear into them, the only light she could see in the drowning darkness.

‘Nothing,’ Merit said gently. ‘Nothing is wrong with you.’

But Tansy knew that wasn't true. The cottage suddenly felt chokingly small. She felt the tangle of secrets inside her pull tighter. The endless lines of shells glinted like rows of pointed teeth. She pulled away from Merit, her chest heaving.

'Tansy.' Merit's voice was soothing. 'It doesn't matter.'

'It *does* matter,' Tansy bit back. 'Merit – you're forgetting …'

Merit's relaxed face turned sharp and angular. 'Maybe I want to forget,' she said quietly. 'Maybe I've done things …' She seemed to swallow down a shudder of revulsion. 'Maybe I want to forget.'

Tansy could see the misery rising in her. The guilt. She wanted to make Merit smile again, but she also didn't want her to lose herself. She knew how hard it was.

How much it hurt.

'If you forget, you'll never find a way out of here.'

'Would that be so bad?' Merit asked.

The knight turned her eyes to Tansy, and for a moment Tansy was lost in the deep night of them. The knotted snarl of guilt and longing inside her grew so tight, she could barely breathe.

'N-no,' she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. 'Not bad.'

It would be wonderful.

They gazed at each other, and Tansy saw a faint flush appear on Merit's pale cheeks.

But then the tugging sensation came, lavender and loyalty drawing her back to Lady Aster along the invisible thread that connected them.

'I have to put the kettle on,' she said. 'Lady Aster will be up soon.' Merit nodded. 'I'll see myself out,' she said. But she hesitated, laying a hand on Tansy's shoulder.

'At least we're trapped in here together,' she said quietly.

Tansy felt the warmth of Merit's hand through the fabric of her bodice, and the knotted tangle inside her relaxed, just a little.

It was everything.

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10
MERIT

Geranium: Scatter petals on a threshold to banish unwanted visitors.

TANSY HURRIED INTO the kitchen, and Merit headed for the pigsty but stopped when she reached the foyer of the Oubliette, which smelled strongly of lavender.

Lady Aster was waiting by the front door, the black cat winding itself around her ankles.

She was not a tall woman, but she was imposing nonetheless, in a stiff, old-fashioned gown, her hair pulled back in a severe bun under a black velvet cap. Her eyes were steel, her mouth a thin line of disapproval.

‘Tansy didn’t tell me we had company.’

Merit saw the way the old lady’s gaze passed over her, lingering on the sunburst scar on her palm. Merit instinctively curled her fingers into a fist. Tansy may not have known what a Carrion Knight was, but Merit got the feeling that Lady Aster did. There was a gleam to her watery old eyes. Recognition.

She thought of the glass globe she’d seen among Lady Aster’s collection. Of the ugly grey building surrounded by forest.

Despite everything else, she hadn’t forgotten the Halls of Order. Why did Lady Aster have a tiny model of Merit’s home? Did the old woman know what it was? What the Carrion Knights did? Who they served?

The memory cut a sickly bright line through the pleasant fog she’d been sinking into. Her training kicked in, putting her on high alert.

What to do? A Carrion Knight would simply kill her. Lady Aster was old and frail; it wouldn’t take much effort. Then the cottage would be Merit’s. She could stay here, with Tansy. Just the two of them, forever.

But she wasn’t a Carrion Knight. Not anymore.

What would a hero do?

What would the Maid do?

Lady Aster was an old woman, but she wasn’t helpless. Merit would bet all the raspberries in the world that she knew the way out of here.

Merit needed her.

She sank to one knee. ‘Lady Aster,’ she said, her head bowed. ‘I am sorry to disturb you. I found my way here, gravely injured. Tansy has displayed great kindness in tending to my wounds.’

The cat sprang onto the sideboard and licked a paw, watching smugly.

‘Get up,’ the old woman said, her voice like the crackling of dry leaves.

Merit obeyed, wincing as the stitches in her wound pulled.

‘Who are you?’ Lady Aster asked. ‘And why are you wearing one of my nightgowns?’

Merit glanced down at the daisy-embroidered shirt that Tansy had modified for her and felt her cheeks colour.

‘I am Sir Merit,’ she said. ‘Of … of Valla.’

Silence hung in the air, awkward and heavy.

‘I see,’ Lady Aster said at last. ‘And what are you doing in my house?’

Merit bit her lip. ‘I … I’m just trying to find my way home.’

Bracken appeared in the hall and trotted over to Lady Aster, wagging his tail in greeting.

Lady Aster frowned down at the scruffy little dog, her nose wrinkling in distaste.

‘And where have *you* been?’ she murmured.

Bracken nosed the bottom of her skirts, and Lady Aster made a small noise of disapproval before turning back to Merit, her eyes narrowed.

‘How did you get here?’

Merit swallowed. ‘I … I’m not really sure. I followed the dog.’

‘Through a door?’

‘Yes, ma’am. In a house that looked like this one, but ruined.’

Lady Aster leaned forward, a shadow of hunger on her face. ‘What happened to the door you came through?’

‘It vanished after I passed through it.’

The old woman sighed. ‘Of course it did.’

‘I’m not here to make trouble,’ Merit said honestly. ‘I just want to find a way back.’

Lady Aster seemed to come to a decision. ‘Let me speak plainly,’ she said. ‘We both know what you really are.’

A monster. Merit flinched. She didn’t need to say it to know what the old woman was thinking.

‘You don’t belong here. I will help you leave, on one condition.’

Merit glanced towards the kitchen, where she could hear Tansy moving around, making tea.

‘What condition?’ she asked.

‘You leave immediately,’ Lady Aster replied. ‘You say nothing to her. You’ve done enough damage.’

Merit frowned. Damage?

The lavender scent seemed to intensify, winding its way into Merit like smoke.

‘She’s just a silly girl,’ Lady Aster explained. ‘She was happy, before you arrived. Now she’s a mess. You’ve confused her. Made her dream of things that are impossible.’

‘Why impossible?’ Merit asked. ‘Why can’t she leave?’

Lady Aster hesitated; then her chin lifted. ‘We’re in hiding,’ she said at last. ‘The last refugees from an ancient war. If Tansy tries to leave, she will not survive. I know it sounds cruel to you, but you must believe me. The

kindest thing you can do is leave and let her forget you. So do we have a deal?'

Lavender hung heavy in the air, along with something suffocating and dusty, like crushed porcelain or old candlewax.

'Yes.' The word escaped Merit's lips before she could take it back.

'Good. Gather your things,' Lady Aster said brusquely.

Merit obeyed. Hurriedly, she rushed out and collected her sword from the pigsty, but hesitated as she turned back to the Oubliette.

Was she really going to leave, without saying goodbye to Tansy?

If Lady Aster was right, then every second Merit spent in the Oubliette would just make things worse. Better to let Tansy forget.

It didn't matter that Tansy made Merit feel like she was the only person in the world. It didn't matter that Merit's heart pounded every time Tansy's fingers brushed her skin.

Bracken whined.

'I know,' Merit said, and the words tasted of lavender. 'But maybe Lady Aster is right. Maybe it is easier to just leave.'

Lady Aster led Merit up the stairs to the first-floor landing, then looked at the ceiling.

'Come now,' she said impatiently to no one in particular. 'Open up.'

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the house seemed to sigh. Merit's stomach lurched as the walls around her contorted, reshaping to reveal another flight of stairs. She followed Lady Aster up them and found herself in the whitewashed passage that she had first arrived in. Lady Aster marched down the passage and stopped before a wooden door. It was indistinguishable from all the others save for *#29* on a brass plaque.

Merit thought of the numbers on the glass globes. What did all of this mean?

Lady Aster produced a small silver key from her pocket and unlocked the door.

How was it possible that it could lead anywhere but another room? What was on the other side? How did Lady Aster *know*?

'Go on, then,' Lady Aster said.

Merit turned to face the door, feeling the raised scar on her palm itch.

‘Tell her … tell her I’m sorry,’ she said.

Lady Aster’s lip curled smugly, and Merit felt something fold in on itself within her, like a withered leaf. She fought the urge to dash back down the stairs and beg Tansy to come with her.

But what could Merit possibly offer? Only cloud castles and make-believe. At least Tansy was safe here, from whoever it was who wanted to hurt her.

It was better this way.

There was a scrabbling noise on the staircase, and Bracken appeared, paws skittering on the floorboards. He came flying down the hallway, legs going in all directions, skidding to a halt at Merit’s feet.

‘Stay here,’ Merit told him. ‘You’ll be better off.’

Bracken whimpered but lay down on the floorboards, resting his head between his paws.

Merit turned to face the door again and took a deep breath. She didn’t trust Lady Aster, but what choice did she have?

She was drowning in lavender, the thick, sugared scent of it coating her tongue and the back of her throat.

She opened the door.

On the other side was swirling grey mist. Merit shuddered, remembering the disembodied breath on her cheek and the snapping of teeth.

‘Is it going to be like before?’ she asked Lady Aster. ‘The darkness?’

The old woman shook her head. ‘You came here on the dark paths,’ she said. ‘The space outside of the world. This is’ – she hesitated – ‘an easier road.’

Merit narrowed her eyes. ‘So it’s safe.’

‘Of course,’ Lady Aster said. ‘This door will send you back to where you came from. I swear it.’

Merit took a step forward, her boot on the threshold. Bracken watched her with soulful eyes.

The last thing Merit heard was a canine whine before she was engulfed in silver mist.

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11
TANSY

Rosemary: Carry a sprig of rosemary in a pocket to recall a lover.

MERIT WAS GONE. Lady Aster had kept Tansy busy with chores all afternoon, so she didn't notice until suppertime, when she went out to see Merit and found the pigsty abandoned.

The knight had clearly found a way to escape the Oubliette.

Without saying goodbye.

Tansy supposed it was fair enough. She'd known Merit for all of twelve days, and the knight had been unconscious for two of them. They barely knew each other.

So why did it feel like Merit had taken a piece of Tansy with her?

Bracken was waiting for Tansy in the kitchen the next morning and followed her around all day like a furry grey shadow, letting out great sighs and little anxious noises. Lady Aster seemed vague and fussy. Nothing Tansy did was right. Her tea was over-steeped. Her toast was too dry. The sitting room was too cold.

Tansy washed Lady Aster's bedsheets and hung them out to dry, thinking about Merit. The way her dark lashes brushed against her pale cheeks. She could feel the comforting weight of the Oubliette on her like a thick blanket, urging her to forget everything. Forget about Merit and her stories of knights and good and evil. Forget about the Unmaker and the Maid. Sink back into the easiness of everyday life. She should forget. But she didn't want to.

Tansy paused. Something had got into her herb garden. The yarrow had been trampled, and the marjoram had withered, as if touched by frost.

An uneasy feeling crept into her heart.

'Did you do this?' she asked the goose, who was lurking nearby.

The goose hissed at her and retreated into the blueberry bushes.

Could it have been Bracken? The little dog had never done anything like it before.

Tansy gathered sage, spearmint and rosemary from the untrampled part of the garden, tying the stems up in a scrap of cloth and looping the bundle about her neck with a bit of string, so she could breathe in its scents as she went about her work.

'Sage for clarity,' she whispered as she scrubbed the kitchen floor. 'Spearmint for concentration. Rosemary for remembrance.'

'Lunch, ma'am,' Tansy said, placing the tray on the sideboard, as always. Bracken trotted in after her, and Tansy braced herself for questions. But the old woman didn't even look at her.

Tansy turned to leave.

'Wait.' Lady Aster's gaze slid over Bracken, then flicked up to the bundle of herbs around Tansy's neck. Tansy felt her cheeks redden.

'Better to let yourself forget,' Lady Aster advised calmly. 'It'll be easier on you.'

Tansy's heart juddered in her chest. Did Lady Aster know? About Merit? She certainly didn't seem surprised to see Bracken.

'But *you* don't, do you?' Tansy asked. 'Forget, I mean.'

'I do,' the old woman said. 'I have no idea how long we've been here.'

'Do …' Tansy took a breath, steeling herself. 'Do you know *why* we're here?'

Lady Aster hesitated. 'Something terrible happened,' she said at last. 'And if we go back, it will happen again.'

'How do you know?'

'I keep … reminders,' Lady Aster explained. 'Of the things that truly matter.'

'Are we prisoners, ma'am?' Tansy asked.

'We are safe here,' Lady Aster said.

Tansy thought about her trampled yarrow. 'How can you stand it?' she asked.

'I forget,' the old woman said simply. 'And you should too. You will anyway, no matter what you do. Better just to give in to it.'

There was a strange smell in the house. Not the usual comforting dusty lavender, or even the furry compost scent of the dog. It smelled of old stone and something metallic.

Tansy didn't go for her usual walk after Lady Aster went upstairs for her nap. She couldn't dream about cloud castles anymore. Not without Merit. Instead she picked up a handkerchief she'd been embroidering and sat by the fire with Bracken at her feet.

She thought about the soft fall of Merit's hair, unbound as it dried in front of the fire. She remembered the silken flow of it between her fingers.

The needle slipped, jabbing into her finger, and a tiny bead of blood appeared. Tansy popped her finger into her mouth.

The handkerchief didn't look right.

It was supposed to be edged in trailing ivy, but halfway along it had become a raspberry cane, with spiked thorns and plump crimson fruit.

Tansy frowned and ran a finger over one of the berries. She should unpick it. Finish the ivy motif so it all matched.

But the thought of another single stitch made her want to scream.

Bracken nudged her ankles with his nose.

'I miss her too,' Tansy said softly.

The dog trotted to the door, looking over his shoulder at her.

‘I don’t know what to *do*,’ she told him. ‘I thought things would go back to how they were, before she came. But I’m different now. I *can’t* forget her. I *won’t*.’

Bracken did his little dance of anticipation.

Tansy sighed. ‘Fine,’ she said, and flung down her embroidery.

Bracken led her up the stairs to the first floor. Tansy stopped short, her heart pounding.

There were *more* stairs. Stairs that hadn’t been there this morning, when Tansy came down for breakfast.

The uneasy feeling returned as she hesitantly climbed up the new stairs.

The cat was waiting for her at the top, its lamplike eyes cold and watchful. Behind it stretched a long passage, much longer than should have been possible in the little cottage.

‘Did you do this?’ she asked the cat.

It regarded her flatly for a long moment, then got to its feet and stalked back down the stairs, its tail in the air.

Bracken let out a tiny growl in the direction of the cat, then trotted off down the passage.

Tansy followed, her heart thumping.

There was a strange smell in the air, like gravedust and sulphur. The passage felt cold and stale. Had it always been here, somehow hidden? The house often felt like it was alive, but Tansy had never imagined that it might *conceal* something from her before.

Shame twisted in her gut. Of course it wasn’t the house that had hidden the passage. It must have been Lady Aster, and she must have had a good reason for it. Tansy wasn’t supposed to be here. She wanted nothing more than to turn and flee back downstairs to her cosy little kitchen and lose herself in the small, mundane tasks that made up her life.

But then she would forget Merit.

Bracken stopped in front of a door. The brass plate read *#29*. The dog sat down and stared meaningfully at her. Hesitantly, Tansy tried the handle.

‘It’s locked,’ she reported, somewhat relieved.

The little dog clearly thought this was Tansy’s problem. He got up and scratched at the door.

‘Is … is this where Merit went?’ she asked. Bracken whined.

Downstairs, she heard something that sounded like the kitchen door slamming, and she froze. What if Lady Aster found her up here?

The fuzzy static of the Oubliette pressed down on her. *Better to let yourself forget,* Lady Aster said inside her head.

Maybe the old woman was right.

‘Let’s go downstairs,’ Tansy suggested to Bracken. ‘I’ll find you a bone.’

The dog didn’t move. He turned pleading eyes to her.

‘How about a walk?’

But Bracken refused to budge.

Tansy’s skin crawled. Something was wrong. The trampled herb garden. The strange odour in the air. This wasn’t how her day was supposed to go.

Forget, the Oubliette urged. *Forget.* ‘I … I can’t do anything,’ she told the little dog helplessly. ‘I’m just a maid.’

Bracken sighed.

She left him there and went back downstairs, pulling the bundle of herbs from around her neck and tossing it on the fire in the kitchen. Perhaps it would drive away the unpleasant smell of gravedust and rotten eggs that hung over everything.

‘Okay,’ she told the house. ‘I give in. Let me forget.’

But the uneasy feeling didn’t go away. Tansy felt like she was being haunted by shadows at the edge of her vision. Memories fluttered around her like ghosts – whispering in the dark corners of her mind. A stone doorway. A faceted jewel. The green scent of valerian and hemlock. A needle and thread, pulled through soft linen.

Whenever she tried to focus on a single shadow, it dissolved like a cloud cake made of bitterness and futile dreams. She drifted aimlessly from room to room, waiting for the forgetting to take hold so everything could go back to the way it was.

She wandered through the shell room, its familiar melancholy air matching her mood. She lingered there, running her fingers softly over the pink curves and whorls.

I keep reminders, Lady Aster had said. *Of the things that truly matter.*

What did it all mean?

The next room was no better. Each glass globe was a world she would never get to see. She picked one up, a stunning ballroom scene in what looked like a palace made of intricately sculpted black marble. The tiny dancers wore masks and elaborate gowns and coats. Tansy had often imagined what it would be like to attend such a ball, to whirl and spin and sip wine from jewelled goblets.

She turned the globe over in her hand and saw the brass plaque attached to the base:

#16

She'd never really thought about the numbers before. If pressed, she might have said they were the order in which the globes had been made.

Tansy carefully replaced the ballroom globe and picked up her least favourite one, the grim blasted wasteland, turning it over in her hand, shuddering.

#18

She turned over globe after globe, frowning at the brass plaques until she found the one reading *#29* on the base. The number on the door that Bracken had led her to.

There was a tiny city inside the globe, built into the side of a mountain, all grey stone steps and cascading little waterfalls. The city looked lived in – the buildings and gardens seemed well maintained. But Tansy could see no people.

Was it Valla? Was it the Bright City? Was this what lay on the other side of the door in the hallway?

Surely that wasn't possible. She peered closer at the glass globe, looking for signs of life.

An apple cart, overturned in the street. An abandoned market stall.

A half-drunk mug of ale on a wooden bench.

Something seemed wrong. The tiny city was too still.

It's a model, the dry voice reminded her. *Of course it's still.*

She placed the glass globe carefully back on the shelf.

Bracken appeared in the doorway, tail wagging eagerly. He had something in his mouth.

A key.

‘We’re just going to have a look,’ she told the little dog as she unlocked the door on the second-floor passage. ‘That’s it. We’ll be back in time to make Lady Aster’s tea.’

Bracken’s tail thumped on the floorboards.

She unlocked the door, and it swung open, revealing swirling silver.

Tansy’s heart was beating so hard, she could hear it pulse in her ears.

Bracken let out a satisfied snort and trotted through the doorway.

Tansy slipped the key into her pocket, then followed the little dog into the mist.

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12
MERIT

Glovewort: Make a paste using glovewort ash and moon water to open doors to other worlds.

THE MISTS GAVE way to a door made of thick, cold stone. Merit pushed through and found herself somewhere cramped and stuffy, a closed space. She could smell damp moss and hessian.

Was she back in the rotten house in the forest? It had all happened so fast.

Lady Aster had convinced her to leave the Oubliette. Had convinced her to leave Tansy.

Tansy.

Her freckle-spattered face, grinning back at Merit. Her gentle fingers in Merit's hair.

Her deep loneliness that mirrored Merit's own.

Why hadn't she insisted on talking to Tansy before she left?

She could have explained. She could have apologised.

But it was too late now. Whatever happened next, Merit was on her own.

Fumbling around in the darkness, she found another door, wood this time, and managed to get it open, its well-oiled hinges moving silently.

She stepped outside and found herself in a narrow alleyway in grey twilight, surrounded by stone walls.

It wasn't the slimy ruined house in the forest.

The fuzzy, contented haze that she'd sunk gratefully into in the Oubliette vanished, and vague memories became horribly clear.

The Halls of Order. Valiant as a new recruit, clutching a white stone. Valiant's sword in her gut.

Every home she had raided. Every child she had taken.

Monster.

Bitterness and shame rose in her throat. Merit doubled over and vomited on the grey stones.

'Control yourself,' she muttered, and spat bile.

She needed to get moving. She would find her way to the Bright City and present herself to the Council of Stars. Warn them about the impending attack. About the return of the Unmaker. Perhaps they would kill her – it would be nothing less than Merit deserved. If she was lucky, they might allow her to serve Valla somehow. To make up for the terrible things she had done as a Carrion Knight.

But wherever she was now, it wasn't the Bright City.

Merit had never been there, but she had heard of its white stone and broad avenues. Here, everything was brown and grey, the streets narrow and twisting.

Another wave of nausea and dread hit her as she realised that Lady Aster had lied. She had promised that she would send Merit back where she came from. But this place was entirely new.

What else had the old woman lied about?

Merit turned and went back into the little chamber she had emerged from. The stone door was still there, cold as ice. But Merit couldn't open it.

There was a little silver keyhole in the door.

And Lady Aster had the key. Wherever Merit was, there was no going back.

She had to be careful. She had trained for this kind of thing.

Scan for enemies.

Establish a safe perimeter.

Kill all who resist.

Keeping to the shadows, she crept along the alleyway and peered around a corner, down a wider road, paved with more grey stone. There were stairs everywhere – the city seemed to be built into the side of a mountain.

Merit smelled charcoal, cooking food, and the tang of refuse. Windows glowed with light, revealing brightly coloured curtains and glimpses into cosy homes.

But she saw no people.

All was still and silent, save for the trickle of water somewhere nearby and the distant shriek of a bird.

Hand on her sword hilt, she moved silently through the empty streets, keeping to the shadows.

Merit knew the signs of violence all too well. There were none here. No broken windows or doors. No scorch marks from fire. No signs of struggle or looting.

An overturned apple cart spilled ripe fruit over the street.

On a bench there was a half-drunk tankard of ale.

Merit silently approached a building, her sword drawn. She stepped into a little kitchen with a fire burning cheerily on the hearth.

The furniture was simple but well made, and Merit took a moment to admire the carved mantelpiece of leaves and berries.

Two bowls were placed on the table, half full of stew. A torn loaf of bread sat between them.

Steam was rising from the bowls. The food was still warm.

The house was small – there were only two other rooms, and both were empty.

Uneasiness spread through Merit as she crept through the empty streets, climbing up several flights of stone steps and exploring each terrace.

In the distance, she heard the birdcall again, a melancholy screech that set Merit’s teeth on edge.

What could make the people of an entire city disappear? She entered a covered arcade lined with shops, each displaying their wares behind glass

windows. Merit peered into one and saw a wooden counter at the back, and shelves of dainty silk slippers. Another sold fancy hats trimmed with lace and feathers and beads. Another was a silversmith displaying ornate candlesticks and platters.

The door to one shop was ajar, and Merit stepped inside. The walls were lined with glass cabinets displaying necklaces and earrings. Gold and jewels glinted in the lamplight.

She lifted a necklace, heavy gold encrusted with diamonds and emeralds. It was worth a king's ransom.

Gold and jewels were portable, valuable, easy to sell for ready coin. Even if people had fled this city, they would have had enough time to snatch up their treasures.

Maybe they hadn't fled at all. Maybe they had just … vanished.

Outside, she heard the bird call again. She ground her teeth. She'd been trained to tune out sound. To focus on the task before her. But there was something about the bird's cry – it was like a hot needle in her brain, pulling her attention away.

Merit frowned, listening as it cried out again.

Not a bird. A baby.

The city wasn't empty after all. Somewhere, a baby was crying.

Merit followed the sound, past eerily quiet buildings. An empty stable. A blacksmith's forge, still glowing red-hot. A town square, devoid of life.

The buildings became more ornate the higher she climbed, grand houses with elaborate embellishments – turrets, stained glass and lacy ironwork.

Finally, she found herself standing before an opulent mansion surrounded by well-tended gardens.

The crying was louder now. She could hear a hoarseness in the baby's voice, as if it had been crying for a very long time.

She took a breath and went up the steps to an imposing set of doors, carved with roses and inlaid with brass and mother-of-pearl.

She was breaking into a stranger's home in order to search for a child. It was something she never thought she'd do again.

But this time, it's the right thing to do, she told herself.

Inside was a large foyer with gleaming marble floors and a grand, curving staircase. It smelled of polished cedar and something else. Something earthen and meaty. She passed wood-panelled rooms, with sparkling chandeliers overhead and furniture of damask and gilt.

Merit followed the crying sound up the stairs and along a wide hallway. She glimpsed an ornate bedroom dominated by a huge bed hung with brocade curtains, dripping with tiny crystal beads. She went up a smaller staircase this time, to what looked like servants' quarters. At the end of a narrow hall was a door.

Something had been hastily scratched into the timber, a series of symbols that Merit didn't understand. She could *feel* them, though, deep in her bones. *Stay away*, they said. *Beware.*

The wailing was on the other side of the door. Merit could hear the desperation in it, a gulping breathlessness. The baby was in extreme distress.

The sound clawed at Merit, awakening something instinctive inside her. It wasn't a sound she could ignore, or tune out. Babies were unfamiliar to her – the Carrion Knights only took children who were weaned. But this baby was alone in the abandoned city, and Merit was the only one who could help it.

It was what a hero would do.

The doorhandle would not turn. Merit put her shoulder to the door and shoved, but it didn't budge.

On the other side, the wailing intensified, as if the baby could sense her presence. Merit drew her sword.

The blade struck the wooden door, sending a jolt of pain down her arm. It was like nothing she'd ever felt before, both hot and cold at once, leaving her feeling weak and jangly, like she was recovering from a fever.

'Magic,' she muttered, narrowing her eyes at the symbols.

There hadn't been much magic in Valla since the time of the Unmaker – it was too dangerous, too unpredictable. Merit had no idea how to counter it, so she did the only thing she knew how to do.

She attacked the door again. And again.

Numbness spread through her sword arm, but she didn't let up. Chunks of wood flew, and eventually the door splintered, and she was able to kick it down. She closed her eyes for a moment as a wave of dizziness overcame her; then she stepped through the debris.

Something clattered against her face, and she flinched.

Tiny bones, hanging from the doorframe like a beaded curtain.

The organic, meaty smell intensified. It smelled like the courtyard in the Halls of Order where acolytes butchered fresh game.

She pushed the bones aside and surveyed the room.

The baby was not in a crib.

It was lying on a bare wooden floor, its face hot and red as it screamed and screamed and screamed.

There were more unfamiliar symbols painted on the floorboards around it, dark and wet on the wood.

Blood.

'Unmaker's balls,' Merit cursed.

There were other things on the floor too. Looping entrails. Bundles of dried herbs. Coins. Little mounds of earth and salt.

And … teeth.

Thirty-two of them, arranged around the baby's head like a halo.

Merit shuddered.

It was a ritual, but for what?

The baby was turning purple, and Merit was afraid it would stop breathing and die.

What would a hero do?

Save the baby, of course.

She stepped to the edge of the bloody circle, but as she tried to cross, something invisible struck her, and she went flying backwards across the room to sprawl against the far wall.

Merit took a moment to catch her breath. She couldn't *see* anything. She and the baby were alone in the room. But something had definitely hit her.

She tried again. As soon as her boot touched the bloody line, she was thrown back. Looking around for something to throw, her eyes fell on a silver rattle that must have been dropped by the baby or a nursemaid. Picking it up, she tossed it gently through the circle, careful not to hit the baby.

The rattle crossed the bloody circle with no resistance. The baby stopped crying, and Merit's blood ran cold.

It turned its face towards her, the movement unnaturally smooth and slow.

Merit's skin crawled, and she took a step back, away from the circle.

The baby looked directly at her, and in its eyes, Merit saw the cold emptiness of the void.

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13
MERIT

Foxglove: Make a black dye from the flowers and mix with rabbit's blood. Can be used to paint protective symbols.

IT STARTED CRYING again as soon as Merit left the room. She couldn't shake the image of it from her mind. The way it had just … stopped.

Those blank, empty eyes.

Merit had no idea what had happened here, but she knew she wanted no part of it.

She didn’t bother moving silently. She didn’t bother staying to the shadows. She skidded down the stone steps, down terrace after terrace. Past graceful waterfalls that tumbled down the rocks. Past empty shops and homes, until she came to the lowest level of the city.

The city wall loomed in front of her. Through the twilight gloom, she could see torches burning in guard towers. Hear the snap of pennants in the breeze.

The sound of the crying baby cut through it, drifting down from the terraces high above.

And then Merit found she could go no further.

This invisible barrier was just like the one around the Oubliette. She ran her hands along it, feeling the smooth coldness of glass.

She raised her sword and brought it down on the barrier, but the blade bounced harmlessly off it.

Panic rose in her throat as she remembered the rows of glass globes, each one containing its own little world. The numbered plaques underneath, matching the brass plaques on the second-floor doors.

Lady Aster had sent her to a prison. And now she would be stuck here forever, with no company but a terrifying baby.

Perhaps it was what she deserved.

She had thought she could be a hero. That she could atone for the terrible things she’d done. But maybe it wasn’t possible to cleanse a stain on one’s soul.

She found her way to a cosy little house where a fire was still burning in the hearth. A bed was made up in the corner, spread with a neat patchwork quilt. Merit climbed in. After so many nights of sleeping on a pile of old straw, it felt luxurious to be in a real bed. She pulled the covers over her head to block out the sound of the baby and closed her eyes.

She drifted in and out of sleep. The light outside didn’t seem to ever change, so she was unsure of how long she lay there. There didn’t seem to be much point in doing anything else.

Movement outside roused her at last, a light step on the cobbled street. She snapped to attention, rolling out of bed in one smooth, silent movement and snatching up her sword. Three strides and she was out the door, her blade levelled at an exposed throat.

‘It’s me!’

Merit’s sword clattered to the stones.

Tansy.

Tansy had followed her.

Followed her through the door and into this strange, awful place.

Tansy had chosen *her*.

The girl flung her slender arms around Merit's neck, going up on tiptoes to press her cheek against Merit's as Bracken danced around their feet.

'You left without saying goodbye,' Tansy said, her voice muffled against Merit's shoulder.

Merit could smell sweet salt and fresh green herbs.

'I'm sorry,' Merit said. 'It was Lady Aster. She cornered me in the foyer and got in my head. Convinced me it would be easier if I just …' She could feel Tansy's heart, thundering in concert with her own.

'It wasn't,' Tansy murmured. 'Easier.'

'I know.'

Slowly, Merit's arms moved as if of their own accord, gently encircling Tansy. Holding her as if she were something precious.

The feeling of the embrace unlocked something, as delicate and fluttering as moths, but at the same time more powerful than the ocean.

She didn't want to let go. Not ever.

All too soon, Tansy pulled away.

But the sensation of the embrace lingered. It felt safe, like lying in a warm bed while rain fell outside. Like raspberries. Merit stared fixedly at the ground, trying to hold on to the moment, but at the same time holding back the tide of emotions that the embrace had released.

Tansy caught her eye and smiled shyly. There was a knowingness in her expression, as though she saw straight to Merit's core.

'Was … was that your first hug?' she asked gently.

Merit bit her lip and nodded as tears threatened to break free.

'Mine too,' Tansy admitted. 'Or at least, the first one I can remember.'

Merit recalled the way her memories had become hard and clear once she left the Oubliette. How overwhelming it had been.

'Is anything coming back to you?' she asked. 'About your life before the Oubliette?'

Tansy shook her head. 'Nothing,' she said. 'But, Merit … do you hear that?'

She cocked her head, listening to the wailing of the baby.

'I hear it,' Merit said, and she couldn't keep the disgust out of her voice.

Tansy looked puzzled. ‘What—’

‘We have to get out of here,’ Merit said to her. ‘This place, it isn’t real.’

‘I know,’ Tansy said. ‘It’s one of Lady Aster’s glass globes.’

‘Do you have the key?’ Merit asked.

Tansy grinned and pulled a silver item from her pocket.

In the terraces high above them, the baby wailed. Merit gritted her teeth.

‘There it is again!’ Tansy said. ‘It sounds like a baby.’

‘It is a baby,’ Merit said. ‘Sort of.’

‘Come on, then!’ Tansy took off after the noise, dashing up a flight of stone steps.

‘Wait,’ Merit called, starting after her. ‘I already found it.’

Tansy paused and looked over her shoulder at Merit, puzzled. ‘You found it?’ she repeated. ‘But why didn’t you—’

‘There’s something wrong with it,’ Merit said.

How could she explain?

‘Show me.’

Merit led her through the empty streets as Tansy gaped open-mouthed at the city.

‘What happened here?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Merit replied. ‘Everyone is just … gone.’

‘Why does Lady Aster have a model of this place?’ Tansy mused.

‘Why does she have any of them?’ Merit replied. ‘Who made them, and why?’

What had Lady Aster said?

The last refugees from an ancient war.

Had Lady Aster and Tansy escaped from this place?

They arrived at the mansion with the carved roses on the door.

‘Are you sure you want to go up?’ Merit asked. ‘It’s … it’s bad.’

‘Merit, it’s a *baby*,’ Tansy said, and marched up the steps and into the house. ‘We can’t just leave it to cry.’

Bracken whined, lingering on the front step.

‘Fine,’ Tansy told him. ‘You stay here and keep guard.’

Merit wished she could stay outside with the little dog, but followed Tansy reluctantly up the stairs and through the destroyed door that led to the baby’s

room.

The stench of carrion assaulted her senses once more, the baby's cry incessant and grating.

Merit's gut twisted as she saw the silver rattle against the wall, in the exact place where she had first found it. It was as if the room had somehow reset itself.

Tansy rushed right up to the bloody barrier, her arms outstretched.

'Don't go too close,' Merit warned. 'It's dangerous. Some kind of dark ritual.'

Tansy shook her head. 'No,' she said softly. 'Look.'

She crouched down to point out the little plant bundles, each one tightly wound with red string.

'Hemlock and vetiver to keep things hidden. Thistle to repel thieves. And snapdragon, to protect from evil.'

'What about the guts?' Merit asked. 'And the *teeth*?'

Tansy frowned. 'The entrails look like rabbit to me. But the teeth are human.' A look of sorrow passed over her face. 'Whoever did this was willing to do anything to keep their child safe.'

Merit wasn't convinced. 'There's something not right about it,' she insisted. 'It … *looked* at me.'

'Of course there's something not right about it,' Tansy said dismissively. 'It's distraught. Look at it! Come on—' She stood up.

Merit put out a hand to stop her. 'How are you going to break the spell?' she asked.

'I don't have to,' Tansy replied, stepping calmly over the line of blood and entrails. 'The spell is to protect it from evil, and I'm not evil. You could have done it too.'

Merit hesitated. 'I just don't think you should—'

But Tansy had scooped the baby up in her arms. It stopped crying at once, but continued to make fussy grizzling noises.

'Poor thing,' Tansy said, rocking it gently. 'It's okay. You're safe now.'

Merit stared.

The spell is to protect it from evil.

It had thrown Merit across the room – twice.

Something dark twisted in her heart, and she remembered the icy look on Lady Aster's face.

We both know what you really are.

Evil.

Was there no way to escape it?

Tansy's head jerked up, the distant look appearing in her eyes. 'Lady Aster will be awake soon,' she said. 'I should go back.'

She looked down at the baby.

'You can't take it with you,' Merit said. 'She'll know you were here.'

A crinkle appeared on Tansy's brow, and Merit fought the urge to reach out and smooth it.

'Maybe you could—' Tansy proffered the baby to Merit.

'No way,' Merit said, holding up her hands. 'I don't know the first thing about babies.'

Tansy gazed down at the child, who had calmed in her arms. It seemed just like an ordinary baby – as far as Merit knew – but she couldn't shake the memory of its blank face and cold eyes.

There was something about Tansy's posture – the way she held the infant, her head bowed. She seemed to know exactly what to do.

Had someone held Merit like this once? Cradled her gently, rocking and cooing?

The thought of it was too much to bear.

'Have you done this before?' she asked abruptly.

Tansy didn't look up. 'Held a baby?' she asked. 'I … I don't know. I don't think so.'

She touched it gently on the forehead. The baby latched a chubby hand around her finger, then tried to shove the finger into its mouth. Tansy laughed.

'You're hungry, aren't you? Poor thing. We'll find you some milk.'

Was this what Tansy wanted? A family? Her own little cottage, full of warmth and laughter. Chickens scratching outside the back door. The thought of it made Merit prickle, her teeth gritting together.

Why? Why did the thought of Tansy being happy make her feel so out of sorts?

Is it because there is no place in that vision for you?

'Lady Aster is going to be so angry,' Tansy said. 'But I can't just leave it here.'

What about me? Merit wanted to ask.

Tansy tilted her head and pursed her lips. 'I suppose you should come too.'

It seemed almost like an afterthought.

The idea of returning to the Oubliette filled Merit with dread. She knew Lady Aster wouldn't be pleased to see her. But she couldn't stay trapped in a glass globe forever.

Tansy took a step towards Merit, drawing close to the inner edge of the bloody circle.

Merit felt a surge of *wrongness*, like the world was warping around them. She heard Tansy's breath hiss in sharply. Tansy took another step, this one a little more hesitant.

As her foot crossed the protective circle, the baby just … disintegrated in her arms, dissolving into what appeared to be tiny white stones.

They poured onto the floor, skittering and bouncing everywhere in a great flood. They clattered like bones, the sudden noise shocking in the silent empty room.

One of them pinged against the toe of Merit's boot, and she looked down at it.

It was a tooth.

The baby had transformed into hundreds – thousands – of human teeth.

Tansy stood frozen, one foot still on the bloody line. Her face was a mask of horror.

Merit felt like reality was collapsing, like up and down didn't exist anymore.

'Merit, what's happening?' Tansy whimpered.

Merit didn't know. She reached out and grabbed Tansy, pulling her across the line. Tansy's boots skidded on the teeth, and she stumbled into Merit's arms.

Merit could hear Bracken barking outside the house.

'Come on,' Merit said. 'Let's get out of here.'

'But the baby—' Tansy glanced over her shoulder at where it had been.

'It's not a baby,' Merit told her. 'It never was.'

Teeth crunched under her boots as she half dragged Tansy out of the room. The floor seemed to buckle underneath them, and Merit's stomach lurched.

'What is it, then?' Tansy asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

'I don't know,' Merit replied.

They reached the front steps of the house, and suddenly the world seemed to right itself again. The ground became ground once more, and Merit

stopped feeling as if the world was falling to pieces. Bracken danced around their feet, barking urgently.

Upstairs, the baby wailed.

Tansy's fingers dug into Merit's arm. 'What is *happening*?'

'I don't know. But I would quite like to leave.'

Tansy glanced up at the house. 'Shouldn't we go back?'

'Absolutely not.'

'But it's a *baby*.'

'No, it isn't. It's … something else. Come on.'

She led Tansy down the stone steps as the baby continued to cry.

Tears were rolling down Tansy's cheeks, and she struggled against Merit's grasp. 'We can't just leave it here!'

'Do you want to spend the rest of your life in this place?' Merit snapped. 'If you want to look after the baby, then you can never leave that protective circle. It won't exist outside of that.'

'How do you know?' Tansy bit back, and Merit was surprised by the heat in her voice.

'I just do.'

'You don't even *care*, do you?' Tansy said bitterly, and Merit let go of her arm.

It was clear that Tansy didn't think Merit was capable of loving a baby.

Maybe she knew that Merit couldn't cross the protective barrier.

Was that it, then? Was she rotten to the core, and no amount of doing good deeds would change that?

Was there no hope at all?

'Please,' Merit begged. 'Let's just go back to the Oubliette.'

Tansy hesitated. 'Fine,' she said shortly.

They headed back to the little room with the stone door in silence, Bracken trotting at their heels.

Tansy pulled the key from her pocket and unlocked the door.

Merit looked over her shoulder at the endless twilight of the empty city and shuddered.

Good riddance.

The silvery mists parted before them, and they stepped back onto the second floor of the Oubliette. Floorboards creaked cheerfully under Merit's feet in greeting.

A bell rang downstairs.

'That's Lady Aster,' Tansy said. 'She mustn't know you're back. You have to hide.'

Merit swallowed, remembering the pigsty and its stench of rotting straw and sickness.

'I have an idea,' Tansy said, dragging Merit further down the passage, away from the stairs.

Merit felt ill.

Whatever spell had been guarding that baby, it had decreed her evil.

We both know what you really are.

And now Tansy knew too. Good intentions weren't enough to undo a lifetime of bad deeds. Merit had been foolish to believe otherwise.

'Here,' Tansy said, stopping before door #4. 'It's a nice one, I promise.'

'No,' said Merit.

She was wasting time here in this strange magical prison. She had to get back to Valla and warn the Council of Stars about the Carrion Knights and their impending attack.

'I know you want to get back to Valla.' There was a frantic edge to Tansy's voice. 'But we don't understand *how*. Not yet. And Lady Aster can't know that you came back. So you have to hide in here until we figure out how to get you home.'

'How will we do that?'

Tansy glanced over her shoulder at the stairs, and Merit knew she was feeling that strange irresistible pull towards Lady Aster. 'I … I don't know. I'll keep looking for clues out here and … well, maybe you'll find the answer you're searching for in there.'

Merit hesitated, but she knew she didn't really have a choice.

Tansy unlocked the door, and Merit stepped through, into the silvery mist.

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14
TANSY

Coltsfoot: Burn in fireplace for peace and tranquillity.

SHE COULDN'T STOP thinking about the baby. The way it had just … collapsed in her arms. The cold, hard edges of teeth on her hands as they poured away. The clattering of them on the floor.

Tansy lay awake reliving it, over and over again. The charnel-house stench of the room, blood and entrails mixed with earth and salt and herbs.

She could still hear the baby crying. In the whistle of the kettle, the screech of a seagull, the scrape of a chair leg on bare floorboards. The

creaking of the house. The furious honking of the goose as it chased Lady Aster on her daily walk to the gate and back.

The cat watched Tansy silently as she tended her herb garden, trying to revive the trampled yarrow.

She shouldn't have snapped at Merit. The flash of hurt that had crossed the knight's scarred, pointed face haunted Tansy almost as much as the baby did.

She would visit the other girl while Lady Aster was napping and apologise. And then they could get started on finding Merit a way back to Valla.

The lavender-scented threads that bound her to Lady Aster tightened, and she straightened up, brushing the dirt from her hands. Time for tea.

Warm the pot.

Two spoons from the caddy.

The house was cold and still, as if it were holding its breath. The scent of blackened iron and crushed stone hung in the air. Tansy hesitated, looking around. Something was different.

Bracken growled, his ears flat against his head, tail firmly tucked between his legs.

'What is it?' Tansy asked him.

He slunk, low to the ground, through the kitchen and into the hall, positioning himself outside the door to the doll room. He growled again, a quiet rumble.

Tansy swallowed, listening for any movement inside. Had Merit come back?

The dog doesn't growl at Merit, the dry voice reminded her.

The doorhandle was ice-cold.

She turned it and stepped into the room, letting out a horrified gasp.

Someone had destroyed the dolls.

They were torn open, seams split and dry sawdust stuffing spilling onto the floor. Glittering glass eyes stared at the ceiling as the dolls still smiled their painted smiles. Tansy felt her heart jump to her throat.

Who had done it?

It couldn't have been Lady Aster, or Merit.

She glanced down at Bracken, who whined. There was no way he could have reached the shelf where the dolls had been displayed.

The cat, maybe?

Please, the voice in her head said sarcastically.

Someone else, then.

The idea of someone *else* coming into the Oubliette hit her like a bucket of cold water. Someone else entering her safe little cocoon and doing … this.

But if Merit could get in, then couldn't anyone?

And not everyone would be friendly like Merit.

Tansy bent and picked up a limp doll corpse. It looked a bit like her, red-haired, in a brown dress with a white pinafore.

It had been ripped open, right down the middle, sawdust spilling out.

Should she tell Lady Aster? Surely the old woman would find out. Would Tansy be in trouble?

Her hands were shaking.

She wished Merit were with her. The tall knight made her feel safe. And Merit was so *sensible*. She would calm the churning tide of panic that was rising in Tansy's chest.

Merit. Merit would know what to do.

She waited until the old woman was napping, then headed upstairs to the second-floor passage.

It was just like the glass globe. A little seaside town spread behind her, orange stone buildings crowded close together, with brightly painted doors and shutters. Pink and yellow flowers tumbled from window boxes and clambered up walls.

Tansy could smell saltbush and rosemary, sweet and warm. The sun was low in the sky, just starting to skim the horizon, but it was still bakingly hot.

Before her was a strip of yellow sand, and beyond that, the glittering sea. The sea by the Oubliette was dark blue and white-capped, promising crushing waves and treacherous depths. This ocean was vibrant and inviting, dotted with colourful boats and ships. The heat of the day beat down on her, and she longed to race down and put her feet into that sparkling water.

And there were *people*.

Such a change from the still emptiness of the damp stone city with the crying baby, or the stifling lavender loneliness of the Oubliette.

There was a little covered market along the seashore, with vendors calling out to potential customers. Music drifted down from an open window, and

Tansy could hear the chanting of workers on the nearby docks hauling cargo onto a canal barge.

They looked real, although a part of Tansy knew they couldn't possibly be. She was in a glass globe, after all.

There were smells, too. Bracken's black nose was high in the air, quivering with delight.

Sizzling hot meat. Honeysuckle and coastal rosemary. Rotting fish. Fried dough. The fresh salt of the ocean. Bracken leaned against her shins, tail wagging, and Tansy felt herself smile. 'I *knew* this was a nice one,' she said to the little dog. 'Come on, let's find Merit.'

The marketplace wasn't large, but Tansy felt like she had never seen so many people all at once. They looked so different – to her and to each other. She saw skin tones of every shade, clothing in every hue and style. Everyone was busy – shouting and laughing and singing. Tansy passed by stalls piled high with unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. Others sold bolts of rich cloth, skeins of wool, glass lamps or great mounds of powdered dyes, brilliant hues that Tansy had never seen before.

She lingered by a small wooden wagon hung with crimson curtains, which swung open to reveal a puppet show. Little figures paraded across the stage, swinging wooden swords at each other. Their strings glinted in the afternoon sun, and Tansy felt a twinge of unease, turning away from the wagon and nearly running into a woman carrying a basket overflowing with fresh figs.

'Sorry!' Tansy gasped as she swerved.

She careened into a stall selling rolls of vividly woven carpet and nearly lost her footing as she tripped over a basket of carved wooden spindles. A hand caught her arm and steadied her.

'Are you lost?' The voice was kind, with a soft accent Tansy didn't recognise.

She looked up to see a man with sandy-blond hair and a beard to match. He was dressed like a soldier, brass buttons on his dark blue coat.

'I-I'm looking for someone,' she said. 'She's a … a knight.'

'There's all sorts here,' said the man. 'Whatever you're seeking, you can usually find it in Uyst.'

'Uyst?' Tansy asked. 'That's the name of this town?'

The man laughed and nodded. 'Uyst welcomes you.'

'Thank you,' Tansy said, and headed along the promenade.

She couldn’t see Merit anywhere, and the unfamiliar smells and sounds were overwhelming. Heat prickled at the back of her neck, and her clothing felt tight and restrictive.

She stopped to catch her breath beside a stall selling sugar-dusted cakes, piled high on silver platters.

An old woman with gleaming bronze skin cast a sympathetic eye over her. ‘You all right, love?’

‘I’ve lost my friend,’ Tansy explained.

The woman nodded. ‘You need one of these.’

She took a cake from the pile and handed it to Tansy, who took it gratefully.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ she said.

The cake melted in her mouth, all rosewater and nuttiness. She almost groaned with pleasure. Then shame flooded her, and her hand flew to her mouth. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she gasped. ‘I don’t have anything to pay you with.’

The woman waved a hand and smiled. ‘It’s a gift,’ she said. ‘Uyst welcomes you.’

‘Th-thank you,’ Tansy said, but her mouth had turned dry from the powdery sweetness.

Sweat trickled down her back. She looked down, expecting to see Bracken, but the little dog had vanished. Panic spiked through her, and she spun around, searching the crowd for him.

‘You all right, love?’ the cake stall woman asked.

‘My dog …’ Tansy wrung her hands.

‘You need one of these,’ the woman said, offering Tansy a cake.

‘N-no, thank you,’ Tansy said. ‘One was plenty.’

The woman held the cake out, waiting for Tansy to take it. ‘It’s a gift,’ she said. ‘Uyst welcomes you.’

They’re not real. The realisation hit Tansy anew. She remembered the baby dissolving into teeth in her arms.

She pushed through the crowd, ignoring the merry cries of ‘Uyst welcomes you!’ from the various vendors and shoppers. Eventually she burst out the other side, pausing in the shade of an orange stone building.

And then she saw a familiar figure, sitting on the seawall, a little grey dog by her side.

‘Merit!’ she cried, hitching up her skirts to dash over.

The knight turned and stood to greet her, a slightly guarded expression on her face.

You don't even care, do you?

Had Tansy really said that?

'I'm sorry,' she blurted out. 'Of course you care. It's just … the baby—'

'I know,' said Merit, and smiled.

Tansy felt sunshine glow within her.

'You look thirsty,' Merit said, and handed her a waterskin. Tansy drank gratefully, sitting beside Merit on the seawall.

A few locals were swimming, skin glistening bright in the water. Bracken raced down to the shore, barking joyously.

'Any news?' Merit asked.

Tansy hesitated. 'The dolls—' She swallowed down a lump of uneasiness. 'They got torn up.'

Merit frowned. 'Torn up? By who?'

Tansy saw the tension come over Merit like a wave. 'Maybe it was the cat,' she said.

Merit seemed unconvinced. 'Are you sure? Maybe I should come back and—'

'No!' Tansy blurted out. Merit couldn't come back. Lady Aster would be angry. 'I … I'm certain it was the cat. It hates those dolls as much as I do.'

It was easy to believe, out here in the golden afternoon. She had been jumping at shadows.

Merit nodded, clearly relieved, and changed the subject. 'You were right,' she said. 'This one *is* nice.'

Tansy fanned herself with her hand. 'I didn't expect it to be so *hot*,' she replied. 'I wish I could put my feet in the water.'

'Why don't you?'

Tansy blinked. There was nothing stopping her, but it felt somehow scandalous. Dismissing any further thoughts of the torn dolls from her mind, she unlaced her boots and removed her stockings, then scurried across the beach to the water's edge. The sand was warm and soft between her toes.

She squealed with delight as a wavelet washed over her bare feet. It was thrilling – fresh and soothing and deliciously cool.

'Come on,' she called to Merit. 'It's wonderful!'

Merit waved and bent to unlace her own boots.

Tansy turned and gazed out over the water, feeling a strange calmness settle over her. She knew that the pull of loyalty back to Lady Aster would come, but the old woman was safely sleeping right now. Merit wasn't mad at her anymore, and it felt pointless worrying about torn dolls and tooth-babies when it was such a beautiful day.

A lone woman wandered the shore, further along the beach, bending every now and then to pick up a seashell. Tansy squinted, peering at her.

She looked somehow familiar.

She was not much older than Tansy, and very beautiful, with rich brown skin and curling dark hair gathered into a low knot. There was a quiet strength to her.

'She's a warrior,' Merit said, her gaze following Tansy's. 'You can tell by the way she moves.'

A wave washed over Merit's feet, and the knight gasped.

'Isn't it glorious?' Tansy said.

Merit grinned at her, and everything was liquid sunshine. Any last traces of uneasiness dissolved, and Tansy surrendered to the golden afternoon.

They splashed and paddled on the shore as Bracken chased the little waves, then watched the fishing boats come in and unload their catches onto the docks.

Tansy's stomach growled, and she stared longingly at the covered stalls in the nearby market. 'I wish we had some money,' she said.

Merit sighed. 'I haven't eaten since yesterday,' she said. 'Except for a cake that a nice lady in the market gave me.'

She slid a hand into her pocket, as if to show Tansy how empty it was. But she frowned and instead pulled out a handful of bright copper coins.

'Where did they come from?' Tansy asked.

'I … I don't know.' Merit glanced around, as if someone might have slipped the money into her pocket while she wasn't looking.

But there was no one nearby, except for the shell collector, who was a little way down the beach.

Merit shrugged. 'Wait here,' she said. 'I'll be right back.'

She scrambled up over the seawall, and Tansy bent to collect a delicate pink shell, all frills and spirals.

'That's a rose nautilus,' a friendly voice said, and Tansy looked up to see the shell collector smiling at her.

'D-did you give us those coins?' she asked.

The woman glanced over to Merit, who was pulling her boots back on.

‘It is a good day for falling in love,’ she said, her eyes twinkling.

Tansy felt her cheeks grow warm. ‘In … *love*?’ she spluttered. ‘I’m not … I mean … I don’t … Merit is just a friend. Unless you mean that *you* …’

The woman chuckled, the sound low and rich. ‘My own beloved will be here soon.’

She held up a shell, a delicate spiralling thing with coppery ridges and soft pink inner folds. ‘Every time I see her, I give her a shell,’ she said. ‘They are like pieces of my heart that she can carry with her.’

‘That’s beautiful,’ said Tansy.

The shell collector nodded, then wandered away up the beach.

Tansy’s eyes strayed to Merit, who was returning from the market, her arms full of food. Tansy grinned and went to meet her at the seawall.

It was a true feast. Tiny fried shrimp in a paper cone. Grilled tentacles drenched in some kind of sticky, tangy sauce. Crunchy strips of seaweed dusted with spices. And a spiked fruit with bright purple flesh.

Bracken appeared as if from nowhere and sat politely at Merit’s feet, gazing up at her with wistful eyes.

‘I saw you talking to the shell collector,’ Merit said. ‘Did she have anything interesting to say?’

Tansy fed a tiny shrimp to Bracken and cleared her throat. ‘She … she said she collects the shells for her beloved.’

‘That’s nice,’ Merit said.

‘She seemed … more real than the lady at the cake stall,’ Tansy observed.

Merit nodded. ‘I’ve noticed that too,’ she said. ‘Some of them just say *Uyst welcomes you*, but there are others you can have a proper conversation with.’

‘Do you think they’re all like …’

Like the baby.

Bouncing teeth on the floor.

Sawdust scattered around the torn corpses of dolls.

Yarrow, the stalks broken and trampled into the dirt.

Better to forget.

Merit nodded. ‘Probably,’ she said. ‘They’re certainly not … real, whole people.’

Tansy shoved it all down, deep inside her, and reached for another shrimp from the paper cone, popping it into her mouth. The salty crunch gave way

to juicy sweetness, and Tansy allowed herself to savour it. She was safe here.

Merit was watching her, a tiny crease between her brows. She bit her lip but said nothing.

‘Where is your sword?’ Tansy asked, looking around.

‘I found an empty room,’ Merit said, indicating the orange stone building with the green front door. ‘It seemed safe.’

They sat on the stone wall and ate, watching the fishing boats as the afternoon sun stained everything pink and gold.

‘This tastes amazing,’ Merit said, her mouth full of the purple fruit.

‘Better than raspberries?’ Tansy asked.

Merit grinned at her. ‘Well, I wouldn’t go that far.’

Tansy kicked her heels against the stone wall and gazed out over the sea.

‘Where do you think this place is?’ Merit asked. ‘It could be the south coast of Valla.’

Tansy shrugged. She didn’t want to think about where it was. She just wanted to be there, in the moment. She fed Bracken another shrimp.

‘I found the barrier,’ Merit continued. ‘Just beyond the market. It’s strange, you can see the rest of the town, but it’s sort of … fuzzy. Like you’re looking at it through clouded glass. I wonder if there is a way of breaking it and getting back to Valla.’

Tansy didn’t want to think about Merit returning home.

The sun was still skimming the horizon, streaking the blue water with rose and gold.

‘Do you think Lady Aster has been to all these places?’ she asked dreamily.

‘Can you imagine her, paddling in the sea?’ Merit snorted.

Tansy giggled, then felt guilty.

‘You still don’t remember anything, from before?’ Merit asked.

Tansy shook her head. Only the Oubliette. Only Lady Aster.

‘You will,’ Merit assured her, with what sounded like false confidence. ‘I was only in the Oubliette for two weeks. I could still remember things; they’d just gone a bit vague. You’ve been there for … much longer than that.’

‘I suppose so,’ Tansy said, but she was still unsure.

She thought of the cake seller. Of the baby, dissolving into teeth.

The dolls, torn to pieces, their sawdust insides scattered on the floor.

What if I'm not real either? She shoved the question out of her mind, along with all her other dark thoughts.

'What next?' Merit asked. 'There has to be a way back to the real world. Perhaps you could look in some of the old woman's books for clues.'

The taste of lavender rose in Tansy's throat, and she felt almost relieved to feel the pull back to Lady Aster. She didn't want to talk about Merit leaving.

'I have to go,' she said.

A flash of disappointment passed over Merit's face.

'I'd stay if I could,' Tansy added softly.

Merit smiled at her, but it was forced. It didn't make her face light up, or those eyes shine. 'Will you come back?'

There was a vulnerability in her voice that made Tansy's heart ache.

'Tomorrow. I promise.'

'And you'll look for clues?'

'Of course.' Tansy nodded; then she and Bracken made their way back through the market to the stone door.

'Uyst welcomes you!' the cake lady called as they passed.

Tansy tidied up the remains of the dolls after Lady Aster went to bed.

'It was the cat,' she reassured herself as she swept sawdust into a pan. 'That's all.'

She and Bracken arrived in the pretty seaside town the next afternoon and were greeted again by the sandy-haired man and the cake lady.

The sun was low on the horizon once more, the air still and heavy. Tansy took a moment to let the heat soak into her skin, melting away the stony chill of the Oubliette. The scent of coastal rosemary and honeysuckle made her smile. It felt … safe.

Merit was swimming, her head bobbing on the gentle sea. Tansy could see she was dressed only in her underthings, and she felt heat wash over her as she glanced at the neatly folded pile of clothes on the sand.

Merit raised an arm in a wave, beckoning to Tansy.

She couldn't.

Could she?

Take off her clothes in front of everyone?

The clear turquoise water called to her, cool and inviting.

‘Come on,’ Merit called. ‘You’ll love it!’

‘I’m not sure I know how to swim,’ Tansy confessed.

Merit smiled, her face open and relaxed. ‘Let’s find out.’ She swam back to shore, cutting through the water with powerful strokes.

Tansy hesitated, then undid her pinafore and pulled the brown dress over her head. She left them on the warm sand with Bracken and waded in up to her knees, the water soaking into her white shift, turning it rather transparent.

She swallowed.

Merit grinned at her, beckoning her further in.

At least the water would provide her with some modesty. Yelping at the shock of the cold water on her warm skin, Tansy forged her way into the sea. Her shift grew wet and heavy when she was out of the water, but as she went deeper and became submerged, it floated around her, making her feel as though she were a water nymph.

‘Lie on your back,’ Merit instructed. ‘I’ll hold you up until you get the hang of it.’

Tansy let her feet lift from the sandy seafloor, and Merit’s hands went under her.

‘I’ve got you,’ Merit assured her. ‘Just relax.’

Tansy let her head fall back, the water cool on her scalp. She gazed up at the sky, blue fading through pink into gold on the horizon.

‘That’s it,’ Merit said encouragingly. ‘Look at that, you’re floating.’

A wave broke nearby, washing over Tansy’s face. Salt water went up her nose and she flailed, trying to right herself, her toes searching for purchase.

Teeth, bouncing on bare floorboards.

Doll parts and sawdust.

Broken stems of yarrow.

She was drowning.

‘You’re fine,’ Merit said, her arms going around Tansy. ‘It isn’t that deep.’

Tansy clung to Merit’s sturdy frame, her broad shoulders a life raft. The movement of the water washed them together, and for a moment their limbs tangled, skin sliding on skin.

The water swirled around them, and Tansy found herself almost nose to nose with Merit, unable to look away from her dark galaxy eyes.

They ate more fried tentacles and strange fruits on the seawall, and Tansy avoided Merit’s questions about finding a way back to Valla. Bracken curled

up at their feet and fell asleep, his fur baking in the late afternoon sun.

‘I wish you could stay,’ Merit said softly.

‘Me too,’ Tansy replied, and it was only half a lie.

It was easier this way, two worlds separated. Lady Aster in one, and Merit in the other. When they were together, it was too much. She didn’t know who to turn to, who to trust, who deserved her loyalty more.

This way, she could have both.

The days began to melt together. Tansy woke each morning, a kernel of warm anticipation at her core. She did her housework, made tea, got Lady Aster dressed. The old woman didn’t seem to notice the dolls were missing.

Sometimes she caught Lady Aster watching her with a strange, almost misty expression on her face. Almost like she knew where Tansy went every afternoon after Lady Aster retired for her nap. But she never said anything.

Every day, Tansy and Bracken greeted the sandy-haired gentleman, the cake lady and the shell collector. Then the two of them would find Merit, and the girls would go swimming in the crystal-clear sea. Tansy grew braver in the water, and Merit taught her how to kick her legs and paddle with her hands. They laughed and splashed each other and sometimes they tangled together under the water, and Tansy wasn’t sure if it was by accident or on purpose, but she didn’t care. She just loved being with Merit.

They sat, side by side on the seawall, and ate fried shrimp and sticky tentacles from paper cones, licking salt from their fingers and talking about nothing at all.

Every day, Merit asked if Tansy had made any progress with finding a way back to Valla. Tansy mumbled about reading old books and going through Lady Aster’s papers, though she had done no such thing. She didn’t like lying, but she didn’t want to give up those golden afternoons with Merit.

Time never seemed to pass in Uyst – it was always the honey-drenched hour as afternoon melted into evening. But something deep inside Tansy knew when she’d stayed too long. The threads inside her would tighten and start to pull. Lavender drowned out the fresh salt of Uyst, and she would return to the Oubliette to make Lady Aster’s tea.

At night, Tansy lay in her bed and thought about Merit, letting that rosy warmth spread through her, a delicious, sweet kind of longing. She would

remember Merit’s hands under her, holding her up in the water. The feeling of her skin sliding against Merit’s, setting off sparkling sensations all over her body.

‘Are you lost?’ the sandy-haired man asked as she strode through the market.

‘No,’ she told him with a smile. ‘I know exactly where I’m going.’

‘Uyst welcomes you,’ the man said with a wink.

The cake lady offered her usual powdery crescent moon. ‘You need one of these.’

Tansy shook her head. ‘Not today, thank you,’ she said.

‘It’s a gift,’ the woman replied. ‘Uyst welcomes you.’

Tansy felt the fizzing of anticipation as she pushed through the crowds to the beach. She didn’t see Merit at first. She spotted the shell collector, following the shoreline. The white birds bobbing in the sea.

Unease stirred in Tansy’s heart, but then she noticed a dark figure sitting at the far end of the seawall, away from everyone else.

She gathered her skirts and ran along the seashore, giddy with joy at seeing Merit again. Bracken raced at her side, happily barking his head off.

‘Merit …’ she panted, out of breath from her mad dash across the warm sand.

The knight turned her head, and Tansy faltered.

Merit’s expression was gloomy, her galaxy eyes dull.

‘What is it?’ Tansy asked.

Merit sighed. ‘Five days,’ she said. ‘That’s how long I’ve been here, and we’re no closer than we were before.’

Tansy sat down next to her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

Merit glanced at her fondly. ‘It’s not your fault,’ she said. ‘I know you’ve been trying to find answers.’

Tansy felt a sharp spike of guilt. She hadn’t been trying at all.

‘I just can’t stop thinking about what Valiant said,’ Merit said. ‘The attack on the Bright City. I thought I could do something to stop it, or at least warn them. But it could have already happened for all I know.’

The knight got abruptly to her feet and strode down to the shore. Her shoulders were hunched with tension.

Tansy followed, feeling wretched.

‘I thought you liked it here,’ she said.

Merit’s frown deepened. ‘It’s lovely,’ she said. ‘But it’s still a cage.’

Tansy’s guilt sharpened into resentment. ‘I live in a cage too,’ she retorted. ‘But I have to work all day. Scrubbing and cleaning and cooking. I’d *love* a day when I just got to laze around on the beach.’

‘Well, I’d love a day when I could do literally anything else.’

There was venom in Merit’s words, and it stung.

‘I’m not one of her dolls, you know,’ Merit said, and Tansy thought guiltily of the disembowelled dolls in the Oubliette. ‘You can’t just put me on a shelf when you’re sick of me.’

I’m not sick of you, Tansy wanted to say. *I’ll never be sick of you.*

That was the problem. Couldn’t Merit see that? If they found a way to send Merit home, then Merit would leave and Tansy would never see her again.

The thought of it was almost too much to bear.

Merit brushed an impatient hand through her hair. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I can’t stop thinking about everything I did. The people I hurt. I need to make it right. And I can’t do it in here.’

‘I know,’ Tansy said. ‘I understand.’

And she did. Merit was right; Tansy *had* been treating her like one of Lady Aster’s dolls. Merit deserved more.

‘I’ll go and get us some food,’ Merit said, her tone conciliatory.

She strode off to the market, and Tansy wandered along the shoreline, gazing out over the water while Bracken investigated a crab that was scuttling across the sand.

‘It is a good day for falling in love,’ the shell collector observed as Tansy drew close to her.

Tansy felt a bubble of miserable laughter rise in her. ‘Not exactly,’ she replied.

But the shell collector didn’t seem to hear her. ‘My own beloved will be here soon,’ she said.

‘You say that every day,’ Tansy observed. ‘But she never comes.’

The shell collector held up her latest find. ‘Every time I see her, I give her a shell,’ she said. ‘They are like pieces of my heart that she can carry with her.’

‘H-how do you know?’ Tansy asked. ‘When you’re in love?’

The shell collector turned to her, head cocked. For a moment, Tansy didn't think she would answer. But then the shell collector spoke.

'You know when she is all you think about. When all you want is to be by her side. When being away from her hurts you, here.' She pressed a hand to her breast.

Tansy thought of Merit.

And she thought of Lady Aster.

Bitterness rose inside her as she realised she'd never be able to choose Merit. Her feelings didn't matter. There was no room for true love. Lady Aster had laid claim to all of Tansy, right down to her bones.

Tansy looked at the shell collector's glowing skin, the curve of her nose, the proud arch of her neck.

And she suddenly remembered where she'd seen her before.

'Merit thought you might be a warrior,' she said tentatively.

The shell collector nodded. 'I am,' she said. 'Or I will be. I'm joining Valla's ninth battalion next week. This will be the last time I see my beloved before I go.'

'Your beloved?' Tansy couldn't keep the tremble out of her voice.

There was a sadness to the shell lady's expression, but a certain steel as well. 'I'm doing this for her,' she explained. 'My beloved has a brilliant mind. I just want her to be safe.'

Tansy swallowed. 'Wh-what is her name?' she asked, although she already knew the answer.

The shell collector smiled fondly. 'Aster.'

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15
TANSY

Hellebore: Sprinkle the powdered root on the ground to banish unfriendly spirits.

‘THEY’RE MEMORIES,’ Tansy explained excitedly when Merit returned, a paper cone in each hand. ‘The glass globes. They’re Lady Aster’s memories. The shell collector – there’s a portrait of her on Lady Aster’s dressing table. I … I think they were lovers once.’

It was strange to think of Lady Aster being young. Walking along the shoreline here in Uyst with the shell collector, hand in hand, watching the late afternoon sun kiss the water.

‘The shell room in the Oubliette,’ Merit said, gazing down the beach at the shell collector. ‘They’re all from *her*?’

Tansy nodded. ‘What do you think happened to her?’ she asked.

‘She was a warrior,’ Merit said. ‘Maybe she died in battle.’

Tansy thought of how *sad* the shell collection room felt. Perhaps Merit was right.

Merit picked up a handful of sand and let it run slowly through her fingers.

‘Lady Aster told me you were refugees,’ Merit mused. ‘I thought … in the first globe … that maybe you both escaped from there.’

Tansy nodded eagerly. ‘Maybe she saved the baby,’ she said. ‘Maybe Lady Aster is the one who put up the ring of protection around it.’

Merit turned to gaze at Tansy, a thoughtful crease on her brow. ‘Tansy,’ she said. ‘The baby …’

Tansy waited for her to finish, but Merit seemed to want Tansy to figure it out on her own.

And then she did.

‘You … you think the baby …’ She blinked. ‘You think it was a memory of *me*?’

Merit bit her lip. ‘It would explain why you don’t remember anything other than the Oubliette,’ she said.

Tansy turned the thought over in her mind. Had Lady Aster found her as an infant, alone and frightened, the only survivor of a terrible disaster, and adopted her? Protected her?

It would explain why Tansy felt such ties of loyalty to the old woman.

The familiar pull started up in her chest again. Lady Aster would be waking up soon.

‘I’d better—’

‘Yes, yes.’ Merit waved her away with a rueful grin. ‘Can’t let the old bat go without her tea.’

Back in the Oubliette, she served Lady Aster tea in the sitting room. With lemon, as it was the afternoon.

Had she grown up in this house? Taken her first steps here? Had there been a time when Lady Aster had prepared Tansy’s meals, instead of the

other way around?

The cat wandered in, springing onto the sideboard next to the framed portrait.

It was definitely the shell collector. Older, though. This gave Tansy some comfort – perhaps she and Lady Aster had lived happily together for many years. Had Tansy known her too?

‘What is it, girl?’ the old woman snapped.

‘N-nothing, ma’am,’ Tansy responded. ‘I just—’

‘Just what?’

Tansy summoned her courage. ‘That woman,’ she said, pointing at the portrait. ‘What was her name?’

Lady Aster’s eyes strayed to the framed picture. ‘You’ve seen her.’ It was a statement, not a question.

Suddenly, Tansy felt foolish. Of course Lady Aster knew that Tansy had secretly been visiting Merit in Uyst. She knew everything. She had even let Tansy keep the little silver key.

‘It’s beautiful there,’ Tansy said softly.

The ghost of a smile appeared on Lady Aster’s thin lips. ‘It is,’ she agreed.

Tansy wanted to ask a thousand questions, but Lady Aster held up a hand.

‘You may continue to visit there if you like. But promise me you won’t open any other doors,’ she said.

The air was drenched with the dusty scent of lavender.

‘I promise,’ Tansy whispered.

The cat stuck a leg in the air and began to wash itself. Lady Aster regarded it for a long moment, then reached for her tea.

Tansy woke at dawn, as always, full of tingling anticipation. She would see Merit again today. The house was silent and still, and colder than usual. On the second-floor landing (it was always there now), she noticed that the door to Uyst was ajar. She glanced over her shoulder, but the passage was empty.

Cold dread collected in her gut.

‘I must have left it open last night,’ she told Bracken, who had followed her down from her attic room.

The little dog whined.

Perhaps she should visit Uyst and check that the knight was safe. Lady Aster wouldn't be up for an hour.

As she stepped through the doorway into Uyst, the cold feeling intensified. Something was very wrong.

It was too quiet. No cries from the market. No music drifting down from windows. All she could hear was the lapping of waves against the shore.

It smelled wrong, too. The usual comforting scents of saltbush, honeysuckle and rosemary were drowned out by something bitter and cold, like the tomb of an ancient warrior.

The market was empty – stalls overturned, hunks of cheese and smashed purple fruit scattered all over the orange flagstones.

Bracken clung to Tansy's ankles, his tail between his legs.

Where was Merit?

The toe of her boot nudged something – a pile of sawdust and what looked like torn fabric, faded blue. Silver glinted in the afternoon sun – bright buttons, just like the ones on the sandy-haired gentleman's coat.

Her heart hammered as she made her way over to the cake stall.

The cake lady was sitting on the ground in front of it, her legs splayed. Horror clawed its way into Tansy when she saw that the woman was split open like a sack, right down the middle of her chest. But instead of blood and entrails, sawdust spilled from her insides. The woman's head was sagging, her eyes vacant. As Tansy looked more closely, she realised the woman's eyes were made of glass, and her face wasn't a face at all, just painted marks on rough linen.

'You all right, love?' the lady asked, her voice rasping and dry.

Tansy took a hurried step back. The cake lady's head turned, a strange, unnatural movement that made Tansy's skin crawl.

'You need one of these,' the cake lady said, but her painted mouth didn't move.

She held out a floppy linen hand that held nothing but sawdust.

'N-no, thank you,' Tansy stammered, backing away.

'Uyst welcomes you,' the lady said, and her head slumped forward.

Tansy fled, sprinting down to the beach with Bracken close behind.

'Merit?' she called into the silence. 'Are you here?'

Please, let her be here. Let her be safe.

She saw a flash of red by the water's edge and leaped over the seawall, her heart in her mouth.

It was the shell collector's red dress. She was lying crumpled on the sand, and someone – or something – was bending over her. Even over the gentle hiss of the sea, Tansy could hear it. A rattling, panting breath and a scrabbling, wet sound.

The crouching figure seemed … *wrong*. Like reality had to bend to accommodate its shape. Tansy felt her eyes sliding off it, as if her mind couldn't quite register its existence. It was somehow too big for the beach, but in other ways no bigger than a speck of dust.

Tansy's stomach lurched as she forced herself to see it properly.

It looked like a man – or something that had once been a man. Clothes hung from a skeletal frame, as thin and insubstantial as cobwebs. Its skin was grey and dull, like ashes. Hair hung in dry colourless wisps.

The shell collector lay still on the damp sand. A wave washed over her body, and Tansy could see her shredded red dress, wet sawdust, and the glinting of glass eyes.

She inhaled sharply, and the hunched creature froze, head crooked to one side, as if listening.

'It is a good day to fall in love,' the shell collector said, her voice wet and muffled.

Tansy took a single step backwards, her feet sinking into the sand. The creature's head snapped around, faster than Tansy thought possible. She bit back a scream as she saw its face.

Sunken grey cheeks. Thin lips pulled back over snarling, pointed teeth.

It scuttled across the sand on all fours like some kind of monstrous spider, heading directly for Tansy.

It looked like it was sleeping – its eyes were closed. No, not closed. As the creature came closer, Tansy saw that it didn't have eyelids at all, just skin. It was as if it had kept its eyes shut for so long, the skin had grown over them.

A monster.

Run, Tansy told herself. *Run.*

But she couldn't move.

Bracken was trembling at her side, seemingly as frozen as she was.

Then the creature was upon her, its fingers on her throat.

It was cold. So cold, even in the heat of the Uyst evening. The cold crept all the way through her, right into her heart, along with the scent of gravedust and bitter ice.

The creature leaned into her breath, as if trying to warm itself. Its teeth grazed her cheek, and she heard the sharp *snap* of its jaw as she jerked her head away just in time.

Bracken came back to life, exploding into motion and high-pitched barks. He darted forward and snapped at the monster, catching a scrap of its tattered cloak in his teeth.

The creature shrank back, snarling. Its skeletal hands went over what remained of its ears, and it cowered away from the little dog, who let go of the cloak and continued to bark.

‘Get back,’ a voice said, and Tansy let out a sob of relief.

Merit, black sword in her hand.

She was alive.

The creature hissed at her, a garbled, snarling noise.

Bracken continued to bark, dancing back and forth on nimble paws. The monster clutched its head, twisting from side to side in an attempt to avoid the piercing sound.

Merit darted forward and kicked out at it, knocking it away from Tansy, who crouched uselessly, unable to stop shivering.

The knight was entirely focused on the creature, her eyes intense. Tansy could see the control she had over her body as she waited for the opportunity to attack.

It came, and Merit lunged, her sword sliding into the monster. It let out a dry, rattling sigh as it staggered back. Merit withdrew her sword, but there was no blood on the blade. The creature didn’t collapse. It advanced towards her, its movements precise and insect-like.

Merit swung again, a crunching blow that caught the creature on the shoulder. The blade sliced into its ragged edges, but again there was no blood.

This time Merit hit out with a massive swinging arc. The sword passed through the monster’s neck, severing it completely. But the head did not topple to the ground. The strange insubstantialness of the creature somehow intensified, blurring around the edges. The monster’s dry, papery skin seemed to knit back together in a sliding, smoothing motion that made Tansy’s stomach lurch as she struggled to comprehend it. The creature bent its head from side to side, as if testing its own mobility.

It hissed again, and the gravelly sounds resolved themselves into words that Tansy could understand.

‘H-he … will … return.’

She swallowed.

‘Why won’t this thing *die*?’ Merit growled, and swung again.

‘I … I don’t think it can,’ Tansy called to her.

‘Then what do we do?’

There was only one answer. ‘We run.’

Merit let out a grunt of acknowledgement, then attacked the creature once more, aiming this time for its spindly legs, hacking and slashing at it until it fell to the ground. Merit tore a leg completely free, then snatched it up before it could knit back together, striding to the water’s edge and hurling the limb into the sea.

‘It is a good day to fall in love,’ the shell collector remarked, her sodden painted lips not moving.

Merit shuddered. ‘That should buy us some time,’ she panted, and grabbed Tansy’s hand, hauling her to her feet.

The ground heaved underneath them, as if the laws of the universe had become scrambled. Tansy felt dizzy from it, unable to tell which direction was up.

Somehow, Merit got them to the stone door on the other side of the markets, Bracken racing ahead, still barking furiously.

Tansy’s fingers fumbled getting the key into the lock – she was still so *cold*.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the cake lady had disintegrated further, now little more than torn linen.

‘Uyst welcomes you,’ said the painted slash of a mouth, the voice dry and crackling with sawdust.

The key slid into the lock, and they plunged through the doorway and back into the Oubliette.

‘That’s the thing that chased me on the dark paths,’ Merit gasped.

‘It said something,’ Tansy said. ‘*He will return*.’

Merit leaned against the wall, panting, her sword still in her hand. ‘The Unmaker,’ she said, her voice quiet with dread. ‘Valiant said the Unmaker was returning soon. He was right.’

Tansy stared at her. Merit's face was paler than usual, her scar standing out pink and bold against her skin.

'There were signs,' Merit continued. 'A blood moon. Salt-rain. Lightning in the northern skies. The Halls of Order have a team of augurs who consult the stars and rabbit entrails for signs …'

Tansy thought about the silent city they had visited. It had felt as if all its citizens had been …

'Merit,' she whispered. 'Do you think—'

'Where are you, girl?' Lady Aster called from downstairs.

Strings pulled tight inside Tansy.

'You have to go,' she hissed to Merit.

Lady Aster would know. She knew *everything*.

Merit held out a calming hand. 'Just—'

But all Tansy could hear was the tread of a foot on the stairs. All she could smell was lavender.

The house seemed to shiver in anticipation.

She was coming.

Lady Aster was coming.

'Now!' Tansy said, fumbling at the closest door with the key.

It felt wrong. She had promised Lady Aster that she wouldn't visit any of the other memories.

But *she* wasn't going through the door. Just Merit. *She* wasn't breaking her promise.

'You don't know what's through there,' Merit protested.

But Tansy couldn't think about this. Her strings were pulled so tightly, all she could think about was Lady Aster.

Lady Aster, who had given her everything. Had rescued her from tragedy as a baby.

'Tansy,' Merit said. 'Just wait a moment. Breathe.'

'I can't,' Tansy said miserably. 'There's only her. Nothing else.'

She opened the door, shoved Merit through, and slammed it shut again. 'I'm coming, ma'am!' she called.

She woke the next morning with the cold realisation that everything was still wrong. The cat wasn't there, batting her cheek. She couldn't hear the goose

honking its morning call.

Tansy dressed hurriedly and went downstairs, poking her head into Lady Aster's room to check that the old woman was still sleeping soundly.

In the kitchen, the cat and the dog sat side by side on the hearthrug, their eyes on her.

'What is it?' she asked them. 'What happened?'

Uneasiness prickled through her, and she strained her ears for any sign of danger.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

Opening the back door, Tansy stepped out into the icy morning and hurried for the little orchard.

Someone … or *something* had been there, she could feel it. The odour of rusted metal and ancient stone hung in the air.

The chickens were … Tansy stopped, her hand going to her mouth.

The orchard was strewn with feathers and sawdust. Scraps of linen displayed roughly painted yellow beaks and red combs.

They had never been real in the first place.

Was any of this real?

Were she and Lady Aster trapped inside a memory?

A pair of beady eyes watched her from deep in the blueberry bushes.

'What happened?' she asked the goose.

The eyes retreated into the leafy darkness.

Tansy tried to lure it out with scraps of bread and a freshly unearthed worm, but the goose refused to emerge.

She went back inside and put the kettle on, her movements automatic as her mind whirled.

The dolls were gone, and now the chickens.

Something had torn them all to pieces.

Could it have been the monster from Uyst? Had it slipped through the door after her? Or could it have followed Merit when Tansy shoved her through that random door?

She thought of its cold, hissing voice.

He will return.

She felt a prickle along her spine and glanced out the kitchen window, as if the creature might appear at any moment.

The kettle began to boil, and Tansy was engulfed in a cloud of steam, her ears ringing with the shrill whistle.

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16
MERIT

Primrose: Protect precious items from theft.

THE SILVER MISTS gave way to a riotous swirl of colour and sound. Merit's heart thundered, adrenaline roaring in her ears. Was she in the midst of a battle? There were people everywhere, the air thick with the scent of human bodies. They moved in strange, smooth ways, some combat style that Merit didn't know. She glimpsed a face, contorted and twisted with blank staring eyes. Another had curving horns rising from its brow. Another, scales, like a fish.

More monsters.

Her training kicked in, and she crouched low, moving silently through the press of them, hoping to remain unnoticed.

Notice your environment.

Find a defensive position.

Kill all who resist.

Someone nearby shrieked, and Merit froze for a moment, then kept moving.

She was inside, she realised, in a huge room of black marble, with vaulted ceilings supported by thick black pillars.

The crush of bodies eased, and Merit found a wall that she could put her back against. She raised her sword in a defensive stance, eyes casting around for the most immediate threat.

‘Careful with that!’ a voice said as it whirled past her.

Her adrenaline started to ebb, and she blinked, the scene before her finally coming into focus.

It was a ballroom, chandeliers glittering gold against black marble pillars, the walls hung with garlands of laurel and juniper.

What she had first thought were monsters were merely dancers, whirling and spinning. They wore masks along with elaborate gowns and frilled coats. An orchestra was perched on a stage at the other end of the hall, strains of music drifting over the general clamour of voices and laughter.

The middle of the ballroom was dominated by a huge statue of an extremely well-muscled man clad in not much at all, his hands clasped over his breast. Golden spikes protruded from his head like a halo, and around his ankles twined two serpents wrought in intricate onyx and silver.

Merit closed her eyes in relief and sheathed her sword.

It took a few minutes for her heartbeat to return to normal.

An abandoned mask lay on a side table, alongside a half-empty goblet of wine. Merit tied it on over her face – it was black, with a simple silver filigree design. She knew this place was just a memory, but after the horrors of Uyst, Merit was keen to go unnoticed.

She slipped along the edge of the wall and through a set of glass doors, onto a terrace overlooking a grand palace complex, with thick stone walls and domed roofs. To Merit, it looked like something from a fairy story.

There were revellers out here as well, goblets in hands, chatting and laughing. But it was nothing compared to the intense crush of the ballroom.

Merit found a quiet stretch of balcony, away from everyone else, and took a few deep breaths.

The palace consisted of great silver and black striped domes, perched on a hillside. Below, a chequerboard of fields and farms spread out before her, interspersed with little clusters of woodland.

The sun was setting behind her, instead of over the ocean, and she suddenly felt very far from anywhere. She found herself longing for the simplicity of Uyst, and the sunny afternoons she had spent splashing in the sea with Tansy. Why had she been so eager to leave?

Because a monster had appeared and tried to kill them.

That creature, with its blank skin-covered eyes and sharp, pointed teeth. Merit shuddered.

Those hissing, garbled sounds, resolving into words.

He will return.

The Unmaker.

It had to be.

Merit closed her eyes and saw the shell collector, her body split open like a sack, nothing inside but wet sawdust.

Merit had known the people inside the glass globes weren't real. They were just echoes. Memories. But the shell collector had *felt* real. Much more so than the cake lady, or the man who gave her fried tentacles in a paper cone every day.

It made sense, really. If the glass globes were all Lady Aster's memories, and the shell collector had been Lady Aster's lover, then of course the echo of her would be clearer, more detailed. Of course she'd seem more like a real person.

Merit's shoulder ached from the frenzied attack on the monster in Uyst. She was out of shape.

'What now?' she murmured to herself.

Her plan had been to return to Valla. To present herself to the Bright Guard. To warn them about the Carrion Knights and the return of the Unmaker.

But that was before she had felt Tansy's skin slide against hers, smooth and cool. It was before she had watched Tansy lick salt from her fingers. It was before her dreams had been of Tansy, her sparkling eyes and gently parting lips.

The thought of never seeing her again was almost too much to bear.

And Tansy was never going to leave Lady Aster.

While Lady Aster was sleeping, Tansy belonged to Merit. She was carefree, laughing and running and splashing in the sea. But then, every day, it was as if a veil fell over her. Her attention would snap back to the Oubliette, and to the old woman.

Merit had no doubt that Tansy was under a spell, but she had no idea how to break it.

The skin prickled on the back of her neck, and she glanced around, her hand going to her sword hilt.

An old man with elaborate white whiskers curling from beneath a hawkish mask held up both hands in surrender. One hand was holding a very full goblet of wine.

'Didn't mean to startle you,' he said, slurring his words a little. 'I was just looking for somewhere to quietly get drunk. Do you mind?' He gestured to the stretch of balcony rail next to Merit.

Merit nodded. 'Go ahead.'

The man pulled off his mask and let it drop to the ground, leaned on the balcony and gazed out over the city. His face was lined, but there was a kindness in his eyes that made Merit feel somehow at ease.

'You're not a dancer either,' he observed.

'No,' Merit agreed.

She wanted to ask him where she was. *When* she was. Had Lady Aster attended this ball, once? It was difficult to imagine the old woman dancing, surrounded by music and gaiety.

'Where do you hail from, friend?' asked the man.

'From Valla,' Merit replied.

'I figured. Welcome to Halsgarth. I am Thymian, His Highness's master of cups.' He snorted softly into his goblet.

Halsgarth.

Merit frowned.

She had learned about Halsgarth as an acolyte. A corrupt state, across the seas. A land of vice and greed and cruelty that was eventually destroyed by the Unmaker. They had stolen the pride of Valla – the stone known as Anhelion – but the Unmaker had reclaimed it.

Merit gazed out at the beautiful palace and its people. They didn't *look* corrupt and perverse. A little drunk, perhaps.

'You'd think that a visiting king would show up to his own ball,' Thymian observed. 'Does he know how much a party like this costs? The wine alone

almost bankrupted us. Not to mention the food. And the orchestra has been rehearsing for months. Learning your traditional Vallan music, horrid as it is.' He made a face. 'Too many violins, always screeching and scraping.'

Merit blinked. 'The king?' she asked. 'The king of Valla is here?'

It felt ridiculous to say. Valla hadn't had a king for centuries.

'King Elior is *not* here,' the man replied. 'That's what I'm saying. He hasn't bothered to attend the official party in honour of his state visit.'

King Elior. In Halsgarth. If this truly was one of Lady Aster's memories, it would mean that she was more than *five hundred years old*.

How was it possible?

Thymian took a deep swig from his goblet and stifled a belch. 'There were doves, too,' he continued. 'To symbolise the peace between our two nations. Do you know how difficult it is to find one hundred white doves?'

'Quite difficult?' Merit guessed.

'Indeed. But Prince Runsdaal wanted doves, so I found doves. I found wine. I fought with the kitchens for weeks about what kind of berries King Elior would like the most. Do you know what kind of berries King Elior likes the most?'

Merit shrugged. 'Probably raspberries,' she said, because surely everyone liked raspberries the most.

The old man's face twisted. 'We decided on goldberries,' he said. 'Perhaps it's just as well he didn't show up. Or his famed wizard.'

Merit froze.

'That's who you all really work for,' Thymian said with a shrewd glance at Merit. 'The one they call Astaroth?'

Merit swallowed. The Unmaker's name was rarely spoken in the Halls of Order. How did the old man know? 'I … I do,' she admitted. 'Or at least, I did.'

'I hope I'm not causing some major diplomatic incident here,' Thymian said with a frown. 'Please don't declare war because of my drunken venting.'

'I promise I won't.' Merit's mind was whirling.

The Unmaker was *here*?

Had Lady Aster stood right here and had this same conversation with the whiskered gentleman? Had she been a Vallan *spy*?

Thymian took another swig of wine. 'Probably your king and his wizard are doing very important things in their chambers. I'm only a party planner. I

don’t know anything about matters of state. But it’s only a five-minute walk from the guest suite to this ballroom. You would think they could just pop in and say hello. Admire the doves. Eat a goldberry.’

Merit’s skin crawled, and she glanced nervously over her shoulder.

Thymian leaned forward. ‘I know why you’re really here,’ he slurred. ‘This is a ruse. A veil of diplomacy. You only want one thing.’

‘Oh?’ Merit said, playing along.

‘Anhelion.’

The word was like a bolt of lightning through Merit’s brain. King Elior and the Unmaker were here for Anhelion. Merit hurriedly thought back through the history lessons she’d been taught in the Halls of Order.

Astaroth had been one of King Elior’s advisers. His chief wizard. He had gone to Halsgarth and reclaimed the long-lost jewel Anhelion, which had given him great power. This had started a terrible war that lasted many long years, until Astaroth had returned with the gem and turned its power on the people of Halsgarth, his first great act of unmaking. He created the Carrion Knights, and as Astaroth’s power grew, King Elior became bitter and paranoid. Eventually, the king tried to destroy Astaroth. The Unmaker used Anhelion and unmade the king and the Vallan army, becoming overlord of Valla. But then the cursed Maid had come and somehow reflected the Unmaker’s power back upon him, destroying them both.

This night, this ball. It was the beginning.

But why was this one of Lady Aster’s memories? Why had she been here, talking to this drunken party planner, five centuries ago?

The old man snorted explosively. ‘Don’t play the fool,’ he said. ‘You think we’ll just hand it over because your wizard threatens us? Anhelion is not just another jewel. It is not a prize to be won. It is our *duty*. We are its caretakers, and every citizen of Halsgarth would lay down their life to do so.’

That wasn’t what Merit had been taught.

Something twisted in her gut. Of course it wasn’t. She had known only lies, because she had been taught by the Unmaker’s followers.

Evil.

‘They say this wizard is dangerous,’ the man continued. ‘Wants to use Anhelion to create a new kind of soldier for Valla, a soldier that is totally, unbreakably loyal.’

Merit felt sick.

The Carrion Knights.

‘C-could Anhelion make an army?’ she asked.

Wine sprayed from Thymian’s mouth as he spluttered. ‘Could it make an army?’ he asked indignantly. ‘*Could it make an army?* Girl, Anhelion is the creation stone. It made *everything*.’

Merit looked down at her own hands, pale on the black stone balustrade.

The stories all said that the Unmaker made the Carrion Knights. Stitched them together from corpses on the battlefield.

The truth was worse. Innocent children, ripped from their parents’ arms. Raised with discipline and violence and cruelty. Made to believe they were serving a higher purpose. That there was nobility and an honour in the atrocities they committed.

But what about the first Carrion Knights?

Had the Unmaker used Anhelion to *make* them, from nothing?

An image flashed into her mind of the shell collector, split open like a sack.

Was that what had attacked them in Uyst? An original Carrion Knight? Had the knights truly once been gruesome monsters?

‘He’ll never find it,’ Thymian murmured, almost as if he were talking to himself. ‘We knew he was coming, so we hid it, somewhere secret. Somewhere safe. In the heart of the sun, guarded by dragons.’

Merit stared at the old man, feeling suddenly sick.

If this conversation was one of Lady Aster’s memories, then she would have known where Anhelion was hidden.

Had it been Lady Aster who told the Unmaker?

‘I have to go,’ she blurted out.

The whiskered gentleman wagged a finger. ‘Remember,’ he said. ‘No diplomatic incidents. I’m just a drunken party planner, after all.’

‘I promise,’ Merit assured him, and headed back into the ballroom, her mind spinning.

She couldn’t stop the Unmaker from gaining Anhelion. It had already happened, after all. Hundreds of years before she was born. Every soul in this room would die, either during the great war or at the Unmaker’s hand. There was nothing she could do about it.

But there were other souls to be saved. Back in Valla, if only she could find a way out of the Oubliette.

Girl, Anhelion is the creation stone. It made everything.

Could it make a door?

She pushed through the crowd, and found herself in an enormous vaulted chamber, with more black marble pillars and carved statues of stern-faced kings and queens of old lining the walls.

At one end, there was a raised dais with an austere black marble throne.

The roar of the party faded behind her.

Where would you keep a stone of great power? Close to the throne, of course. But perhaps not out in the open where anyone could steal it.

Behind the throne, she spotted a small door, almost hidden away out of sight. That was more like it. She moved silently through the vast hall, aware that guards could appear at any moment.

Or the Unmaker.

The door was engraved with a stylised sunburst.

Merit looked down at her palm and saw the same design there.

Her heart quickened, and she pushed the door open.

The chamber on the other side was small, made of rough-hewn stone, the air damp and ancient. There was a stone basin in the centre of the room, half full of clear, shimmering water. Merit felt an overwhelming sense of sanctity, and she somehow knew without a doubt that this was the place where Anhelion was traditionally kept.

But not anymore.

We knew he was coming, so we hid it, somewhere secret. Somewhere safe.

Merit's heart sank as she realised that Anhelion could be anywhere. She left the chamber, heading back into the ballroom. She'd go back to the balcony and see if she could wring any more information from Thymian.

The revellers seemed to be even more frenzied than before, the aroma of wine hanging heavy in the air. Laughter rose over the music as they spun and whirled in a blur of lace and jewels and leather.

They didn't know that this was their last day of peace.

Her eye fell on the huge golden statue in the middle of the room. The muscular man with his spiked crown. The serpents twisting around his ankles.

Merit frowned. What was it that Thymian had said?

In the heart of the sun, guarded by dragons.

Merit stared at the statue's spiked crown, then down at the sunburst scar on her palm. Then back up at the enormous marble hands, clasped over the

man’s bare chest.

She didn’t think.

She just put her head down and charged through the crowd, right to the centre of the room where the statue rose above the dancing.

She could only reach up to its ankles, but she grasped one and tugged at it.

‘Hey!’ a dancer said as they whirled past. ‘You can’t do that!’

The statue wobbled on its black marble plinth. Merit blinked, and for a second it looked as if the black and silver serpents were writhing, coming to life.

Merit gritted her teeth, scrambling up onto the marble plinth, flinching as she imagined the serpents striking at her.

‘It’s just a statue,’ she muttered to herself, wrapping her arms around one of the golden man’s legs and pulling.

For a moment, she thought she wasn’t strong enough. That the statue was too large, too heavy.

But then her centre of gravity shifted, and she sprang out of the way as the statue crashed to the ground, shattering into thousands of pieces of painted plaster.

The music stopped abruptly, and the dancers screamed and shrank away from the destroyed statue, huddling together like frightened rabbits, staring open-mouthed at the destruction.

Merit stared too.

Because it was there, among the fragmented shards.

A faceted gem the size of her fist, pulsing with amber light.

Anhelion.

Merit’s mind filled with a shimmering, bell-like sound that drove all rational thought from her. She felt warm, bathed in sunlight that made her think of long afternoons in the flower meadow with Tansy. Of raspberries and cloud castles and smooth skin.

She leaped down and snatched up the stone, feeling a tingling glow spread across her palm, to the tips of her fingers.

‘Stop her!’ a voice cried, and suddenly the room was full of armoured guards.

Merit struggled to focus as delicious warmth continued to trickle through her, and Anhelion’s song rang sweet and mellow in her ears.

She had Anhelion.

Now what? Could she use it to make a door to Valla? Did the stone still have powers, even though it was just a memory?

A guard leaped in front of her, and Merit didn't even think. She drew her sword and cut him down in a single, smooth movement.

The guard slumped to the ground, no more than canvas and sawdust, his painted face and glass eyes fixed and expressionless.

There were more guards coming. She could hear them, clanking and shouting. She burst through the double doors, back into the throne room, not bothering to move silently, pelting across the marble floors as she heard the footsteps pounding behind her. She skidded around a corner and found herself in a long hall with branching passages on either side.

She ran.

Anhelion was warm in her hand, warm like an afternoon picnic. Warm like drying off on the seawall after a swim. Warm like the liquid honey of gazing into Tansy's eyes.

She turned another corner, and the ground seemed to tilt beneath her feet. Merit felt a sudden surge of nausea as she abruptly lost all sense of direction. But she didn't stop running. She could still hear the tread of the pursuing guards, and the screams of the revellers in the ballroom. She turned corner after corner, corridors stretching and bending around her, like she was lost in a maze where up and down no longer existed. She could smell sunshine and sawdust and something green and herbal. Her lungs burned as she ran and ran.

The tread of the guards behind her was steady and rhythmic, almost like the thudding of a drum, matching the frenzied pounding of her heart.

She glanced down at Anhelion in her hand and let out a cry of horror as she skidded to a halt.

The golden gem was gone.

Instead, Merit held something that she grimly suspected was a human heart, bloody and raw, still pulsing with life.

It fell to the floor with a wet thud.

Merit looked up, expecting to see the long stretch of corridor. But instead there was a set of double doors. She blinked, disoriented. Which direction had she come from? And where was Anhelion? She turned back the other way, but there was another set of doors. The corridor had disappeared.

And so had the bloody heart.

Merit tasted bile as her mind struggled to comprehend what was happening. She knew the memory was going wrong, just as it had in the silent city when Tansy tried to save the baby. And when the monster had torn apart all the people in Uyst.

She had to find Anhelion. She had to use it to escape.

She pushed through the doors and found herself back in the ballroom.

The thudding sound that she had heard hadn't been the guards at all. It *had* been a drum. The music and dancing had resumed, the screams melting into laughter.

Bitterness rose in Merit's throat as she saw the statue rising before her, whole and unbroken.

Just like the baby had re-formed in the silent city.

Despair roiled in her gut as she saw how foolish she had been.

It was all just a memory, even Anhelion. The stone here had no real power.

Someone grabbed her arm, and she swung around, adrenaline rising, her hand going to her sword hilt. She saw a mask of delicate green leaves and a pair of bright eyes.

'It's me,' Tansy said breathlessly. 'I came as soon as I could.'

Merit could still feel the warmth of Anhelion against her palm. Tears pricked at her eyes, and she shook her head.

A Carrion Knight *never* cried.

'Merit, what's wrong?' Tansy asked.

Merit told her everything, about the drunken party planner and the Unmaker and Anhelion. Tansy listened intently, shaking her head.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'What part did Lady Aster play in all this?'

Merit didn't know.

The crowd swelled around them, and they were crushed together. Merit's arms went around Tansy protectively, Tansy's hands resting on Merit's shoulders as the girl gazed up at her.

The crowd was overwhelming. The smell of wine and laurel and sweat. Damp heat, rising from their bodies.

Even with their masks on, the dancers looked so … free. So unburdened. Like nothing in the world mattered, except the song, and the dance.

They didn't realise that war was on their doorstep.

That they would all be slain, either in battle or at the hand of a cruel, capricious wizard.

The same wizard Merit had been raised to serve and revere.

Tansy turned to her and said something that she couldn't hear.

Merit shook her head.

Tansy leaned forward. 'Dance with me!' she said again.

Merit knew they should leave. Abandon these poor souls to their inevitable fate.

But there was a fire in Tansy's eyes, a kind of reckless cheer that Merit knew was made of desperation.

They were on borrowed time. Soon the Unmaker would come, and death would follow. Soon, Tansy would feel the pull back to Lady Aster.

Why *not* just enjoy themselves, just for a moment?

Merit wasn't a dancer. She was a warrior. Show her something or someone that needed to be hit, and she would hit it. She didn't know how to move her body like this, as though it were made of liquid.

'I … I don't know how,' she admitted.

Tansy shrugged. 'Me neither,' she said. 'Or if I do, I've forgotten.'

She took a step closer to Merit, their bodies fitting tightly together, and began to sway in time with the music.

It took a while to get the hang of it. Merit's body was strong and used to obeying her commands. But she wasn't sure what commands to give it. She kept treading on Tansy's toes like a lumbering awkward giant.

Tansy, on the other hand, looked like she'd been dancing her whole life. Like she was made for it. She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the ceiling, glittering chandeliers washing her skin with warm light. She moved and swayed with a grace that was mesmerising.

Merit realised she was standing stock-still, gawping at Tansy.

'I'm sorry,' she said helplessly. 'I don't know what to do.'

'You're trying too hard,' Tansy said, going up on tiptoes so she could speak directly into Merit's ear. The low buzz of her voice set something alight inside Merit. Something bright and fierce.

She glanced over at the golden statue. Anhelion was right there. So close, but Merit was five hundred years too late.

Tansy smelled of salt and green growing things. Merit could feel heat radiating from her skin. Her brow was damp, russet hair starting to escape its bun, falling in tendrils and framing the green leafy mask.

'Where did you find this?' Merit asked, touching a finger to it.

'Someone gave it to me, just after I came in,' Tansy said. 'Said it went with my hair.'

They had been right. The dancers around them were dripping with lace and jewels and finery, but nobody was as beautiful as Tansy.

Her lips brushed Merit's ear as she spoke. 'Close your eyes,' she said.

Merit hesitated. A knight should never close her eyes around so many people. How would she stay alert? How would she identify any oncoming threats?

But they weren't real people. They were just dolls full of sawdust.

Only she and Tansy were real.

'Please,' Tansy insisted.

Merit closed her eyes, and the music seemed even more intense than before. She could feel the black marble floor beneath her vibrating with the rhythm of it. Her body seemed to respond, somehow, and she felt the urge to move her feet in time.

Music had never been a part of Merit's life. There were certain war chants that the Carrion Knights learned in training, and sometimes a drum was used to keep them in formation. But that wasn't really *music*. She heard real music, from time to time, passing by taverns or villages. Lullabies sung inside homes, abruptly cut off when she or another knight forced open the door and snatched the children from the arms of their parents.

This was different.

This music was bright and beautiful, and she wasn't hearing it muffled through walls. It was loud, filling the air so completely that there was no room for anything else.

'That's right,' Tansy said. 'You have to *feel* it, and then just … give in.'

She kept her hands on Merit's shoulders, and Merit's own hands went to Tansy's waist, the way she'd seen with the other dancers. The music bound them together, and Merit started to move.

She was still awkward and clumsy, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. She surrendered to the rhythm of the dance and stopped thinking entirely. The music lifted her, and she moved in time with Tansy, whirling and spinning until she was breathless and giddy.

The music slowed, and Merit found Tansy in her arms, her soft swell of breast pressed against Merit's own, much broader chest.

Tansy's face turned up to Merit's, and the music faded. The dancers around them became just a blur. Nobody else existed but Tansy.

It was like they were connected to each other, drenched in sunlight.

Tansy's eyes were luminous, and Merit felt like the girl could see right into her soul.

It would only take the smallest of movements to lean down and close the distance between them.

To kiss.

The thought of it made Merit dizzy with longing.

Romantic relationships had been forbidden in the Halls of Order, but that didn't mean they never happened. She had glimpsed shadowy figures moving together in the dormitories, or fumbling at each other in secluded corners.

The couples were always caught and punished, then sent to different Halls to ensure the offence would not reoccur.

Merit had never considered it for herself. Never felt the urge to drag someone into a dark corner and cover them with kisses. To feel the slide of skin on skin, smooth and soft.

Until now.

Tansy's lips quirked in a tiny smile, her eyes warm. It felt like an invitation. Inevitable, yet still so fragile.

Merit hesitated a moment too long, and a dark cloud passed over Tansy's face, the honey warmth fading to cold grey. Her eyes went vacant, and Merit understood that she wasn't really *there* anymore. Whatever spell bound her to Lady Aster had activated, and Merit knew there was nothing she could do to stop it.

'I have to go,' Tansy said. 'Lady Aster—'

It was always Lady Aster.

For a brief, golden moment, Tansy had belonged to Merit. But it had only been for a moment.

Now Tansy belonged to Lady Aster, like she always did. Like she always would, unless Merit *did* something.

'I'm going to save you,' she whispered as she followed Tansy through the stone door, her hands curling into fists.

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17
TANSY

Thyme: Burn as incense to encourage loyalty.

MERIT PACED UP and down the second-floor hallway like a wild creature. Tansy clasped her hands behind her back, not sure whether she wanted to push Merit through another door or grab the knight and kiss her.

Lady Aster would be waking up any moment now. She had to put the kettle on.

Just minutes ago, she'd been in Merit's arms and everything had been golden and perfect.

But then the lavender threads had pulled her back to Lady Aster.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I have to go.'

Merit stopped pacing and looked at her, a long, assessing look that made Tansy feel like she was stripped naked. Then her expression softened. ‘I know this isn’t you,’ she said. ‘It’s *her*. You’re like this because of her.’

Tansy shook her head. ‘She saved me,’ she said. ‘From the silent city.’

You don’t know that, the dry voice said inside her head. *You only want it to be true*.

‘It’s been here,’ she told Merit. ‘The Sleeper.’

Merit frowned. ‘The what?’

‘The monster.’ Tansy had started thinking of it as the Sleeper. It made it seem less frightening somehow. ‘It killed the chickens.’

‘Not the chickens,’ Merit murmured in dismay. ‘Are you sure it was the … the Sleeper?’

‘Pretty sure.’

‘You didn’t see it, though?’

Tansy shook her head.

‘We need to find a way out of here,’ Merit said firmly. ‘There’s something the party planner said …’ She shook her head. ‘She’s the key to it. Lady Aster. We need to know more.’

Tansy’s mind slid away from the thought, unable to focus on it for more than a moment. ‘I have to protect her,’ she said automatically.

‘Tansy, open your eyes! That was one of Lady Aster’s memories. The party planner told her where Anhelion was, and she told the Unmaker. She was working for him!’

‘No,’ Tansy replied vehemently, taken aback by the heat in Merit’s voice.

Merit had misunderstood everything. She didn’t understand Lady Aster the way Tansy did. ‘She must have been a servant of *King Elior*!’ Tansy said. ‘She—’

She broke off, unsure. The faintest whisper of memory emerged from the fog in her mind. A tall man, broad-shouldered, with a grim mouth above a short, pointed beard. Darkly robed.

The truth felt close, tantalisingly close, but Tansy couldn’t quite grasp it. Maybe Merit was right. Maybe they did need to search Lady Aster’s memories for more answers.

The scent of lavender hit her so hard she nearly retched.

‘What is it?’ Merit asked, frowning.

Tansy shook her head. ‘You have to go,’ she said thickly.

‘Where?’ Merit asked, rounding on her. ‘Where will I go?’

Tansy gestured at the doors that lined the passage with a shaking hand. ‘Anywhere.’

Lady Aster would be waking up any moment now and Tansy hadn’t even started her tea.

‘I’m not leaving without you.’ Merit’s jaw was set.

‘I don’t need *rescuing*,’ Tansy snapped. ‘This is where I belong.’

Merit kept talking, but everything was lavender and all Tansy could think about was Lady Aster.

‘Merit, please,’ she begged.

She couldn’t bear it – the threads inside her pulling in different directions, pulling the knot tighter and tighter.

‘You could go back to Uyst,’ she suggested timidly.

Merit shuddered.

‘I think it will have … gone back to how it was,’ Tansy said. ‘Like the baby did. And the ballroom.’

Merit shook her head. ‘I know where I’m going,’ she said, turning and stalking down the hallway.

She stopped before door #18.

Tansy recoiled. She knew the corresponding glass globe.

‘Why do you want to go *there*?’ she asked.

Merit’s chin lifted, just a little. ‘To find answers. Unlock the door.’

Tansy swallowed, then pulled the silver key from her pocket. ‘Take it.’

‘You keep it. If the Sleeper comes back, you’ll have somewhere to hide.’

Tansy frowned. ‘How will you get back?’

‘You’ll unlock the door tomorrow, when Lady Aster is asleep,’ Merit replied. ‘I’ll be waiting on the other side.’

‘You’re going to spend a whole day and night?’ Tansy asked, glancing at the door. ‘In *there*?’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Merit’s voice was edged with steel.

The knight strode through the doorway without another word, leaving Tansy feeling wretched and confused.

As she descended the stairs, she heard Bracken bark, a sharp, urgent warning, and quickened her pace. The walls of the house seemed to close in

on her a little. The scent of lavender faded, replaced with cold iron and sulphur.

There was something hard and heavy in her chest. Her fingertips turned cold, and she thought of the disembowelled corpses of the chickens strewn about the yard.

If the Sleeper comes back …

She stumbled down the stairs, urgency pounding like a drum in her throat.

'Where is she?' she whispered, and the house responded, a lamp flickering in the foyer.

Lady Aster stood by the front door, her back as stiff as a rod, her lips a single pale line.

The Sleeper crouched in front of her, its back to Tansy. It was poised, ready to strike. Only Bracken stood between them, his fur on end, a low growl emanating from his throat.

Lady Aster's eyes flicked to Tansy. 'Did *you* do this?' she asked.

Her tone was measured and even. She seemed almost calm, gazing at the Sleeper through narrowed eyes as if it were a puzzle to be solved.

The creature let out a long, slow hiss, creeping slowly forward like an insect stalking its prey.

Tansy didn't hesitate.

She flung herself at the creature, an animal screech emerging from deep within her.

She had to protect Lady Aster. No matter what.

The Sleeper's head whipped around, its pointed teeth glistening with black saliva. Tansy shoved Lady Aster aside, ignoring the old woman's grunt of surprise and the resulting spike of guilt.

None of that mattered now.

Bracken began to bark, and the Sleeper shrank back from the high-pitched sound.

'Come on,' Tansy yelled at the Sleeper. 'Come and get me!'

The front door burst open, and she careened through. The Sleeper followed, scuttling towards her on all fours, its eyeless face contorted in a snarl.

She had to lead it away from the house. She started down the garden path, but the goose was there, white wings spread wide, hissing and arching its neck. The Sleeper slowed and hissed back, flexing its long, twiglike fingers hungrily.

The goose showed no fear. It advanced on the Sleeper, forcing it to retreat back towards the house.

‘Whose side are you *on*?’ Tansy yelled at the goose, veering to the side, trampling chamomile and parsley seedlings under her boots. The scent of turned earth and crushed greenery gave her new energy, and she yelled again at the Sleeper, which resumed its chase, giving the goose a wide berth. She leaped over the low stone wall that surrounded the garden, Bracken at her heels. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the cat, perched on the thatched gable of the house where it could safely observe the proceedings. It licked a paw, as if it didn’t have a care in the world.

Tansy’s lungs burned as she raced across the flower meadow. The Sleeper was following, wild grasses and flowers withering in its wake. As they reached the edge of the cliff, Tansy steeled herself. She dug a heel into the soft green turf, spinning to face the Sleeper, which ran straight into her. Its teeth snapped an inch from her face, and she could smell its breath, cold and foul with ancient rot. She put her hands on its bony shoulders, and for the briefest instant, she slipped inside the creature’s mind, an endless, howling black abyss. There she felt its darkness, its rage, its hunger. She saw a tall figure, crowned and robed, and felt the Sleeper’s fear and a loyalty that mirrored her own.

And beneath it all, she felt longing, so deep and faint that it was barely there.

For warmth. And sunlight.

Tansy hesitated, compassion welling inside her. But her loyalty to Lady Aster was stronger. She gritted her teeth and shoved.

The Sleeper teetered on the edge of the cliff, fingers clawing the air for purchase. Then it tumbled backwards, plummeting down, still snarling and snapping, until it was swallowed by the churning dark ocean below.

She saw it flailing in the water as it sank and recalled that it could not die. Could not drown. It couldn’t return, though. The ocean was too deep, and the cliffs were too high. Perhaps it would thrash and writhe helplessly down there forever, unable to reach the sunlight it craved.

Tansy took a deep, shuddering breath, then turned back to the Oubliette.

Lady Aster would be wanting her tea.

She yanked the kettle from the hearth, splashing boiling water into the teapot.

The soft static of the Oubliette pressed down on her, gently urging her to forget.

‘I can’t,’ she told the house. ‘Not this time.’

‘What are you goggling at, girl?’ Lady Aster snapped as Tansy hesitated in the doorway to the drawing room, tea tray in hand.

‘A-are you all right?’ Tansy asked. ‘Did it hurt you?’

Lady Aster let out a little hiss of impatience. ‘Pour the tea.’

Questions crowded at the back of Tansy’s throat, choking her.

‘Ma’am,’ she said timidly. ‘It isn’t safe here.’

Lady Aster turned cold, watery eyes onto her. ‘I’m well aware,’ she said shortly. ‘Tea.’

Tansy set the tea tray down and lifted the teapot with shaking hands. The adrenaline of her flight across the meadow was wearing off, and she felt hollow and fragile, like a porcelain cup.

‘Ma’am,’ she said again. ‘The Unmaker …’

Lady Aster narrowed her eyes. ‘You know nothing of the Unmaker.’

‘I have seen him,’ Tansy said, remembering the terrifying dark figure she had glimpsed in the Sleeper’s mind. ‘He is returning.’

Lady Aster’s face took on a sardonic twist. ‘Is he, now?’

‘I … I know we are refugees,’ Tansy said. ‘You told Merit. We’ve been hiding here, from him. The Unmaker. But it’s not safe anymore. We need to leave.’

‘We can’t leave.’ Lady Aster reached for the cup and saucer.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean there’s no way out,’ Lady Aster replied calmly. ‘There was a door, once. But it disappeared long ago, and this damned house won’t bring it back.’

‘But the Sleeper …’ Tansy trailed off. ‘It isn’t safe,’ she said again helplessly.

Lady Aster shrugged and sipped her tea. ‘I’m an old woman,’ she said. ‘I’m not afraid of death. Now get back to the kitchen. Supper isn’t going to cook itself.’

Tansy made bread. She scrubbed the kitchen floor. She dusted the glass globes, her eyes lingering over #18, hoping Merit was safe inside that bleak and barren wasteland.

She went outside and tried to salvage the remains of her herb seedlings, but most were crushed and withered after her battle with the Sleeper. Tansy fetched a shovel and started to turn the soil over, digging new furrows for fresh planting. Bracken dug too, his paws sending sprays of earth flying into the air. The smell of fresh loam was soothing, and Tansy felt tension melt from her shoulders as she settled into the rhythm of the work.

There was no way the Sleeper could climb the cliff. She and Lady Aster were safe.

Bracken barked at her. He had dug an impressive hole, his paws dark with soil. He wagged his tail and did his little dance of anticipation.

'Very helpful,' Tansy told him, going over to inspect his work.

There was something in the hole. Too smooth to be a natural stone.

Tansy crouched down in the dirt, scraping and scrabbling at the thing until she could tug it loose.

It was a glass globe.

She used a corner of her pinafore to wipe the dirt from the glass, revealing a tiny Oubliette inside. It looked exactly like the other ones, the garden almost identical to the one she was standing in. She turned it over to examine the wooden base.

There was no number on the bottom.

Tansy tucked the globe under her arm and went into the kitchen, intending to get on with preparing Lady Aster's supper. But her eyes kept drifting back to the globe.

Who had buried it in the garden? And why?

Only one way to find out, the dry voice said.

The lamp in the kitchen flickered briefly in agreement, and Tansy had the oddest sensation that the house was holding its breath.

'Fine,' she muttered, grabbing the globe and marching up the stairs.

She wandered down the second-floor passage, searching for a door with no plaque.

'Well?' she asked the house. The Oubliette creaked, as if it were resettling itself, and Tansy felt a strange lurching in her stomach. She turned in a half circle and found herself facing a door that hadn't been there a moment ago. Identical to all the others, except it had no brass plaque.

Tansy bit her lip.

It would just take a moment. She'd return in time to let Merit back in.

'Wait here,' she told Bracken, who had followed her up the stairs.

The little dog sat obediently as Tansy put the glass globe down next to him and unlocked the door.

A wave of dizziness overcame her as she stepped through the silver mist and found herself in the kitchen, looking at a figure in a brown dress, bending over the hearth.

Tansy stared as the girl in front of her washed pots, scrubbing at them with a handful of sand and hot water.

The girl was identical to her. Same neat bun of russet hair. Same brown dress and sensible boots. Same spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

It *was* her.

The kitchen was the same, too. Same herbs hanging from the rafters. The scent of lavender and chamomile in the air. It could have been yesterday. The only thing that was missing was the cat, who was almost always present in the kitchen when Tansy was, in case there was an opportunity for scraps or a dish of milk.

And the house *felt* different. Tansy couldn't sense it, the way she usually could. Its familiar presence, almost as if it were alive. This just felt like an ordinary house.

Memory-Tansy didn't seem to notice her. She was distracted, muttering to herself.

'She's in danger,' she said. 'I have to look after her. *I have to.*'

Tansy knew that tone of voice. She could see the desperate urgency on the other Tansy's face. She was talking about Lady Aster.

'She did it. She killed him.'

Tansy took a step forward. 'Killed who?'

But memory-Tansy couldn't see or hear her. She just kept scrubbing at a big black pot, her movements sharp and jerky.

'She killed him and soon they will all know and they will come for her and she won't be safe.'

Tansy noticed that the girl's hands were raw from scrubbing and that the dishwater was stained pink with blood.

'I have to protect her. They'll come for her. They'll take her from me—' Memory-Tansy let out a little sob. 'Not yet, not yet. She needs time. Time to

… heal. She isn't ready. I'm not ready.'

'Ready for what?' Tansy asked the memory, but of course there was no answer.

For him to return, the dry voice said inside her head.

Merit had told her about how the Carrion Knights believed the Unmaker would return. And that there was only one person who could defeat him.

Memory-Tansy wrung her bloody hands, tears streaming down her face. 'I can't betray her,' she whispered. 'But I must do *something*.'

The girl took a deep breath and put the kettle on to boil. Then she went into the pantry. Tansy followed and watched her gather valerian, poppy, mandragora and hemlock, placing a generous pinch of each in a little twist of paper.

Powerful sleeping herbs.

'Mustn't do it,' memory-Tansy muttered. 'But what choice do I have? What *choice*?'

She hurled the little white packet away from her as if it were a vile living creature.

'This is bad,' she whispered. 'Bad bad bad bad bad.'

She raked raw hands over her face, bright scratches appearing on pale skin.

'Stop,' Tansy cried out, but her memory couldn't hear her.

Memory-Tansy slumped down to the flagstones, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. 'I can't do it,' she gasped.

'What?' Tansy yelled at the memory. 'Can't do *what*?'

She sank to her knees beside memory-Tansy and shook her.

'She can't hear you,' a voice said behind her.

Tansy turned to see Lady Aster, standing in the doorway and gazing at her with glittering dark eyes.

This was the real Lady Aster, not a memory. She was sure of it. She must have come through the door after Tansy.

'You,' Tansy whispered. '*You* killed him.'

And finally, she understood.

She knew who Lady Aster was.

Lady Aster's head inclined in a nod. 'I did.'

Memory-Tansy rocked back and forth on the floor, whimpering. 'I have no choice …'

What had she done?

Tansy felt sick as she stared at Lady Aster. Her thin white hair, pulled into a severe bun. Her pale, pinched lips. Her wizened, fragile frame.

‘You’re the Maid,’ Tansy said, and a corner of Lady Aster’s mouth curled in a smile.

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18
MERIT

Willow: Make a tea of willow bark to bring peace to those near death.

MUDDY ORANGE CLOUDS boiled before her.

Merit's stomach heaved as her brain tried to reorient itself. The stone door was set into the ground and she was looking up into a sickly sky.

She scrambled up and out, into the wasteland.

The ground was churned to thick, black mud, the sky overhead dark and heavy. Foul-scented rain fell, like rotten eggs and rancid meat.

Salt-rain, Merit thought. *An omen of the Unmaker.*

There was smoke in the air, too, sharp and acrid.

The door she'd come through was barely visible, a stone slab half swallowed by muck.

She scrambled up the slope, sliding on the mud. It didn't seem to be a natural hill, more like a large pile of rubble slathered in sludge. She saw sheets of rusted iron, wheels with bent spokes, splintered boards, and, occasionally, the stark white angles of bones.

Merit's lungs burned from the smoke, and something in the rain was making her eyes sting. Her breath caught in her throat as she gazed around.

The muddy chaos stretched out in all directions, ruin and desolation as far as the eye could see. Through the haze of rain and smoke, she glimpsed a crumbling ruin in the distance – a familiar structure, perched on a hillside. Most of the silver and black striped domes had been destroyed, but a few still remained.

This was Halsgarth.

Only minutes ago, she had been in that palace. Everything had been opulent and giddy with wine and candlelight.

Now it was in ruins.

The steady hiss of the rain drowned out all other sound, so Merit didn't hear the tread of feet behind her until it was too late. She turned, reaching for her blade, but the blow to her temple came swift and strong, and she sank into unconsciousness.

Merit woke with a foul taste in her mouth, like bitter gall and burnt hair. She was in a small, cramped cell that stank of stale sweat and excrement. Her sword was gone. Her side throbbed where Sir Valiant had stabbed her. The wound had closed over and healed well, thanks to Tansy's careful attention and regular bathing in the fresh salt water in Uyst. It hadn't bothered her for weeks.

Until now.

There were no guards, no other prisoners.

'Hey!' she yelled. 'Somebody!'

A soldier appeared, his mud-streaked face sagging with exhaustion. His uniform was ragged and filthy.

'Quiet,' he said. 'You'll bring the enemy.'

'What enemy?'

The soldier didn’t reply.

Merit slammed a hand against the rusted bars of her cell. The soldier frowned, then stared at her for a long moment through bloodshot eyes.

‘Quiet,’ he said again. ‘You’ll bring the enemy.’

Merit sighed.

The soldier spat. ‘Valla scum,’ he said.

Merit found herself longing for the busy cheerfulness of Uyst. The screech of seagulls. The riot of colours and smells in the market square. The golden light of late afternoon. She remembered the feeling of sun on her back. Of swimming in the crystal-clear ocean.

Of Tansy.

Her bright smile. Her cleverness.

Her skin, cool and smooth against Merit’s.

Footsteps and voices were approaching. Merit got to her feet and waited by the bars of the cell.

‘Why bother?’ a woman’s voice was saying. ‘We’ll all be dead soon enough.’

‘Yes, Captain Skaw.’

Two soldiers appeared in front of the cell. One was the man Merit had spoken to before. The other was a woman, older, with close-cropped grey hair and a drooping face, lined with exhaustion. She reminded Merit a little of Lady Aster, but the idea of Lady Aster being so covered in mud and filth was ridiculous.

The woman passed a weary hand over her face. ‘Are you a spy?’

Merit knew how to talk to captains. She saluted. ‘No, sir.’

‘Who are you, then?’

‘My name is Merit, sir. I … I want to know about Astaroth.’

Captain Skaw gazed at her for a long, assessing moment. ‘Come with me.’

The soldier unlocked the cell, and Merit followed the captain along a cramped passage that seemed to be dug into the earth. Everything was damp and grimy.

They passed a room that looked like an infirmary, and Merit stopped.

The chamber reeked of blood and rot. About ten crudely made stretchers bore the bodies of injured soldiers. Merit saw gashes and wounds and faces

contorted with pain.

One soldier had feet that looked grey and rotten, bloated and swollen from the endless rain and mud. Another had only one leg, the other just a stump wrapped with blood-soaked bandages.

‘You want to know about Astaroth?’ the captain said sourly, indicating the carnage. ‘Here.’

Merit had been around injured soldiers before. There were infirmaries in the Halls of Order. Knights could be wounded in training, or when villagers attempted to fight back during recruitment. But she’d never spent much time in them. They were the domain of medics – those who had been raised in the Halls but not passed the trials and become knights. But she knew they were clean, orderly places, well-equipped and smelling of lye soap and wintergreen. This place was nothing more than filth and desperation, the stench of death hanging heavy in the air.

‘What can I do to help?’ Merit asked.

The captain let out a humourless snort. ‘Put us out of our misery.’

If only Tansy were there. She could heal them, like she had healed Merit.

‘They need medicine,’ Merit said. ‘Do you have any herbal remedies?’

‘No herbs,’ the captain said bleakly. ‘We’re lucky to get turnips or hogroot. Occasionally a horse will die, then we get meat.’

A strange look passed over her face, grimness shrouding deep shame and revulsion. Merit suspected that the soldiers were sometimes forced to consume meat other than horse, or else face death by starvation.

‘Water, then,’ Merit said. ‘These men look parched.’

‘No water, either,’ the captain said over her shoulder as she led Merit down the passage. ‘It’s tainted.’

Captain Skaw’s quarters were cramped and sparse, a trestle and several stools in the centre and a cot and blanket in the corner. The captain sank onto one of the stools, swaying with exhaustion. She sighed and rubbed a weary hand over her cropped hair.

‘What is it you want from us?’ she asked.

A soldier appeared in the doorway with two bowls, passing them to Merit and the captain. Merit looked down and saw a few pale lumps floating in watery gruel. She set it down on the trestle.

‘What *happened* here?’ she asked.

Captain Skaw shovelled the gruel into her mouth with grim determination. ‘You stole Anhelion from us,’ she said. ‘You didn’t think we’d fight back?’

Merit swallowed. If this was a battlefield, then where were the other soldiers?

‘How long ago did it happen?’ she asked.

‘Years,’ the captain said. ‘I lost count. None of it matters now. It’s all over.’

‘Why?’ Merit asked. ‘What happened?’

The captain’s face twisted bitterly. ‘How were we to know that Valla’s greatest general was also the wife of the king’s wizard?’

Merit frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘We killed her,’ Captain Skaw said. ‘One of our archers. Valla’s great general, slain on the battlefield. It should have been a moment of victory for us. It should have turned the tide. Instead it was our death sentence.’

‘Why?’

‘What you see here is the wizard’s revenge.’

Merit glanced around at the little underground hovel. At the dirt filling the weary lines of Captain Skaw’s hollow face.

‘The Unmaker did this,’ Merit said. ‘All of this.’

‘The Unmaker?’ Captain Skaw said. ‘That is a good name for a monster.’

The Unmaker had ruined this place. Destroyed the people of Halsgarth. Merit had already known it, but to see it like this … It was too much.

‘Our entire army, gone in the blink of an eye,’ Captain Skaw said.

‘How did you survive?’

‘This infirmary is underground,’ Captain Skaw explained. ‘The wizard’s magic only reaches so deep.’

A rumble shook the earth around them, and Merit glanced nervously at the earthen ceiling of the little room.

‘I had a family, in the city,’ Captain Skaw said quietly. ‘A husband and two children. The youngest had just started walking.’

Her voice cracked on the last word.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Merit said. ‘At least … at least you know they didn’t suffer for long.’

Captain Skaw gazed down at her hands. ‘Oh, my children are not dead,’ she said. ‘I wish they were.’

Merit swallowed. ‘What happened to them?’ she asked, although she already knew the answer.

She remembered the baby in the silent city, the protective symbols around it.

‘The wizard stole our children and turned them into monsters. Like you.’ Captain Skaw indicated the scar on Merit’s palm. ‘Do you ever wonder where you came from? Who your parents were? Have you forgotten them completely?’

Merit thought, suddenly, of Valiant. Reaching his hand across the space between their beds in the dark of the night. His voice. It had been the only moment of kindness Merit had experienced as a child. The only one she could remember, anyway.

And Valiant had attacked her and left her for dead.

He had believed he was doing the right thing, so he did it, even though it must have hurt him.

Not as much as it hurt Merit, because obviously Merit was the one with the sword in her gut. But she had seen the flash of anguish in his eyes. Felt the tremble in his sword hand.

Did Valiant still think about it? Did he feel guilt? Regret?

She wished she could see him again.

The Unmaker had stolen babies and turned them into monsters. He called them carrion. Made them hunters. Scavengers. For five centuries, the Carrion Knights stole children in his name. Killed all who resisted.

She heard footsteps, and a soldier appeared at the door, pale and trembling. Merit could see tears in his eyes.

‘Soldier, report.’

‘Sir …’ The soldier let out a little gulp of misery. ‘Word from above. She’s here. She says she wants to talk to you.’

Captain Skaw let out a long breath and put her head in her hands.

Merit frowned. ‘Who’s here?’

Was it the Maid? Was there a chance these poor souls might survive after all?

Captain Skaw turned to her, eyes sharp. ‘Is it you?’ she asked. ‘Have you finally come for us?’

Merit shook her head. ‘I’m … I’m nobody,’ she said. ‘*Who* has come?’

‘Who do you think?’ Captain Skaw said wearily. ‘Valla’s wizard. What did you call her? The *Unmaker*. She’s come for us.’

Merit stared at Captain Skaw as the entire world fell out from under her feet.

‘She?’

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19
TANSY

Cloves: Steep in boiling water to bring back forgotten memories.

‘YOU’RE THE MAID,’ Tansy said, and a corner of Lady Aster’s mouth curled in a smile.

But she said nothing, just gazed down at memory-Tansy, huddled on the floor, muttering to herself.

There was so much Tansy wanted to ask. About the Unmaker. The Sleeper. The glass globes. She didn’t know where to begin.

‘What did I do to you?’ she said at last.

Lady Aster's eyes narrowed slightly. 'You betrayed me,' she replied, not looking away from the other Tansy on the flagstones. 'You trapped us here.'

'I don't understand,' Tansy said. 'Is this one of your memories?'

'I believe it is one of yours.'

'Why can't she see us?' Tansy asked. 'The people in the other globes could.'

'She can't comprehend the idea of seeing herself,' Lady Aster explained. 'She's just an echo, after all.'

Tansy opened her mouth to ask another question, but Lady Aster interrupted. 'You're really not going to let this go, are you?'

Tansy bit her lip. 'I don't think I can, ma'am.'

The old woman sighed. 'Very well. Perhaps it's easier if I show you.'

She turned and led Tansy back out through the stone door, into the second-floor passage. Tansy felt her stomach lurch as she stepped through the mist, from the memory-Oubliette to the real one.

She swallowed.

Was there a real Oubliette? Or were they all memories?

This one felt different, though. It felt real. Floorboards creaked fondly under her feet, and she felt the house welcome her.

Bracken stood up and wagged his tail, and she bent to touch his fur. He was real enough too.

A little way along the passage, the black cat was sitting in front of a door – #7. Bracken growled as they approached, but the cat studiously ignored him.

'I think she's ready, don't you?' Lady Aster said to the cat.

The cat climbed gracefully to its feet and stalked away, tail high in the air.

Lady Aster unlocked the door, and she and Tansy stepped through.

Tansy recognised the scene within instantly. This glass globe was one of her favourites.

A library at night, a labyrinth of ancient shelves piled high with leatherbound books.

The scent of old paper and ink hung in the still, silent air.

Lady Aster led her through the maze of darkened shelves and passage to a cluttered desk, where a candle threw out a weak yellow light.

A young woman sat there, surrounded by books and parchments. Her hair was jet-black, but Tansy recognised the dark eyes and pointed little nose.

‘It’s you,’ she said, awed.

The young Lady Aster turned a page, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She scribbled in a notebook with a pencil.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘A long time ago, I was a sorceress,’ the old woman said. ‘I served King Elior. I devised protections for him, performed divinatory readings, and made enchantments to strengthen him in battle. I travelled the world, searching for the rarest books and scrolls.’

Tansy nodded. That explained why she had been in the ballroom at Halsgarth. Lady Aster must have worked alongside the Unmaker, before he betrayed her and King Elior.

‘Here in the libraries of Halsgarth,’ Lady Aster continued, ‘I learned of a great power.’

‘Anhelion,’ Tansy said, the word strange yet familiar on her lips.

Lady Aster nodded. ‘The creation stone. Such power, I believed, would allow Elior to make peace among the many warring kingdoms of the world and rule over them all as High King.’

Tansy’s mind whirled. ‘But the Unmaker stole it,’ she said.

The old woman said nothing for a long while. When she finally looked up, Tansy thought she saw something in Lady Aster’s eyes that hadn’t been there before.

Guilt, the dry voice inside Tansy’s mind said.

Had the Unmaker learned of Anhelion through Lady Aster’s research?

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Tansy told Lady Aster hastily. ‘You weren’t to know.’

Lady Aster didn’t respond. She just turned and led Tansy from the library, back into the second-floor passage, and through a different door.

The next memory was of a utilitarian hall of unadorned grey stone. Narrow beds lined one wall, each with the same drab grey blanket.

She could smell woodsmoke and cloves, and thought of Merit.

Outside, Tansy could hear barked commands and the clattering of wood on wood. She peered out a window into a courtyard where children were

paired up, sparring with wooden swords and shields.

‘This is the Halls of Order,’ Tansy said. ‘Where Merit grew up.’

‘It is the very first Hall of Order,’ Lady Aster replied. ‘Centuries before your friend was born.’

Tansy watched the children spar, their movements precise and controlled.

Why was this one of Lady Aster’s memories?

Had she visited the Halls of Order? Did she know about the Unmaker’s experiments, his desire to make an army of loyal soldiers?

Of course she did, the dry voice remarked.

‘You knew him,’ Tansy said. ‘The Unmaker. Before he turned and betrayed King Elior.’

Lady Aster pursed her lips. ‘Men get all the credit for the work women do.’

It was beginning to make sense. Lady Aster had been a sorceress – of course she had worked closely with the Unmaker, before he turned evil. That was how she had got close enough to destroy him.

Because she was the Maid.

‘Merit told me the people of Valla remember you to this day,’ she said. ‘What you did.’

‘I’m sure they do,’ Lady Aster said dryly.

‘The Maid is a great hero.’

‘It’s all just stories,’ Lady Aster said. ‘Nobody knows what really happened that night.’

Her eyes skated over Tansy, who shifted uncomfortably and gazed out the window at a young girl, no more than six years old, who was sparring with an older boy. She was struggling, losing ground against her much bigger opponent. Sweat streamed from her forehead, and the girl blinked, trying to clear her vision. The boy’s wooden blade curved around in an arc, catching the girl on her shoulder. She let out a surprised cry of pain and stumbled backwards, losing her footing and sprawling in the dust.

‘Merit said the Unmaker wanted to use Anhelion to make an army of loyal soldiers,’ Tansy said. ‘Is that who these children are? Were they made by the Unmaker?’

Lady Aster’s expression turned sour. ‘Creation is harder than it looks.’

The girl straightened up, her face a mask of grim determination. She gripped her sword and advanced on the boy once more.

‘It isn’t fair,’ Tansy said. ‘They’re just children. They should be having fun. Running and climbing and playing.’

Lady Aster looked amused. ‘You seem to know a lot about childhood fun.’

Tansy swallowed and summoned her courage to voice the question she had been wanting to ask for days. ‘The silent city …’ she said. ‘Where you sent Merit …’

‘Scata Delve,’ Lady Aster said. ‘Once a city of great artisans and craftsmen.’

Tansy bit her lip. ‘Th-the baby,’ she said. ‘Was it me? Is that where you found me?’

‘No,’ Lady Aster said shortly.

She didn’t elaborate, and Tansy felt a lancing pain in her chest. ‘Who was it, then?’ she asked. ‘It … it wasn’t like the others. They all had straw inside, like the dolls. But when I tried to cross the threshold, the baby turned into … into teeth.’

She shuddered.

Lady Aster raised one shoulder in a shrug. ‘Memories can be strange,’ she said. ‘When something happens that’s very different to how things were remembered, they become unstable.’

Tansy balled her hands into fists as misery threatened to overwhelm her.

‘Lady Aster, who *am* I?’ she asked.

The old woman made an impatient noise. ‘You’re nobody,’ she said.

The next memory was more familiar – it was the Oubliette, or something very much like it. Outside was different, though. Tansy could see the little kitchen garden, but beyond it there was no wildflower meadow. No sparkling strip of sea. Just dark forest.

It smelled different, too, of wet forest boughs and warm beeswax.

Was this a memory of the house that Merit had found in the real world?

Lady Aster was bent over a workbench, still young, but a little older than before, shirtsleeves rolled up to her elbows. Around her were strange tools and scribbled notes that Tansy couldn’t decipher. Spheres of glass littered the table, some cracked and broken. But there was one that Tansy recognised – a glass globe containing a tiny model of the Oubliette.

Her eye was drawn away from it, though, to a fist-sized golden gem that sparkled in a wooden cradle in the centre of the workbench. Tansy could feel its radiating warmth, hear the shimmering bell note singing from its bright facets.

‘Is that … Anhelion?’ she asked.

Why did Lady Aster have it?

A door opened, and another woman entered the room, dressed in gleaming gold armour, a crimson cape spilling from one shoulder. Tansy gasped.

‘The shell collector,’ she said.

The severe lines of Lady Aster’s face softened. ‘Sunniva,’ she said, and made a little sound, as if there were something stuck in her throat. ‘My wife.’

‘You met her in Uyst,’ Tansy murmured, remembering the damp, sack-like body drifting in the shallows of the beach at Uyst, sawdust leaking out. The scrabbling clawed hands of the monster, scooping out her sodden insides.

‘We were both young and foolish,’ Lady Aster said, and there was a fondness in her tone that Tansy had never heard before. ‘I fell in love with her instantly, of course. Sunniva took a little more convincing. She was just as ambitious as I was. Her prowess on the battlefield was matched only by her skill in leadership, and it didn’t take long for her to rise through the ranks of the Vallan army. She became first general of the Bright Guard. People said that she was King Elior’s right hand and I was his left.’

Tansy wondered where the Unmaker fit into this story.

I think you know, the dry voice said.

She ignored it.

‘So you’re going to Halsgarth,’ the young Lady Aster said to her wife. ‘I wish you wouldn’t.’

Sunniva raised her eyebrows. ‘I wouldn’t have to, if someone hadn’t stolen Halsgarth’s most precious gem.’ She stared pointedly at Anhelion. ‘Are you sure you should just leave it lying around?’

‘I’m using it,’ Lady Aster said. ‘Look. I’m making us a house.’ She held up the glass globe with the tiny Oubliette inside.

‘We already have a house.’

‘It’s not safe here,’ Lady Aster said. ‘This war is already so ugly. Betrayal and deceit everywhere. That poisoning attempt last week. Assassins the week before. We can’t trust anyone.’

Even then, Tansy thought, *she understood the danger she was in*.

Sunniva raised her eyebrows. ‘So you’re making a … snow globe.’

‘I’m making us a safe place where we can be together. Where we can *sleep*, without worrying about being woken with a knife at our throats.’

‘It looks like our house,’ Sunniva observed.

‘It’s another version of our house,’ Lady Aster replied. ‘Pulled from my memory and trapped in a bubble, outside of the world. No one can get in but you and me.’

‘We’ll need someone to make the tea.’

‘You and your tea,’ the young Lady Aster chuckled.

‘You made the Oubliette,’ Tansy said to the old woman. ‘And all the glass globes.’

‘I thought creation would be easy,’ Lady Aster admitted. ‘That I would grasp Anhelion and command an army into being. That’s how the histories described it. Anhelion would glow like a sun, creation streaming from its light. But I couldn’t do it.’ Her mouth twisted wryly. ‘I suspect I’m not pure enough of heart, or at least that’s what the reason would be in a story.’

‘So what did you do?’

Lady Aster hesitated. ‘I discovered a way to harness memories,’ she said at last. ‘Using Anhelion, I could create a kind of echo of my mind that existed outside of reality, on the dark paths between worlds.’

‘You’re sure it’s safe?’ Sunniva said, gazing at the tiny model in the globe. ‘You’re not trying to trap me in there, are you?’

‘Of course not,’ the younger Lady Aster replied. ‘It’s perfectly safe. Safer than the real world.’

Sunniva bent down and kissed her. ‘I have to go,’ she said.

‘What if you didn’t?’ Lady Aster said, reaching up to take Sunniva’s hand.

Sunniva cocked her head, considering it. ‘Well,’ she said. ‘My men would run around like headless chickens on the battlefield without me and quickly thereafter become literally headless. We would lose the war, and Valla and all her citizens would suffer.’

Lady Aster rolled her eyes. ‘All because you didn’t show up to work?’

Sunniva shrugged. ‘I’m very good at what I do.’

‘And so modest.’

‘Naturally.’

Lady Aster cupped Sunniva’s cheek in one hand. ‘Every time you go, I’m afraid you won’t come back,’ she whispered.

‘You underestimate me,’ Sunniva said with a smile. ‘I will always come back.’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise.’

Sunniva carefully laid a pink and yellow striped shell on the workbench, then turned and left.

‘Of course I *was* trying to trap her in the Oubliette,’ the real Lady Aster told Tansy. ‘I wove a spell of forgetting into the very foundations of the house. I knew if I could keep her there for long enough that she would forget her duty to the king, to Valla. That she would stay, forever. Protected and safe.’

‘But she didn’t stay,’ Tansy said. ‘Did she?’

Lady Aster shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘She never had a chance. An archer in Halsgarth …’

‘She died?’ Tansy asked in a small voice.

The smallest inclination of Lady Aster’s head. ‘It was … a turning point for me. Grief clouded my sight. My reason.’

Tansy twisted the fabric of her skirt uneasily.

Go on, the dry voice said. *Ask her what happened next.*

‘I don’t understand,’ Tansy said.

Lady Aster sighed. ‘You will.’

The next memory was of a throne room, austere yet grand in white stone.

A man sat on the throne, a spiked crown on his head. Lady Aster stood before him, older, her face pinched and cold.

‘King Elior,’ Tansy whispered.

‘Explain it again,’ he was saying.

‘They have been unmade, my lord,’ Lady Aster replied. Her long black robes made her appear imposing, despite her diminutive height. ‘Their fibres unwound and reabsorbed into the fabric of the universe.’

Tansy thought of her own embroidery. Of how if a knot wasn’t secured properly, the whole design would unravel into a tangle of loose thread.

‘How is such a thing possible?’ the king asked.

Lady Aster reached into the recesses of her robe and withdrew Anhelion. ‘With this.’

King Elior gazed at the stone, perturbed. ‘So small,’ he murmured. ‘But so powerful. Too powerful. It must be locked away in the treasury, where none can abuse it.’

Tansy saw Lady Aster’s knuckles whiten as she gripped the stone. ‘My lord,’ she said. ‘The war with Halsgarth is ended, but we have other enemies.’

The king’s eyes narrowed. ‘Go on,’ he said.

‘Send me to Scata Delve,’ Lady Aster urged. ‘With its army unmade, all its resources will be at your disposal.’

The king didn’t take his eyes from Anhelion. ‘And then what?’ he asked. ‘Where does it end?’

‘It ends with our enemies crushed. With you as High King over all.’

‘And the stone?’

‘I will keep it safe,’ Lady Aster said.

King Elior shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You must give it to me. It will be the jewel of my treasury.’

Lady Aster hesitated. ‘Of course, my lord. As soon as our work is done.’

She’s lying, the dry voice said.

‘I knew King Elior didn’t trust me,’ the real Lady Aster commented. ‘I could not rely on the Bright Guard to protect me any longer. I had already started making plans to protect myself. Making my own army.’

Tansy felt numb, the knot inside her twisting over and over, becoming more and more impenetrable with every word that came out of Lady Aster’s mouth.

‘I tried to create,’ the old woman continued. ‘Using the stone, but it was beyond my abilities. The best I could do was this.’ She gestured at the throne room. ‘Echoes of what once was that I managed to cobble together with glass and linen and sawdust. Even that was exhausting. I couldn’t begin to comprehend how you could make a person from scratch. But unmaking? Unmaking was easy. Like crushing a child’s sandcastle.’

‘So you unmade Astaroth,’ Tansy said as desperation rose in her. ‘Right? Because you are the Maid. *You* saved Valla.’

Lady Aster looked weary. ‘You haven’t been paying attention.’

Seriously, the dry voice agreed.

The knot inside Tansy pulled tight, and she tasted lavender in the back of her throat.

‘The Oubliette is making you confused,’ Tansy insisted. ‘It’s made you forget …’

‘I *did* forget,’ Lady Aster said. ‘For a time, after we first came here. But I knew that I might. That was why I made so many glass globes. Reminders of who I was. What I had done.’

A hollow, haunted look came over her then. She shook her head and led Tansy out of the memory and back into the second-floor passage.

Tansy felt a sob rise in her throat. ‘Why don’t *I* remember?’ she said, hating how whiny and plaintive she sounded.

Lady Aster regarded her, head tilted. ‘You’re choosing not to,’ she said. ‘You could remember if you really wanted it.’

Tansy swallowed. ‘Because of what I did?’

‘Probably.’

‘Tell me,’ Tansy begged. ‘What did I *do*?’

Lady Aster narrowed her eyes. ‘You surprised me,’ she said. ‘I thought you were … nothing. A housemaid. Empty-headed and obedient. I was wrong.’

The words stung Tansy. She didn’t matter to Lady Aster. She never had. She was just a tool. A nuisance.

‘I don’t think I want to see any more,’ she said.

‘One more,’ Lady Aster said. ‘You have to see how it all ends.’

The last memory was another version of the Oubliette, in the same second-floor passage. Tansy could see the wildflower meadow and the sparkling strip of ocean.

‘How do you know which one is real?’ she asked. ‘Don’t you get confused?’

Lady Aster’s left eyebrow quirked. ‘None of them are real,’ she replied.

Another Lady Aster emerged from a doorway. She was older, but not as old as the Lady Aster Tansy knew. She looked exhausted, dark hollows under her bloodshot eyes. Tansy looked up to see *#4* engraved on the door’s brass plaque.

‘Uyst,’ Tansy whispered. ‘You were going to see Sunniva.’

They followed the other Lady Aster downstairs to her bedroom, where another Tansy waited in the doorway, hands folded neatly before her.

‘Ma’am, you are unwell. You need to rest.’

‘I can’t hide in here,’ Lady Aster snapped. ‘I have things to do.’

She yanked a drawer open and withdrew a fist-sized stone, shining and golden. Tansy could hear its song. Could feel the warmth radiating from it and felt a corresponding glow in her chest.

But the memory of Lady Aster stared at the gem with bitter resentment on her face.

‘Just for a few hours,’ the other Tansy pleaded. ‘I’ll wake you up. I promise.’

Lady Aster glanced away from the gem, glaring at the other Tansy through narrowed eyes.

‘You’ll be able to think so much more clearly once you’ve rested. It isn’t safe for you out there, you know that. It’s my duty to keep you safe.’

Reluctantly, the other Lady Aster let Tansy guide her to the bed. Her skin was sallow and loose. She fumbled in a drawer for a stubby candle and gestured to Tansy with it.

Understanding, the other Tansy took the candle and set it within a holder, then took a taper and lit it from one of the hanging lamps that illuminated the room.

‘When this burns down,’ Lady Aster said, ‘you’ll wake me.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Swear it.’

The other Tansy nodded. ‘I swear.’

Lady Aster climbed into bed, Anhelion still gripped tightly in one hand, and Tansy fussed around the old woman, arranging pillows and blankets. Lady Aster closed her eyes, and her breathing became steady.

The other Tansy slipped from the room.

The Oubliette fell silent and still. Outside, castle-like clouds towered in an otherwise brilliant blue sky. Wildflowers nodded on the rolling meadow, and in the distance Tansy could see a stripe of dark blue ocean.

All was peaceful.

All was safe.

The other Lady Aster was asleep in her bed.

She looked small, almost childlike, propped up on pillows, her face vulnerable in sleep.

Tansy felt uneasy, remembering the wretched, tortured version of herself she had seen in a previous memory, scrubbing at pots until her hands were

raw and bloody.

‘I … I think I’d like to go back now,’ she said.

‘Not yet,’ Lady Aster said quietly. She was expressionless, watching the other version of herself.

The candle had almost burned down when the other Tansy returned.

She had a cloth tied over her mouth and nose, a tea tray in her hands. She poured tea into the cup and held it under the sleeping Lady Aster’s open mouth, watching silently as the old woman inhaled the steam.

It was no ordinary tea. Tansy could smell the grassy scents of valerian, poppy, mandragora and hemlock.

She felt a stab of dread. ‘I poisoned you,’ she said.

‘I am loyal,’ the other girl whispered to the sleeping Lady Aster. ‘You aren’t safe out there, so you have to stay in here.’

Lady Aster stirred a little, turned her head to the side. ‘Shh,’ the other Tansy said, moving the steaming cup. ‘You need to rest. It isn’t time to wake up. Not yet.’

The other Lady Aster sighed deeply, then lay still. The candle sputtered and went out, and memory-Tansy bit her lip until it bled. Then she leaned forward and gently prised Anhelion from the sleeping Lady Aster’s hand.

‘Don’t worry,’ the other Tansy murmured, gazing down at the jewel. ‘I’ll look after you.’

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20
MERIT

Hawthorn: The crushed berries can open portals to other worlds.

SHE'D BEEN WAITING for hours in the stinking warm salt-rain. Waiting for Tansy to open the door and let her back into the Oubliette. Her mind churning, darker than the mud beneath her feet.

How could she have not realised sooner? It was right there in the name.

Astaroth.

Lady Aster was the Unmaker, and Tansy was her prisoner.

Merit pushed against the stone slab again, hoping that this time it would open.

What if something had happened?

What if Lady Aster had … *done* something?

Merit would kill her if she had hurt Tansy.

Perhaps she should kill her anyway.

The idea festered in her mind. If Lady Aster was dead, then maybe the spell of loyalty that bound Tansy to her would break.

If Lady Aster was dead, the Unmaker would never return. It was the right thing to do.

The *only* thing to do.

Death was what she'd been trained in.

She heard a metallic *click*, and the stone door swung open. Merit tumbled through the silver mist, back into the lavender-scented passage where Tansy was waiting for her.

'She's the Unmaker,' Merit burst out.

Tansy nodded miserably, and Merit sagged with relief. She knew too.

'We have to get out of here,' Merit urged. 'Right now.'

Tansy bit her lip. 'You'd better come downstairs.'

Merit drew her sword and followed Tansy down into the sitting room. A fire burned cheerily in the grate, and Bracken lay in front of it, his tail thumping on the hearthrug as Merit entered.

Lady Aster was waiting for them, perched on an armchair like a wizened crow.

Merit levelled her sword at the old woman's throat in one smooth movement.

'No!' Tansy cried. 'Don't hurt her!'

The tip of the blade pressed against Lady Aster's crepe-like skin.

It would be easy.

Death was easy.

Merit thought of Valiant's sword, sliding into her gut.

Death was how Carrion Knights solved all their problems.

Lady Aster shrugged. 'Go ahead,' she said. 'I don't care.'

Merit ground her teeth. It would be easier if the old woman put up a fight.

'I won't let you hurt her.' Tansy's fists were clenched by her sides.

Merit turned to her. 'You're under a spell,' she said gently. 'You can't help it. You can't see what she really is.'

'I know what she is,' Tansy replied. 'But I still can't let you do it.'

'This isn't *you*,' Merit told her. 'What you're feeling, none of it is real.'

‘If you hurt her, I’ll never forgive you. I *won’t*.’

‘Will she be free of it if I kill you?’ Merit asked Lady Aster. ‘Her obligation to you? Her loyalty?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Lady Aster replied. ‘The ties that bind us are tight. If I die, then so does she.’

Merit felt sick. ‘Where is Anhelion?’ she demanded.

Lady Aster didn’t answer. Instead she nodded to Tansy. ‘Pour the tea,’ she ordered. ‘Three cups.’

‘Why?’ Merit asked. ‘Are you going to poison me?’

The corner of Lady Aster’s mouth twitched. ‘Poisoning isn’t really my style.’

Tansy let out a little gulping sob as she lifted the teapot. What had happened between them?

‘What is your style, then?’ Merit asked. ‘Death? Lies?’

Lady Aster sniffed in chilly amusement. ‘The former, certainly. But I have never lied to you, Sir Merit.’

Tansy passed a china cup and saucer to Lady Aster, then offered one to Merit, who shook her head. Tansy kept it for herself but did not drink.

‘You said you were going to send me home,’ Merit said to Lady Aster, lowering her sword. ‘That was a lie.’

‘I said I would send you back to where you came from,’ Lady Aster corrected. ‘Which I did.’

Merit scowled at her. ‘You don’t know where I’m from.’

Lady Aster waved a dismissive hand. ‘Some of the first Carrion Knights came from Scata Delve,’ she said. ‘I unmade their parents and took them as children. Close enough.’

‘King Elior should have killed you,’ Merit said. ‘Why didn’t he?’

‘Everyone who tastes power wants more of it,’ Lady Aster replied. ‘King Elior especially. He supported me for as long as his power grew. But eventually, my army eclipsed his, like I knew it would. He demanded that I give him Anhelion, but it was too late.’

‘You used it on him. You unmade him.’

The old woman shrugged. ‘I had no choice.’

‘There’s always a choice,’ Merit said. ‘You could have stopped. You could have made peace.’

‘Peace is a false promise that men make to justify their violence,’ Lady Aster said. ‘There is no such thing as peace, only power.’

Merit resisted the urge to punch her in the face.

'I regret it all, if that means anything to you,' Lady Aster added.

'It doesn't,' Merit replied shortly.

'That's fair.'

'The monster in Uyst,' Merit said. 'What is it?'

Lady Aster shrugged. 'I have no idea,' she replied. 'I assume it slipped into this world when you did.'

Was she lying? Merit remembered the icy darkness of the void between the rotting house in the forest and this version of the Oubliette. The snapping of teeth. Perhaps she *had* brought it to the Oubliette.

Hesitantly, Tansy told her about how the creature – she called it the Sleeper – had attacked her and Lady Aster.

'It's gone, though,' Tansy finished. 'I ran it off the cliff into the sea.'

Merit raised her eyebrows, impressed. 'That sounds incredibly brave.'

Lady Aster shrugged. 'It's just the loyalty,' she said. 'She can't escape it.'

Merit frowned. 'But … she *did* escape it,' she said slowly, as something occurred to her. 'Didn't she? And you've been punishing her ever since.'

The china cup slipped from Tansy's fingers and shattered on the floor.

'I'm … I'm so sorry—' she stammered, springing to her feet. 'I'll get the dustpan …'

'Don't *apologise* to her,' Merit growled. 'She's a monster, and you're a hero.'

Tansy wrung her hands. 'I'm not a hero,' she said. 'Lady Aster is right. It was just the loyalty. I wasn't even thinking—'

'Tansy.' Merit worked hard to keep her voice steady. 'Sit.'

Tansy hovered, uncertain. Lady Aster nodded, and Tansy sat. Her obedience made Merit prickle all over with rage.

'Who is Tansy?' Merit asked the old woman. 'And how did she get here?'

Lady Aster's lips curled in a thin, cold smile. 'You think you understand,' she said. 'But you don't.'

'Tell me, then,' Merit said. 'Tell me the truth.'

'The truth is, I made a mistake,' Lady Aster said, gazing at Tansy, her expression distant and critical, as though she were assessing a cake that hadn't risen. 'I made you loyal above all else. But I should have made you *obedient*.'

A flash of anguish passed over Tansy's face, and Merit clenched her fists. How *dare* this old woman – this *villain* – speak to Tansy like this? And what

had she *done* to make Tansy so loyal?

'Is she like me?' Merit asked. 'Did you steal her as a child?'

'No.' The old woman had a sharp glint in her eye that Merit didn't like. She was playing with them.

'I've had enough,' Merit said. 'Just tell us how to get out of here.'

'I can't.'

Merit put her hand on her sword hilt again, and Lady Aster smirked.

'You won't kill me,' she said. 'You care too much for the girl.'

'You're right,' Merit said. 'But I can hurt you.'

Lady Aster chuckled. 'I doubt that.'

'Try me.'

The old woman gazed at her for a long moment, then shrugged. 'There was a door,' she explained. 'The way in and out. But it's gone.' She glared up at the ceiling, and the fire popped in the grate.

'Say more,' Merit said, not taking her hand from her sword hilt.

Lady Aster scowled at her. 'Anhelion,' she said. 'Anhelion was the key to get from Valla – the real world – into the Oubliette. That's what made it safe – nobody could get in or out unless they held the stone.'

'So where is Anhelion?'

'Ask her.' Lady Aster nodded at Tansy.

Merit unsheathed her sword. 'She has a *name*.'

Lady Aster's eyes narrowed. '*Tansy* took Anhelion from me while I slept. I've spent years – centuries – looking for it. But I have no idea where it is, and the house won't tell me.'

Merit noticed the faintest twitch at the corner of Lady Aster's eye. Was she lying?

Tansy's gaze kept straying to the broken china, and Merit could see how desperate she was to clean it up.

'Do not judge her too harshly,' Lady Aster said, watching Merit carefully. 'She only wishes to do her duty. As do we all.'

A tear slipped down Tansy's cheek.

'What's *your* duty, then?' Merit asked Lady Aster.

'To remain here,' she replied. 'In exile. The world is better off without my influence.'

Merit's mind was whirling. '*I* got in,' she said slowly. 'I came here from Valla. If I can get in, then I can get out again. There must be another way.'

‘Believe me,’ Lady Aster said acidly, ‘I’d love to get rid of you. You’ve been nothing but trouble since you arrived.’

Merit turned to Tansy, who blushed.

‘I … I think *I* made you come here,’ the girl said quietly. ‘Or at least, I wished for it, and the house made it happen.’

‘The house?’

Tansy nodded. ‘It looks after us. You asked me once where all the food comes from? I think it comes from the house.’

Merit glanced at Lady Aster, who was frowning thoughtfully at Tansy.

‘You … wished for me?’ Merit asked softly.

Tansy’s blush deepened, and she looked down at her hands, neatly folded in her lap. ‘I … I wished for a brave knight,’ she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. ‘I just wanted someone to talk to.’

Merit saw the girl’s loneliness written clear on her face and knew she’d do anything to set her free.

‘Can you … ask the house for a new door?’ she asked. ‘A door that would take us back to Valla?’

Tansy glanced guiltily at Lady Aster and shook her head.

Of course she couldn’t. The loyalty spell bound her too tightly.

Merit considered this puzzle, then sheathed her sword and went to kneel at Tansy’s feet. She reached out and gently took the girl’s small, cold hands, warming them in her own.

‘Could you do it just for me?’ she asked.

‘I can’t go with you,’ Tansy replied.

‘I understand. Just like you understand why I can’t stay.’

Tansy’s eyes brimmed with tears, but she nodded. Her skin felt like soft linen beneath Merit’s calloused hands. There was so much she wanted to say, but she knew none of it would do any good. Tansy would never choose her. Lady Aster’s spell was too strong.

‘Make me a door,’ Merit said softly.

Tansy took a hitching breath. ‘I can try.’

She stood up, tentatively reaching her hands out, her fingers brushing what looked like empty air. Her bottom lip slipped between her teeth, her brow crinkling in a frown as she concentrated.

Lady Aster leaned forward. She looked hungry.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Merit growled. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’

‘Just professional curiosity,’ Lady Aster said, but Merit didn’t believe her.

‘Wait,’ Tansy muttered. ‘I’ve almost got it …’

And then there was a door, in the middle of the sitting room. Cold stone, with a sunburst carved on it. The scar on Merit’s palm tingled, and Lady Aster’s eyes gleamed.

‘How …’ Merit turned to Lady Aster. ‘That seems pretty powerful for a mere housemaid. Who *is* she?’

Tansy tugged on Merit’s sleeve. ‘It wasn’t me,’ she said. ‘It was the house, I told you. I just … asked nicely.’

Lady Aster shrugged and got to her feet. ‘So kind of you to call,’ she said to Merit, radiating cold smugness. ‘Now you must be on your way. Isn’t that right, Tansy?’

‘Y-yes, ma’am.’

‘And it’s truly what you want?’ Merit asked her. ‘To stay here?’

Tansy wouldn’t meet her eyes. ‘Yes.’

Merit told herself that Tansy didn’t mean it. That she was under a spell. But the words still cut, like shards of broken glass. Bracken let out a whine but didn’t move from the hearthrug.

‘Wait,’ Tansy said, and disappeared from the room, returning a moment later with a glass globe in her hands.

It was a model of the Oubliette, grimy around the edges, the glass dull. Merit sheathed her sword and took it in one hand, the glass cool on her palm. She turned it over, but there was no plaque on the bottom.

‘Don’t forget me,’ Tansy whispered.

She unlocked the door with the silver key, and Merit saw the darkness of the void.

‘The dark paths between worlds,’ Lady Aster said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ Merit warned her, then turned back to Tansy. ‘You’ll make the door go away, won’t you?’ she asked. ‘Once I’m gone?’

Tansy nodded. ‘I promise.’

Merit swallowed and opened her arms, hoping Tansy would step into them for one last embrace.

Tansy glanced at Lady Aster, as if asking for permission. Merit wanted to scream, but she kept her face neutral as the old woman nodded.

‘Who am I to stand in the way of young love?’ Lady Aster said, coldly amused.

Merit thought of the thousands of people who had died under the Unmaker's hand and clenched her teeth.

She should kill Lady Aster now. A single blow would do it.

But then she would lose Tansy.

Merit thought about Valiant, crouching by the riverbank, just a frightened child.

Brave and strong and good.

Heroes were merciful.

They didn't destroy.

They *saved*.

Tansy stepped into Merit's embrace, and Merit tightened her arms.

'Merit?' Tansy began to struggle as Merit took a step backwards towards the hole in reality.

'Trust me,' she said gently to Tansy. 'Please.'

'Merit, no!' Tansy tried to pull away, but Merit was too strong. She took another step back, the gravedust-and-ice smell of the dark paths filling her nostrils.

'Wait.' Lady Aster held up a hand.

'I'm afraid you'll have to make your own tea from now on,' Merit said scathingly.

'Please—'

There was an urgency in Lady Aster's tone that Merit hadn't heard before. She hesitated.

'You could stay,' Lady Aster said. 'Stay by my side, and I will let you be with her.'

The promise hung in the air.

'Yes,' Tansy whimpered. 'Merit, please …'

Merit heard the desperation in Tansy's voice. It would be easy to give in. She could succumb to the forgetting spell of the Oubliette and stay with Tansy. Every day would be picnics and raspberries, until the end of time itself.

But that wasn't what a hero would do.

'Sir Merit, the Unmaker commands you.' Lady Aster's voice was hard as black iron. 'You could be something great, at my side.'

A Carrion Knight would leap at this opportunity. To serve the Unmaker directly.

But Merit wasn’t a Carrion Knight. She took another step towards the door.

‘Don’t leave me here alone,’ Lady Aster said, her voice barely more than a whisper. ‘I need her.’

She rushed forward and scrabbled at Merit, trying to pull Tansy from her grasp. Merit shook her off easily. She had never seen Lady Aster like this before, desperate and vulnerable. Nothing more than a little old lady.

Bracken barked, winding anxiously around Merit’s ankles.

Tansy struggled in Merit’s arms. ‘Merit,’ she whimpered. ‘Please.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Merit whispered to her, and stepped back, pulling Tansy with her into the darkness and slamming the door closed behind them.

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21
TANSY

Comfrey: Carry leaves in shoes or pockets for protection in travel.

BRACKEN WHIMPERED IN the darkness.

Tansy felt consumed, like she'd been swallowed up. Like she'd ceased to exist.

It was terrifying.

'What have you done?' she whispered.

She wrenched herself out of Merit's grasp and then immediately wished she hadn't. She heard the *snick* of a sword being unsheathed.

It was cold. Cold like a grave, and getting colder. Tansy thought she detected movement nearby. A whisper of ragged cloth.

‘Hold this.’ The glass globe was shoved into her hands.

Her skin crawled. The Sleeper was gone, trapped at the bottom of the ocean. Wasn’t it?

‘I … I have to go back,’ Tansy said, looking over her shoulder.

The door was gone.

‘And leave me here alone?’ Merit’s voice emerged from the darkness.

‘This was your choice,’ Tansy said in a low voice. ‘You could have stayed with me. With us.’

An icy finger touched her cheek and she froze, panic rising in her throat. The finger moved across her skin like a caress, passing over her lips, which she pressed together tightly.

Bracken let out a bark, short and sharp, and the finger withdrew.

Tansy heard a rattling hiss of breath.

‘Run,’ Merit said quietly, and Tansy obeyed, a hand stretched out in front of her, stumbling blindly through the blank, icy nothingness until all around her was cold and silent and empty.

‘M-Merit?’ she whispered.

‘I’m here.’ The knight sounded a little out of breath.

Something cold touched Tansy’s ankle, and she let out a yelp.

The sound reverberated in the darkness.

A snuffling noise came from the direction of the cold touch, and Tansy let out a breath.

‘It’s just Bracken,’ she said, relieved.

The little dog whined.

Merit laughed nervously, a sound that felt out of place in the suffocating darkness. It hung in the silence, then returned as an echo. Tansy frowned. She’d been thinking of the dark paths as a kind of void, but if there was an echo, then there had to be edges. Something for the sound to bounce off.

Maybe there was a border, like the glass globe worlds.

Bracken barked, a short, sharp sound that was swallowed by darkness.

‘Tansy,’ Merit said in a low voice.

‘Hmm?’ Tansy responded, still thinking about edges.

‘Bracken barked,’ Merit said.

‘So?’

‘There was no echo. When you yelped before, when I laughed, there was an echo, or at least, I thought that’s what it was.’

Tansy frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I think it was … them.’

Sleepers.

There was more than one.

Tansy hadn’t thought it was possible to feel *more* cold.

Merit clapped, a sharp, staccato sound.

It rippled outward in a spiral.

Horror rose in Tansy’s throat as she realised that Merit was right.

There was no echo.

The sound was being *mimicked*.

Thousands. There were thousands of Sleepers with them, in the void.

‘We have to go back,’ she gasped, whirling around, but everything was darkness.

What if she never found her way back?

Panic clawed in her chest, rising around her like a lavender-scented tide, drowning her every thought.

‘Her t-t-tea,’ she babbled. ‘I need to put the kettle on. Stoke the fire. Warm the pot. She doesn’t like it to be over-steeped, but if it’s too weak she will know. I have to—’

Merit’s hand found hers. It felt warm and solid and real. Tansy clung to it like a life raft.

Merit was here.

‘We need a door,’ Merit said. ‘Can you make one?’

‘N-no,’ Tansy stammered. ‘It wasn’t me that made it. It was the *house*—’

She was trembling all over. All she could think about was tea.

Boil the water. Warm the pot.

Two spoons of tea-leaves from the black caddy.

Pour over boiling water.

Lid on.

Milk in the morning, lemon in the afternoon.

Water.

Tea.

Milk.

Lemon.

Lavender.

Dimly, she heard Merit saying her name.

Water.

Tea.

Milk.

‘Bracken,’ Merit was saying, but it sounded like she was a long way away. ‘Take us to Valla. Take us to the Bright City.’

Water.

Tea.

Water.

Tea.

The little dog let out a yap, and Tansy felt Merit tug on her hand and allowed the knight to lead her through the darkness.

All around, she could hear snatches of inhaled breath. The grinding of teeth. Cold fingers brushed against her cheeks, her neck, her hair.

In the darkness, a voice sounded. It didn’t seem to come from any one direction. It sounded like a great cracked bell. Like iron grinding on stone.

‘I. WILL. RETURN.’

The voice was not echoed; instead, a chorus of snapping teeth followed the words like a round of terrifying applause.

Tansy felt the words drop deep in her gut.

Icy fingers reached for her, and she cried out in fear.

‘Come on, Bracken!’ Merit urged, and Tansy heard the whistle of her sword blade, the crunch of steel on bone.

There were so many of them.

Tansy held her breath. ‘Please, Bracken,’ she whispered. ‘Find us a door.’

The little dog barked, some distance away. They followed the sound, until Merit let out a cry of relief.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘A door. I can feel it.’

Tansy’s fingers were numb. Was it getting colder?

‘It’s stuck,’ Merit said, and Tansy heard the thump of her body hitting something solid.

‘Th-the key,’ Tansy stammered. ‘I still have it.’

She fumbled in her pocket, Merit’s fingers reaching out to guide her to the cold stone door.

The voice sounded again, cold and empty as the stars.

‘I WILL RETURN.’

It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Around them, the Sleepers were growing agitated. Tansy could hear the gnashing of teeth and dry rustle of ancient fabric on papery skin.

She scrabbled at the icy stone, searching for a keyhole.

Deathly cold fingers reached for Tansy, brushing her skin. She heard a hissing breath, close to her ear.

'Hurry!' Merit cried.

The key slid into an indent in the door, and Tansy heard a *click*.

A crack appeared, blazing like lightning in the night sky. The door swung open, and Tansy sobbed with relief as they burst through into brightness.

She glanced over her shoulder back into the void and thought she glimpsed an impossibly tall figure shrouded in tattered cloth, a high spiked crown rising from his brow.

Her feet went out from underneath her, and she collapsed, her eyes screwed tight against the blinding white light.

The thread that tied her to Lady Aster was pulled so tight, she was sure it would snap. What would happen to her then? Would she die?

Warm the pot.

Two spoons of tea-leaves.

Milk in the morning.

Lemon in the afternoon.

She waited for the dry voice to tell her what to do, but it was silent.

Bracken nuzzled her neck with his wet nose.

She was lying on the ground, something smooth and cool pressed against her cheek. Opening her eyes, she saw intricately carved white tiles.

She wasn't on the dark paths.

But she wasn't in the Oubliette either.

She sat up, her head pounding, and shielded her eyes from the brightness around her.

Everything was white, and Tansy wondered if this was how it felt to be dead.

A dark lump beside her groaned and shifted.

'Tansy?' the lump murmured. 'Are you okay?'

It was Merit, struggling into a sitting position. The knight looked pale, the scar on her face standing out dark pink against her skin.

'I'm okay,' Tansy told her, even though the thread inside her was pulling even tighter.

There were no Sleepers. No tall, crowned figure.

As her eyes adjusted, Tansy saw they were on a kind of large balcony. Almost a courtyard, tiled in white marble and open to the air. Behind them were ornate wooden doors, carved and painted in white and gold.

There was no sign of the stone door they'd come through.

She climbed to her feet. The air felt cold and thin. They were high up.

A larger-than-life statue rose in the centre of the open space, all smooth lines of gleaming white marble. Tansy ignored it and stepped to the edge of the balcony, her breath catching.

An unfamiliar city spread below her, all shining white stone, trimmed in gold. They seemed to be in the very middle of it, in a high tower. Around her, other turrets and battlements brushed the clouds, gold pennants snapping smartly in the breeze.

Unlike Scata Delve, this city was alive. Tansy could hear the cries of merchants far below, the sharp *clop* of hooves on the wide stone streets. The laughter of children. The bright sound of trumpeting horns.

A river wound through the city, sparkling silver and dotted with boats.

It was all so dazzling, it made her eyes hurt.

The Bright City.

It had to be.

Panic took hold of her as she glanced around. 'Are we in another glass globe?' she asked.

Merit shook her head. 'I think this is the real Valla.'

'No.' The word slipped from Tansy's lips. 'I … I can't be in Valla. I have to go back. Lady Aster—'

Merit's expression was clouded. 'She isn't *Lady Aster*,' she said. 'She's Astaroth, remember? The Unmaker.'

Terror seized Tansy as she remembered the icy voice on the dark paths.

'But if Lady Aster is the Unmaker,' she whispered, 'then who did we just hear in there?'

Merit shook her head. 'I don't know.'

Tansy's lips were dry. 'Maybe she just *wanted* us to think she was the Unmaker. M-maybe she really is the Maid after all, and it was all a ruse to … to p-protect us.'

She was babbling now.

'Tansy.' Merit's voice was patient and awed. '*Lady Aster* isn't the Maid. Look.'

The knight took Tansy's shoulders and gently turned her around to face the huge statue on the balcony.

It was a young woman – barely older than a girl, carved in white marble. She wore a long, simple gown, her hair unbound and crowned with a floral wreath. In one hand, she held a sword. In the other, outstretched, she proffered a sunburst jewel.

Tansy felt a jolt of recognition as she looked at the statue's face.

'Tansy,' Merit said. 'It's you. *You're* the Maid.'

That didn't make any sense.

She wasn't the Maid. Lady Aster was the Maid.

Tansy was just … *a* maid.

Merit was staring at her like she was something wondrous.

Tansy didn't like it at all.

The lavender threads inside her were so tight they were going to snap, she was sure of it. What would happen then?

'I have to go back,' she said, turning, searching for the stone door.

'Tansy, look around,' Merit protested. 'You're *the Maid*. You defeated the Unmaker.'

'No, I didn't!' Tansy wailed. 'I *betrayed* her. I … I drugged her, Merit. To keep her asleep, so she'd forget.'

'How you did it doesn't matter,' Merit insisted. 'The fact is, you banished the Unmaker from Valla. You're a hero.'

She wasn't.

She wasn't a hero.

'I have to go back,' she said again. 'I … I think I might die without her.'

'You can't go back,' Merit said, gesturing around. 'There's no door.'

'I'll find a way,' Tansy insisted. 'I'll go to the house you found, in the forest. That's how you got in.'

Merit stared at her for a long moment, her expression unreadable. 'Fine. I'll go with you,' she said at last. 'Just … let me go to the Council of Stars first. Warn them about the Carrion Knights. Then we'll go there together.'

'No,' Tansy said. 'You … you have dreams of your own. You can have a life here. You can be happy …'

Merit thrust her jaw out stubbornly. 'I can't be happy without—' She swallowed. 'Without knowing that you're safe.'

'I'll be all right,' Tansy reassured her, although the idea of returning to the dark paths alone filled her with terror.

‘What about the Sleepers? And … the other thing in there? The voice?’

‘I’ll take Bracken.’

Tansy hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

Merit caught her hand. ‘Unmaker’s *teeth*,’ she muttered. ‘Is it always supposed to be this *difficult*?’

Tansy took a deep breath. ‘You don’t owe me anything, Merit,’ she said as the strings inside her pulled tighter and tighter. ‘You don’t have to be loyal or do your duty. Just do what you *want*.’

‘I’m *trying*,’ Merit ground out. ‘But I can’t think of anything else to do except—’

She broke off, a flush creeping down her neck.

‘Except what?’ Tansy asked in a small voice.

Merit’s eyes were wild, her breathing erratic. ‘Except … Except kiss you.’

Tansy’s heart started to pound, and for a moment she forgot about Lady Aster.

‘Do it, then,’ she breathed, lifting her chin.

Merit’s eyes burned into her, searching for something.

‘Please,’ Tansy gasped.

And then Merit was kissing her, and she was kissing Merit back.

Warmth flooded her, drowning the icy cold of the dark paths and miraculously – *blessedly* – easing the relentless pull back to Lady Aster and the Oubliette.

The lavender threads, the beautiful city, the Tansy-faced statues faded away, until all that existed was Merit. Merit’s lips, Merit’s skin, Merit’s body, pressed against hers. They fit together perfectly, as Tansy had always known they would.

The nameless, voiceless longing that was all Tansy had ever known evaporated, the question that consumed her finally answered.

Merit’s arms were around her, holding her as if she were something precious.

‘Tansy …’ Merit whispered.

‘Shh,’ she murmured against Merit’s lips.

She didn’t want to talk. She didn’t want to think. She just wanted to bask in this blissful stillness.

Dimly, she heard the tread of footsteps behind her, but she didn’t care. Merit’s shoulders stiffened, and the knight broke the kiss, pulling away.

Tansy let out a little kittenish sound of protest.

Someone nearby cleared their throat.

Tansy reluctantly turned to see a squadron of soldiers in gold-plated armour streaming through the wooden doors. Ivory cloaks fell from shoulders, and white feathers plumed from helmets. They clanked out onto the balcony, each bearing a huge golden shield and swords made of steel so bright it was almost white. They turned simultaneously, forming two lines with an aisle between.

The man who had cleared his throat stood in the centre of this aisle, his gold-embroidered cloak swirling dramatically around him. His face was aristocratic, with fine cheekbones and a well-kept white beard. A gold circlet sat on his brow, studded with glittering green jewels. Curious blue eyes went from Merit, to Tansy, to the statue, then back to Tansy again. He appeared to be doing some complex mental calculation.

Then he sank to one knee before her.

'My lady,' he said. 'The prophecy is fulfilled at last.'

Tansy stared at him, baffled. Behind her Merit stood still and tense. Even Bracken didn't move.

'Is this the Bright City?' Merit asked.

'Of course,' the man responded. 'And I am Lord Brinian, High Counsellor of Valla.'

Tansy stared at the man. 'D-do you … *know* me?' she asked.

'You are the Maid,' Lord Brinian replied, getting to his feet again. 'The brave maiden who defeated the Unmaker and saved us all.'

Tansy shook her head. 'But wasn't that hundreds of years ago?' she asked. 'Why aren't you more surprised to see me?'

'A prophecy foretold your return,' Lord Brinian said. 'It said you would appear in a bolt of lightning, at our greatest hour of need.'

'But' – her mouth was suddenly dry – 'I could be anyone. An … an ordinary girl with a passing resemblance.'

'An ordinary girl with a passing resemblance who appears in a bolt of lightning, atop the tallest tower in the Bright City,' Lord Brinian agreed. 'A tower that, I might add, is surrounded by armed guards.'

Tansy gulped. 'You probably have questions,' she said.

'Oh, yes,' Lord Brinian agreed. 'First and foremost of which is, why is the Maid accompanied by a Carrion Knight and' – he glanced down at Bracken – 'something that I *think* is a dog?'

Bracken looked indignant.

The golden guards moved forward, their swords drawn and pointed at Merit.

Tansy flung out a hand. ‘Wait!’ she cried.

‘My lady,’ Lord Brinian said, ‘has this servant of the Unmaker harmed you?’

‘Of course not,’ Tansy said. ‘She’s my …’ She felt her cheeks grow hot. ‘My friend. Please.’

Lord Brinian considered her for a long moment, then gestured with one hand to the guards, who lowered their weapons and stepped away from Merit.

‘Sir Merit saved my life,’ Tansy said. ‘More than once.’

‘You *are* a Carrion Knight, are you not?’ Lord Brinian asked.

‘I was,’ Merit admitted. ‘But not anymore. I’ve come here to’ – her voice grew thick with emotion – ‘to offer you my life. In service or in death, whichever you deem just.’

Slowly and carefully, she slid her black iron sword from its sheath, then laid it on the white marble floor at Lord Brinian’s feet.

Lord Brinian regarded her. ‘I see,’ he said at last. ‘This is a most interesting development.’

‘My lord,’ Merit said, ‘the Carrion Knights are planning to attack the Bright City.’

A wrinkle appeared on Lord Brinian’s brow, and he gestured for Merit to continue.

‘It will come before the next full moon,’ Merit said. ‘They believe the Unmaker is returning. You must be prepared.’

‘I see,’ Lord Brinian said. ‘Thank you for this information.’

There was something about his tone that made Tansy feel uneasy. It was almost as if he were humouring Merit. Like he didn’t believe there was any way the Carrion Knights could attack the Bright City.

‘What happens now?’ she asked.

‘Now you will follow me,’ Lord Brinian replied.

‘Are we prisoners?’

Lord Brinian laughed. ‘Of course not. I will show you to rooms where you can rest and refresh yourselves while I gather the Council of Stars. And then …’ He gazed down at Tansy, his eyes warm.

‘And then?’ she asked timidly.

‘And then we will introduce the Maid to her people,’ Lord Brinian said gently. ‘A people who have waited five hundred years for her return.’

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22
MERIT

Nettle: Breaks curses and enchantments.

MERIT WAS PRETTY sure she *was* a prisoner. But she had to admit it was a nice prison.

Lord Brinian had escorted them down endless flights of stairs to the base of the tower, then across an immaculate white courtyard lined with weeping cherry trees to an imposing building, crusted with statuary and ornamentation.

Tansy had been shown to her rooms first, then Merit, just down the hallway. She had felt uneasy at being separated from Tansy, but there didn't seem to be much either of them could do about it.

Her mind was still reeling from everything that had happened. Lord Brinian. The Bright Guard.

Tansy.

The memory of the kiss was seared into Merit's mind, her lips still tingling from it.

Kissing Tansy was better than raspberries.

Tansy in her arms, her body warm and alive and *her*. Merit had felt like the dawn was breaking, like she had been bathed in golden sunlight that soaked into every particle of her.

And for as long as the kiss had lasted, Tansy had been truly *herself*, free of the spell Lady Aster – Astaroth – had put her under.

The Halls of Order hadn't encouraged fairy stories, but Valiant had whispered things to her in the darkness when they were acolytes. Told her about brave knights who could break a spell with a kiss.

Was it possible that Tansy was finally free of Lady Aster?

Merit's heart leaped at the thought, and she almost strode out of the room to find Tansy at that very moment, but the servant who had ushered her in – an apple-cheeked woman with an expression that suggested she would tolerate no nonsense – clearly had other ideas.

'You must refresh yourself, my lady,' she insisted, ushering Merit through several enormous rooms draped with damask curtains in white and gold. Glittering chandeliers hung from the ceilings, and the furniture was all shining gilt and plush ivory velvet.

Merit was afraid to touch anything, for fear of leaving behind smudges.

The servant showed her a huge marble bath filled with steaming perfumed water, then tried to take Merit's shirt off.

'I can do it myself,' she growled, and glared pointedly at the woman until she left the room.

Merit closed the door firmly behind her.

A wash probably wouldn't hurt. She was still covered in filth from the grim battlefield at Halsgarth.

She checked that the door was locked, then stripped off and stepped into the bath.

It was large enough that she was entirely submerged in warm, perfumed water. She stretched her legs out and let her head fall back against the marble rim. There were baths in the Halls of Order, but they contained iced water, to help build strength and the ability to withstand pain.

This was a *very* nice prison.

Vanilla and cherry blossom filled her senses, and Merit felt her muscles start to unclench, a dull ache she hadn't even noticed was there starting to drain away. Her eyes grew heavy, and for the first time in a long while, she let herself relax.

When she woke, the water was tepid, and the vanilla scent had given her a headache.

She clambered out of the bath and wrapped herself in a soft white towel. Stepping out of the bathing room, she was surprised to see the serving woman was still there, waiting for her. Merit pulled the towel more tightly around her body.

'Am I under surveillance?' she asked.

'Of course not, my lady,' the woman replied mildly. 'I'm here to help you dress.'

Her tone was deferential, but Merit saw the sidelong glance as the servant cast her eye over Merit's bare limbs.

'Looking for the seams?' she asked pointedly.

The servant flushed. 'M-my lady?'

'The seams,' Merit repeated with a scowl. 'Where the Unmaker stitched me together from battlefield corpses.'

The woman spluttered a little, clearly trying to find a way to respond politely to this. 'Er,' she said. 'M-my lady, I wasn't sure if you would prefer a gown or … or a man's attire …' She gestured to two piles of clothing laid out on the bed.

'I can dress myself,' Merit said. 'You're dismissed.'

The servant looked like she wanted to argue, but Merit crossed her arms and glowered, and eventually the woman bobbed a rather sarcastic curtsey and left the room.

Merit hunted around for her own clothes, before discovering that the woman had discreetly removed them. She eyed the two piles of finery on the bed.

Both looked very complicated to get on.

In the Halls of Order, if the knights weren't in armour, they wore simple black hose and tunic. Merit briefly regretted sending the servant woman

away. But she wasn’t about to call her back in.

She glared at the piles of lace and velvet and ribbons, as if they were enemies that needed defeating.

The gown was out of the question. The many-layered skirts would be impossible to fight in.

Men’s clothes it was, then.

She pulled on the undershirt and drawers, then a pair of white hose so tight they left very little to the imagination.

The doublet was next. It was gold, heavily embroidered, with enormous puffed sleeves crusted with little crystals and trimmed with ermine.

A huge gilt-framed mirror stood against one wall. Merit caught a glimpse of herself in it and let out a groan of dismay.

She looked ridiculous.

She picked up the stiff white ruff she was supposed to wear around her neck.

‘Absolutely not,’ she told it, and discarded it on the bed, along with the absurd lace cuffs and a heavily stuffed codpiece. There were no shoes. The white hose had soft leather soles built in that would be utterly useless in rough terrain.

The servant woman had taken her boots away, too.

A gentle knock sounded at the door. Merit crossed the room and opened it, ready to demand that somebody bring her back her old clothes.

A lady stood in the doorway. She wore a corseted gown of stiff brocade with voluminous skirts. Her hair was pulled back into an intricate series of braids that glittered with jewels.

Merit stared.

‘Close your mouth,’ Tansy told her. ‘You look like a fish.’

She pushed past Merit into the room, her skirts rustling.

‘Where’s Bracken?’ Merit asked.

‘Sulking on my bed,’ Tansy replied. ‘One of the servants gave him a bath.’

Merit knew how he felt.

‘Can you believe this place?’ Tansy asked, gesturing at the opulent room. ‘Mine is just like it. The drapes! The wallpaper! So much gold! So much ornamentation!’

‘Are you okay?’ Merit asked.

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ Tansy replied.

Because of Lady Aster.

Because you're under a spell.

Because she's the Unmaker.

Because you're the Maid.

But Tansy seemed … fine. Cheerful, even, as she turned to inspect Merit's new clothes.

'Why aren't you wearing any trousers?' she asked. 'Did they not bring you any?'

Merit felt her face flush. 'I believe this is the current fashion,' she said stiffly.

Tansy raised her eyebrows. 'The current fashion is to wear no trousers?'

'These are trousers,' Merit protested, indicating the tight hose. 'Sort of.'

Tansy snorted indelicately. 'If you say so.'

'Shut up.'

Tansy flopped onto the enormous bed with a dreamy sigh. 'The mattress is stuffed with *feathers*,' she told Merit. 'Not straw or wool. Feathers! It's like lying on a cloud. Have you tried it?'

Merit shook her head, feeling a smile creep over her face.

'Come and lie down with me.'

Tansy had been so desperate to leave when they had first arrived at the top of the tower. Maddened by the pull back to Lady Aster. But now she seemed she had forgotten the old woman completely.

Had the kiss truly broken Lady Aster's spell? Could it be that simple?

Merit clambered onto the bed and lay down. It was big enough to fit ten people. She was careful to stay a respectful distance from Tansy. She didn't want to assume anything.

Tansy was home. She belonged here.

She was a hero.

And what was Merit? A prisoner? A traitor?

Tansy looked over at her and wrinkled her nose. 'My corset is so tight,' she said. 'Does everyone dress like this in Valla?'

Merit chuckled. 'No,' she said. 'Only the lords and ladies.'

'I can barely breathe. When the maid laced me up, I thought she was going to crack one of my ribs. And this' – she indicated her décolletage – 'this is a lot.'

Merit felt her cheeks grow hot and decided not to respond to that.

She gazed up at the creamy velvet canopy that hung over the bed, embroidered with gold leaves and flowers. The feather mattress beneath her

was, indeed, like lying on a cloud. She almost felt comfortable, except for the shockingly tight hose and the puffiness of her sleeves.

'What is this?' Tansy was sitting up, holding the stuffed codpiece.

'Er …' Merit cleared her throat. 'I believe it is a decorative item.'

Tansy frowned. 'Where does it go?' she asked, holding it to her throat. 'Is it a kind of necklace? Or does it go in one's hair?'

'Unmaker's teeth, put it down,' Merit said, her voice strangled. 'It is … worn by men only.'

Tansy blinked, frowning at the pearl-encrusted item. Then she made a face and dropped it back on the bed. 'These are very strange times,' she mused. 'Did you try the bath?'

'I did.'

'And did you see this?' Tansy hauled herself off the bed and pattered into the bathroom, turning on one of the gold taps. 'The maid told me it's called *plumbing*,' she said, raising her voice to be heard over the rushing water. 'Pipes that carry water to every room. And it can come out hot or cold!'

Her eyes were shining, and Merit couldn't help but find her enthusiasm infectious.

'Did you know there are no outhouses here?' Tansy continued. 'There's a room called a *water closet*. Inside! More plumbing!'

'That's only in grand houses,' Merit told her. 'Most people in Valla still use an outhouse.'

'And the pipes don't just carry water,' Tansy went on, gesturing up at one of the glittering chandeliers that hung from the cavernously high ceilings. 'They also carry a kind of air that makes light!'

'Gas,' Merit said, smiling despite herself. 'It's called gas.'

'You know of it?'

She nodded. 'The Halls of Order have gas lighting. And plumbing.'

Tansy shook her head, astonished. 'Why didn't you *tell* me?'

'It never came up.'

'Everything is so different!'

'You've been away for five hundred years,' Merit reminded her. 'Things change.'

Tansy's eyes grew wide. 'I want to see the kitchens,' she breathed. 'I bet they're *amazing*.'

'Have you remembered anything?' Merit asked curiously. 'From before the Oubliette?'

Tansy's smile faltered, and she shook her head. Suddenly Merit could feel the presence of Lady Aster, looming between them.

'Forget that now,' she said hurriedly. 'Let's talk about something else.'

She patted the bed beside her. Merit saw Tansy's jaw clench, then soften. The tension between them dissolved like a wisp of steam. Tansy leaped back onto the bed, landing in a soft cloud of sweet-scented fabric.

'What if we didn't talk at all?'

'All right,' Merit said. 'What do— Oh.'

Tansy wriggled closer, until her nose was almost touching Merit's. It seemed like an abrupt change in mood, but Merit still didn't entirely understand the rules of quarrelling. And Tansy was *very* close. And smelled *very* nice.

Tansy's mouth curved in a smile, her ankle hooking over Merit's, her fists bunching in the fabric of Merit's doublet.

'Why didn't I do this weeks ago?' Merit heard herself murmur as her lips brushed Tansy's.

Better than raspberries.

'Why *didn't* you?' Tansy whispered back.

Merit swallowed. 'I … I didn't know if you wanted me to.'

She could feel Tansy's heart beating against hers, separated only by skin and a few layers of fabric.

'I did,' Tansy said softly. 'I do.'

Merit was drowning in liquid sunshine, melting away all the spiked barriers she had erected around herself. Her fingers wandered over the stiff brocade of Tansy's dress, and she wondered idly how difficult it would be to take the whole thing off. To feel skin slide against skin, the way it had in the water in Uyst.

A knock sounded at the door, and they sprang apart.

The servant was back, bearing a silver tray. Tansy's cheeks were flushed pink, and Merit could feel a similar glow on her own.

'Some refreshment, my lady.' The woman's eyes passed over Tansy, but her expression remained polite. 'My *ladies*.'

Tansy shot the woman an impish grin, then rolled off the bed in a decidedly unladylike manner.

'I'm starving,' she remarked happily, smoothing her skirts.

She was a marvel, and Merit couldn't stop staring at her.

The servant laid out tea in an elaborate silver service, including a tiered stand of little cakes and sandwiches. Each was decorated like a tiny work of art.

‘The Council of Stars is gathering now,’ she said. ‘You will be called to them shortly.’

The servant woman’s eyes lingered on Tansy for a moment. Then she curtseyed deeply and left the room.

Tansy poured the tea into porcelain cups. They were painted with intricate gold vines and flowers, but the cups were so small they held barely more than a mouthful. Tansy turned her attention to the tiered stand.

‘They all look so beautiful,’ she said, examining the cakes and sandwiches. ‘It seems a shame to eat them.’

She picked up a tiny cake decorated with perfect sugar roses, then shrugged and popped it into her mouth.

Merit helped herself too. Each cake seemed to melt on her tongue, leaving behind a mere impression of sweetnesses. The sandwiches were as soft as down feathers, but they didn’t taste of much at all.

Perhaps her palate wasn’t refined enough for this kind of food. She found herself thinking longingly of raspberries and crunchy fried shrimp in a paper cone.

Tansy screwed up her nose. ‘They’re a bit … bland?’

Merit felt a little surge of relief. ‘I thought it was just me.’

Tansy had a dab of icing on her top lip, and Merit leaned forward and brushed it away with a gentle thumb. Tansy’s lips parted, and she put down her teacup.

Merit thought she might die if she didn’t kiss her soon.

She hooked an arm around Tansy’s waist and drew her as close as Tansy’s enormous skirts would allow.

Another knock sounded at the door, and Merit fought the urge to break something.

‘My ladies. They are ready for you.’

The Council of Stars gathered in a stately chamber, around an enormous circular table, rich mahogany inlaid with elaborate gilded vines. The ceiling

above was high, painted a deep, dark blue, embellished with thousands of glittering stars that glinted in the light cast from glass wall sconces.

There were perhaps thirty members of the Council, each wearing heavy white robes of state, embroidered with celestial motifs in golden thread. But five were raised a little higher than the others. Merit saw Lord Brinian with his golden circlet at the head of the table.

All appeared solemn and serious.

Merit's heart beat furiously. This was it. The Council of Stars was the highest power in Valla.

Her future lay in their hands.

'My lady,' Lord Brinian said to Tansy. 'You are most welcome in this chamber.'

He didn't say anything to Merit, but she felt mistrustful eyes lingering on her. She was very aware of the armoured guards at the door, white-gloved hands resting on sword hilts.

'Allow me to introduce the High Council of Stars.' Lord Brinian indicated the woman next to him. She had dark skin and hair cropped close to her head. A heavy chain of office hung around her neck, set with enormous red rubies. 'This is Lady Fara, High Councillor of Coin.'

The woman nodded. Tansy bobbed a curtsey, and Merit bowed.

'Lord Hoy, High Councillor of Laws.' A pale, thin man with prominent cheekbones, his collar lined with pearls.

'Lord Aiken, High Councillor of Vows.' An elderly man with white hair escaping from under a richly embroidered headdress that seemed too heavy for his scrawny neck to support.

'Lady Lyness, High Councillor of Might.' A tall, stern-looking woman with shining epaulettes on her shoulders.

'And I am Lord Brinian, High Councillor of Secrets.'

Merit wondered what a Councillor of Secrets was in charge of. Spies? Magic? Ancient wisdom?

Tansy bobbed another curtsey, automatically slipping back into being an ordinary maid, instead of *the* Maid.

'We are very curious to hear your story,' Lord Brinian continued. 'To learn where you have been for the last five hundred years.'

'U-um …' Tansy faltered. Her voice seemed small in the large room.

Merit stepped forward. 'Apologies, Lord Brinian,' she said. 'There are more urgent things to speak of. The Carrion Knights will attack soon.'

‘Thank you,’ Lord Brinian said mildly. ‘But the danger has passed. The problem of the Carrion Knights has been dealt with for now.’

Was that it?

‘The danger has not passed,’ Merit insisted. ‘The Unmaker lives.’

She felt Tansy’s gaze turn to her, sharp and accusatory. The girl balled her hands into fists.

‘The Unmaker poses no danger,’ Tansy said. ‘But … there is another threat. We heard … a voice, in the dark spaces between worlds. A dark lord, gathering an army of monsters.’

Merit saw Lady Lyness’s eyes flicker over to her.

Monsters.

‘Rest assured that we are ready,’ Lady Lyness said, her voice a sharp slice of steel. ‘We have been preparing for the Unmaker’s return for many centuries.’

‘And now you are back where you belong, my lady,’ Lord Brinian added. ‘We have everything that we need.’

Merit’s heart thudded against her ribs. *Did* they, though? Not a single face in the room seemed in the least concerned.

‘We are not frightened of dark lords,’ Lady Lyness declared. ‘Nor any army of monsters. The Unmaker no longer has any power in Valla.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ Tansy asked.

‘Because we have Anhelion,’ Lord Brinian said, a smug smile ghosting over his face.

Lord Aiken stood, his elaborate headdress swaying alarmingly, and tugged on a rope that hung on one side of the room. The velvet curtain that covered the back wall of the chamber fell in a dramatic cascade, revealing a white marble plinth, and …

Merit’s breath hissed in through her teeth. Tansy’s shoulders stiffened.

A golden jewel, the size of her fist.

She remembered holding it in her hand, racing down the labyrinth of corridors in Halsgarth. The warm radiance of it, like sunshine. Its shimmering song.

But the stone was silent now.

‘How did you get it?’ Tansy asked.

‘It was recovered from the Unmaker’s residence,’ Lord Brinian said. ‘After you …’ He paused and smiled, flashing white teeth and twinkling eyes. ‘Well, you know.’

Tansy bit her lip. ‘Oh,’ she said in a small voice.

She was terrified, Merit realised. She had no idea how to tell them the truth – that she had trapped Lady Aster in the Oubliette out of loyalty, not out of any desire to save Valla.

‘Sir Merit.’ Lady Lyness placed her hands on the ornate table before her, palms down. ‘You are a Carrion Knight, are you not?’

Merit swallowed. ‘I was.’

‘You are a deserter?’

A coward. A traitor.

‘She was exiled,’ Tansy spoke up, her voice suddenly clear and confident. ‘For sparing the life of a child.’

Lady Lyness’s eyes narrowed slightly. ‘A heroic act, indeed.’

She walked around the huge table and came to stand before Merit. Lady Lyness was tall and broad-shouldered, her skin bronzed and gleaming. An ornately hilted sword was sheathed at her waist, the scabbard crusted with jewels.

‘You have guarded our Maid with your life and returned her safely home. We are grateful to you for this. But you must understand, we cannot allow you to return to the Halls of Order.’

Merit nodded. ‘I understand. I … I do not wish to return.’

‘What do you wish, then?’

For a moment, Merit saw herself on the shore in Uyst, eating sticky tentacles from a paper cone. Licking salt and lime from her fingers. Her legs tangling with Tansy’s in the cool water, skin sliding on skin.

But then she remembered crying herself to sleep as a child, plagued by nightmares of a dark lord. Remembered Valiant, clutching a white stone in his muddy little hand. The wide, frightened eyes of the child whose life she had spared.

She had made a choice that night in the little hut. But the other Carrion Knights, they didn’t know there *was* a choice. They thought the Halls of Order was all there was.

They deserved to know the whole story. She lifted her chin.

‘I want to undo the damage that the Unmaker did,’ she said. ‘I will fight to rebuild what was destroyed.’

Lady Lyness looked at her with piercing dark eyes. ‘Do you renounce your oath as a Carrion Knight?’ she said. ‘And your loyalty to the Unmaker?’

‘I do.’

‘Will you pledge your allegiance to Valla? To the Bright Council? To the Maid?’

Merit hesitated. ‘I will.’

Lady Lyness unsheathed her sword in a smooth, graceful motion. The bright blade glinted.

‘Kneel,’ she instructed.

Merit knelt, unsure of what was about to happen.

Lady Lyness laid the flat of the blade against her brow. ‘I dub thee Sir Merit of the Bright Guard,’ she said solemnly, ‘Knight Protector of the Maid. Now, rise.’

Merit stood, her legs trembling beneath her.

‘You will be granted arms and armour,’ Lady Lyness said. ‘And you will accompany the Maid as she performs her duties.’

‘Return to your rooms,’ Lord Brinian said. ‘And rest. News of your arrival is already spreading throughout Valla. Tomorrow the Bright City will ring with thousands of joyous voices. You will greet our grateful citizens and be much celebrated.’

Merit glanced at Tansy, who grinned at her.

This is what Merit had wanted.

The Council of Stars had embraced her. They had seen beyond her dark past. They saw her for who she truly was.

Here, in the Bright City, Merit was no monster. She was a hero.

Wasn’t she?

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23
TANSY

Lemon balm: Strengthens the bond between lovers, grants impossible wishes.

THE DAYS PASSED in a whirl of parades, balls and ceremonies held in her honour. Speeches were made, toasts were drunk. She was showered with gifts, titles, honours. Gowns and jewels, each more opulent than the last.

None of it felt real.

She smiled and nodded, thankful that nobody seemed to expect her to make a speech in response or perform any great feats of bravery. People seemed happy just to see her existing in the world.

Her jaw ached from smiling. Her shoulder was tight after spending three hours in a carriage, traversing the blindingly white streets of the Bright City, waving to assembled crowds.

They cheered to see her. Children danced. Some people openly wept. They threw petals and laid flowers at her feet.

A secret part of her longed for it to be true. Longed to be the great hero of old. That part of her luxuriated in the attentions of the councillors, the adoration of the people.

But mostly she just wanted to go home.

To lose herself in the comfort of routine once more. To embroider flowers on handkerchiefs and coax seeds to life in her herb garden.

Thoughts of Lady Aster haunted her constantly, the lavender pull of loyalty unceasing. Tansy was riddled with guilt. For betraying Lady Aster. For leaving her alone.

She couldn't bear to think of Lady Aster as the Unmaker, though she knew it was true. It changed nothing.

Merit saw none of her turmoil, and Tansy worked hard to keep it that way. She could see how relieved the knight was. How she believed that Tansy was cured, that Lady Aster's spell was broken.

And sometimes, in the brief moments that she and Merit were alone together, Tansy could believe it too. She could lose herself in the sunshine glow of Merit's kisses and forget about Lady Aster.

For a moment, anyway.

Apart from these stolen kisses, they had barely any time to speak privately. The days and nights were crowded with official events, surrounded by councillors and members of the Bright Guard.

Every day was tightly scheduled, from sun-up to long past midnight. Tansy was waited on by an army of attendants and ladies' maids, who bathed her, dressed her, and followed her around offering bland sweets and tiny cups of flavourless tea. She had tried dismissing them, but they seemed drawn to her like flies to a side of spoiled mutton. And she *did* need their help dressing. The elaborate gowns were so heavy, with so many layers and fastenings, she couldn't manage them by herself. She succumbed to having her hair braided, coiled and bejewelled, like a doll from Lady Aster's collection, dressed up over and over.

It felt wrong. She should be a maid. Not *the* Maid.

Every night, she would arrive back to her rooms from whatever ball or concert or assembly had been held in her honour, aching with weariness. Servants would strip off her finery, take down her hair, and dress her in a lace nightgown. They would usher her into the enormous soft bed, arrange her hair on the silken pillow, then turn out the gas lights and quietly exit.

Tansy would tell herself to get up. To go to Merit and lose herself in the knight's arms.

But instead she found herself curled in her bed, clasping the glass globe and staring at the tiny Oubliette within.

Each day, Merit stood beside her in the gleaming armour of a Bright Guard, a feathered plume erupting from her helmet, white steel blade by her side. She looked noble and brave, like a knight from a story.

Tansy was happy for her. This is what Merit had wanted, after all.

At least one of them was getting a happy ending.

A week after their arrival in the Bright City, she woke as a servant drew the curtains, letting weak morning light into her bedchamber. She felt Bracken scramble off the bed to greet this newcomer.

Tansy came fully awake as she realised the person in her room was not a servant.

'Good morning,' Merit said to Tansy, leaning down to scratch Bracken behind the ears.

She looked … different. No shining armour or jewel-encrusted doublet and hose. Instead she wore a loose-fitting linen shirt, a pair of simple brown trousers, and a padded brown jacket.

'You shouldn't be in here,' Tansy told her. 'An army of maids will be descending upon me any minute now.'

'I intercepted them in the corridor,' Merit said with a grin. 'And sent them away.'

Tansy blinked, fully awake now. 'What did you say to them?'

'That you were feeling poorly and needed to rest.'

She flopped back onto her pillows. 'You weren't wrong. I'm exhausted.'

'I know. Yesterday at the ball I thought you were going to pass out.'

'I nearly did.'

It had been nothing like the dancing in Halsgarth. Balls in Valla were strictly choreographed, stiff movements under stiffer garments. The music was ponderously dull, with conversation to match.

Tansy gazed out the window. The sun had risen over the walls of the Bright City, washing the white buildings with warm light.

She sighed. ‘This city is beautiful, but I miss seeing *green*. I miss feeling earth under my feet and hearing the wind in the grass.’

‘I’m glad to hear you say that,’ Merit replied with a knowing smile.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m kidnapping you. Just for today. Let’s go have an adventure.’

‘We can’t!’

‘Says who?’

‘I have’ – Tansy gestured vaguely – ‘a schedule!’

Merit shrugged. ‘You’re not feeling well, remember? And Bracken desperately needs a walk. He’s been cooped up in here for days.’

Bracken was not enjoying palace life. He didn’t like the noise of parades and balls, so spent most of his days in Tansy’s quarters. When they had first arrived, a pair of attendants had bathed him and brushed him until his grey fur was silky soft and strongly perfumed. He had a white silk bow around his neck and looked utterly miserable.

‘Look at him,’ Merit said. ‘He wants to get out of here as much as I do.’

Bracken let out a plaintive whine.

‘See?’ Merit said. ‘Do it for Bracken.’

Tansy bit her lip, uncertain, her eyes straying to the glass globe of the Oubliette, resting on a bedside table.

At least when Tansy was being the Maid, she could tell herself she was doing her duty. Not her *real* duty, to Lady Aster. But a kind of duty nonetheless. She could suppress the pull of the Oubliette, grit her teeth until it became a dull lavender ache she could ignore.

But Merit didn’t know that. Merit believed that the curse was broken. She thought Tansy had escaped Lady Aster – that Merit had rescued her.

And Tansy didn’t have the heart to tell her otherwise.

So when Merit held her hands out to Tansy, she took them. Merit tugged her up and out of bed, pulling her close. Tansy was suddenly very aware of her lace nightgown and how little separated them. Her whole body seemed to come alive as she felt the thudding of Merit’s heart.

Merit bent down, her lips hovering before Tansy's, almost touching, but not quite.

'Run away with me, Tansy,' she whispered.

'I can't,' Tansy replied breathlessly. 'You know I can't.'

'Sure you can,' Merit said. 'Not forever. Just today.'

'What happens when they come to check on me? They'll panic! Send out the entire Bright Guard.'

'We'll leave a note.'

Tansy felt like she might die from this exquisite longing.

Merit leaned close to her, her lips brushing Tansy's ear as she whispered, 'I already packed us a picnic basket.'

A giggle escaped Tansy, and Merit smirked.

They snuck out of the citadel and into the streets of the Bright City.

Merit had somehow obtained simple clothes for them both – trousers and jacket for herself, and a simple brown dress for Tansy, with hooded cloaks and a rope lead for Bracken. She'd obviously been planning this for a while. It was the first day since they'd arrived that Tansy hadn't worn a stiff corset, and the ability to breathe and move felt like a luxury. But no corset pulled her as tightly as the invisible threads that bound her to Lady Aster.

The city was different at ground level. Tansy had really only seen its broadest avenues, from the vantage point of a grand balcony or gilded carriage. Now she could see that the streets weren't quite as clean and bright as they seemed. There was an inevitable amount of grime. Soot marks on chimneys and horse manure shovelled into corners. There were good smells from food stalls and bad smells from rubbish heaps. It was a beautiful city, but it was still a city.

The streets were busy, so Tansy kept her hood up and nobody paid them any heed. It was refreshing to not be the absolute centre of everyone's attention, but Tansy couldn't shake the feeling they were going to get caught and marched back to the citadel in disgrace.

It didn't help that her face was *everywhere*.

There seemed to be a statue on every corner, her noble expression turned to the sky, Anhelion clutched in her hand.

They hurried past a bakery that was selling pastry replicas of her face. Street vendors hawking cards and flags bearing her name. An inn called The Maid's Rest, with her likeness painted on the hanging board out front.

Merit turned down a side street, and the crowds thinned out.

'How do you know where to go?' Tansy asked, hurrying to keep up.

'I don't,' Merit replied cheerfully over her shoulder. 'I'm improvising.'

A part of Tansy kept expecting to run into an invisible barrier, like they'd encountered in all the other places they'd visited together. The idea that this place just kept going on forever was thrilling, if a little terrifying.

Soon the huge white walls that surrounded the city came into view, and they joined the crowd again, letting the tide of people carry them to the gate. Members of the Bright Guard were stationed there, keeping a watchful eye on who was coming in and out of the city, but everyone seemed free to come and go as they pleased. Tansy and Merit kept their hoods up, and nobody stopped them.

Outside the walls, there were stables, an inn, and a cluster of rustic buildings. They walked down the main road for a mile or so, then turned off to a smaller path which led down into a green wooded area, blissfully free of people.

They both threw back their hoods, grinning at each other. 'We did it,' Merit said smugly, bending to slip Bracken's lead off. The little dog went darting into the undergrowth, barking joyously.

Tansy sighed as cool green boughs enveloped them. She looked around and saw foxgloves and wood violets. She bruised a dock leaf between her fingers and inhaled its peppery scent. For a moment, it banished thoughts of the Oubliette and Lady Aster.

'Better?' Merit asked.

'*So* much better. Thank you for kidnapping me.'

Squirrels chattered at them from above, darting from branch to branch with their bushy tails bouncing behind them. Bracken found something suspicious to roll in, emerging from the bushes with his coat tangled with moss and prickles and smelling decidedly unpleasant.

'You look very pleased with yourself,' Merit said to the little dog.

Bracken wriggled with happiness, then plunged back into the forest.

They found a leafy glade by a burbling stream, fringed with delicate ferns and buttercups. Tansy let out a little cry of pleasure at the sight of it, and

Merit grinned at her as she laid out a picnic blanket and unpacked apples, cheese, hard-boiled eggs and a sturdy loaf of brown bread.

Tansy stared at the spread of food. ‘This is … not fancy?’

Merit froze. ‘Did you want fancy?’ she asked. ‘I thought—’

‘No, no!’ Tansy reassured her. ‘I’ve had *so* much fancy. This looks amazing. Where did you find real food?’

‘This is what the servants eat,’ Merit explained. ‘The other stuff is only for the lords and ladies.’

Tansy popped a crumb of cheese into her mouth and closed her eyes with pleasure. Palace food was ornate and delicate … but it never had much flavour.

‘No raspberries, alas,’ Merit said with a rueful smile.

‘They’re out of season,’ Tansy replied. ‘You’ll have to wait until midsummer.’

She felt a stab of misery at the thought of it and knew deep down that she had to be back in the Oubliette long before then, or else she would die.

‘Are you all right?’ Merit asked.

Tansy smiled through the pain. ‘Better than all right.’

She ate and chatted with Merit while Bracken snuffled around the edges of the clearing, gazing longingly up at the squirrels, who teased him by scrambling down tree trunks until they were almost close enough to catch, then darting away out of reach as soon as he jumped for them.

‘It’s good to be out of the city,’ Merit said.

Tansy nodded. ‘It turns out I don’t enjoy being the centre of attention.’

‘Not many people do.’

‘Everyone’s always looking at me and I feel like they expect me to perform, somehow. Do a magic trick or make a speech. But I’m not special.’

‘Yes, you are.’

Tansy felt herself grow warm under Merit’s gaze.

A thrill of nerves cascaded down her spine as she held out a hand, and Merit reached over and took it, scooting closer to her on the picnic blanket. Tansy leaned her head against Merit’s shoulder, and the nerves fizzed into something deliciously pleasurable. The feeling of Merit’s solid body next to hers was comforting, but there was excitement there as well – longing and anticipation all bundled together.

She traced the line of Merit’s brows with a finger, and the jagged pink scar that split her face.

Then the invisible threads pulled tight again and it all came crashing back, the thick tangle of guilt and shame and lavender.

‘Tansy,’ Merit said, a crease appearing on her brow. ‘Are you—’

But Tansy didn’t want to talk.

‘Kiss me,’ she said desperately, pulling Merit’s face down to hers.

She lost herself in the kiss. Merit had one hand in her hair, the other pressed into the small of her back, pulling her closer and closer.

The threads inside Tansy slackened, and she could breathe again. Her hands tangled in the knight’s silky hair, and everything was drenched in sunlight. It was the same kind of giddy joy she had felt swimming in Uyst, like nothing else mattered but this moment, simple and sweet as liquid honey.

Lady Aster didn’t exist and Tansy was free.

It only lasted for a moment, though.

Then everything was lavender and straining thread.

Tansy wrenched herself away from Merit and crawled to the edge of the clearing, where a clump of hemlock sprouted umbrella-shaped clusters of tiny white flowers. The green grassy scent of it mingled with the lavender.

Hemlock, valerian, poppy and mandragora. That’s what she had used to drug Lady Aster. To keep her trapped in the Oubliette.

Her stomach churned and she retched, but nothing came out.

‘Tansy?’ Merit asked, alarmed.

‘I’m fine,’ Tansy gasped. ‘I … I’m just not used to real food.’

She took in a deep breath of forest air, but lavender coated the back of her throat.

It was time for Lady Aster’s tea.

‘Do you want to go back?’ Merit asked.

Tansy nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. ‘I do,’ she whispered, although she knew Merit had meant go back to the city.

Could she flee right now? Find her way to the crumbling house with its stone door that would take her back to the Oubliette?

It was impossible. The world was so huge, and she had no idea where to start looking.

She heard Merit gathering the picnic things. She crouched by the stream and splashed icy water onto her cheeks.

It was no good.

She'd tried ignoring the pull. Tried losing herself in Merit's kisses, in balls and receptions and parades.

But she couldn't ignore it any longer.

She had to return to Lady Aster.

The city was a blur as they retraced their steps. The noises too loud, the colours too bright.

'Boil the water,' she whispered to herself. 'Warm the pot. Two spoons.'

'Tansy,' Merit said, her face a mask of concern. 'Talk to me.'

Tansy shook her head and clamped her lips together. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'Just a headache.'

She could tell that the knight didn't believe her.

Tansy flung herself into her room. Merit tried to follow, but Tansy shook her head.

'I need to be alone.'

In another life, a different Tansy would have seen the flash of hurt that crossed Merit's face and regretted her words. She would have softened and taken Merit's hand. They would have fallen into bed together, all soft skin and gentle gasps and sweet salt.

But in this life, all she could think of was Lady Aster.

She drew the curtains, sent away any servants who attempted to enter. Crouched on the feather bed, cradling the glass globe in her arms like a child, gazing down at the tiny Oubliette.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself back there. Getting water from the well. Talking to the cat and pottering around in the kitchen. She imagined Lady Aster, her thin-lipped scowl. The dusty lavender scent of her hair as Tansy pinned it into place.

The snarled knot inside her felt so big, it filled her chest completely.

She had to go back.

There was no other choice.

'She still has you.'

It was Merit, standing at the foot of her bed like a spectre. Tansy hadn't noticed her come in. A part of her wondered how long Merit had been standing there, watching.

'Just leave me alone,' Tansy said. She didn't want Merit to see her like this.

'Tansy, she's the Unmaker,' Merit said.

'I know.'

It didn’t matter.

‘How can you want this?’ Merit asked. ‘Want *her*?’

Bitter tears slid down Tansy’s cheeks. ‘It’s who I am.’

Merit moved swiftly, her movements graceful and catlike, to snatch the globe from Tansy’s hands.

‘Give it *back*!’ Tansy felt her lips peel back in a snarl.

‘It’s just a spell,’ Merit said, taking a step backwards. ‘You don’t really want her. You want me.’

‘No, I don’t.’ The words spilled from Tansy’s lips like poisoned gems, cold and hard and vicious. ‘I never wanted you. You were never anything more than a distraction. An irritation. You are nothing to me.’

Merit swallowed, and Tansy could see how hurt she was.

Good.

‘I just want you to be free,’ Merit whispered, and the globe slipped from her hands.

‘No!’ Tansy lunged forward, but it was too late. The glass shattered, and Tansy’s heart felt like it was shattering along with it.

She sank to the floor, sobbing brokenly, shards of glass glittering around her like broken stars.

She scrabbled at them, gathering the pieces in her hands. Bright red streaks appeared on her fingers, but she felt no pain.

‘Stop,’ Merit said. ‘You’re hurting yourself—’

‘Get out,’ Tansy said in a low voice.

Maybe she could fix it. She tried to fit the pieces together, her hands slippery with blood.

‘Tansy, please.’ Merit was crouching beside her. ‘You’re scaring me.’

Tansy hissed at her. ‘I said get *out*.’

Her voice rose into a scream and she slashed at Merit with one of the glass shards. Blood dripped down her wrist, and Merit backed away, hands up in surrender.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, but Tansy didn’t care.

Merit didn’t matter.

Nothing did.

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24
MERIT

Witch hazel: Carry a twig to cool unwelcome passions.

MERIT HESITATED OUTSIDE Tansy's door. All her instincts were telling her to stay, to make sure she was safe.

But Merit's presence hadn't helped. Tansy was frenzied, mad with her dark longing to return to Lady Aster.

Merit had thought she could save her.

She had foolishly believed that she had broken Lady Aster's spell. That loving Tansy was enough to keep the girl's thoughts away from the old woman and the Oubliette.

But she was wrong.

Tansy would leave, and Merit would be alone again.

It felt impossible to imagine a life without her.

But what was it that she loved? How much of Tansy was really *her*, and how much was just magic, tangled up in her loyalty to Lady Aster?

The stolen moments they'd shared together had meant everything to Merit. But what had they been to Tansy? Had she been thinking of Lady Aster the whole time?

'I'm not giving up,' she whispered.

If love wasn't enough to break the spell, then Merit was going to need something much more powerful.

She needed Anhelion.

The palace grounds were empty, washed silver in the moonlight. The golden spires and turrets of the Bright City looked like knives in the darkness, pale claws thrusting up into the night.

She headed for the large domed building at the heart of the citadel, where the Council of Stars gathered.

Where Anhelion was kept.

The domed building was eerie and silent in the darkness. It was usually such a hive of activity, with servants, courtiers and councillors everywhere. But Merit was alone. There weren't even any guards at the doors, which felt strange, given the great treasure that lay within.

The chamber was empty, the stars on the ceiling glowing faintly. Merit wondered, absently, how the effect was achieved. Through some kind of alchemy, perhaps.

She took a step into the room, her eyes on the velvet curtain.

A door closed somewhere nearby. She melted into the shadows as a figure emerged from a concealed passage.

Hooded and cloaked, the figure moved as silently as she did.

Merit's heart started to pound, and she watched the stranger cross the chamber and exit the building. As they stepped outside, the figure turned to look over their shoulder. Merit shrank deeper into the shadows and watched as a shaft of moonlight illuminated the stranger's face.

Merit's blood ran cold.

It was Sir Valiant.

What was a Carrion Knight doing here, in the Bright City?

Anhelion.

Merit moved, silent and swift, across the chamber to the velvet curtain, yanking it aside to reveal the white plinth.

The jewel was still there, glittering coldly in the shadows. She reached out and took it in her hand.

It felt hard and lifeless, nothing like the gem she'd snatched up in the ballroom in Halsgarth.

'Sir Merit,' a voice said behind her. 'Isn't it past your bedtime?'

She spun around to see Lady Lyness standing in the doorway to the concealed passage. Diamonds glittered at her throat.

Merit swallowed, slipping Anhelion into her pocket and hoping Lady Lyness wouldn't notice.

'A … a Carrion Knight was here—' she stammered.

'I think we'd better have a little chat,' Lady Lyness said, and Merit followed her down a short passageway to a cosy, book-lined antechamber, with a fire crackling in the grate.

Lord Brinian looked up in surprise from a leather armchair. He cradled a tumbler of amber liquid in one hand.

'Why was Valiant here?' Merit said abruptly.

Lady Lyness and Lord Brinian exchanged a look, clearly debating whether to lie to her.

She thought about how unconcerned they had been when she'd warned them of the upcoming assault on the Bright City. Like they'd known an attack was impossible.

'You're working with them,' she said woodenly. 'With the Carrion Knights.'

She hoped they would protest. That they would be horrified by the accusation.

Sir Brinian took a slow sip of his drink. 'We have … a mutually beneficial arrangement.'

Merit took a step back, her gut souring. She thought she might be sick, right there on the red and gold carpet. 'But why? You're the Council of Stars. The light of the Bright City. The brightest. The purest. And they're …'

'Evil?' Lady Lyness suggested. 'Sir Merit, you of all people should know that the real world is far more complicated than that.'

‘What is the arrangement?’ Merit asked.

‘I think you already know,’ Sir Brinian said. ‘You grew up dreaming of this place. Of the Bright Guard. Of great battles between good and evil. It brings people comfort to know they are on the side of the righteous. To know that they are part of something good and pure. The Carrion Knights exist to remind the people of Valla what can happen when they turn away from the light.’

‘How long?’ Merit asked.

Lady Lyness folded her hands neatly on her lap. ‘The deal was made shortly after the Unmaker was defeated.’

Everything Merit had ever known was a lie.

She frowned, remembering something Lady Aster had said.

Nobody knows what really happened that night.

‘How did you know that the Unmaker was defeated by the Maid?’ she asked. ‘If nobody else was there …’

‘A squadron of soldiers attacked the Unmaker’s home,’ Lord Brinian said, swirling the liquid in his tumbler. ‘And found only a housemaid, who reported that the Unmaker had not been seen for weeks, not since the murder of the king.’

A housemaid. Had it been Tansy? ‘But I thought the Maid vanished,’ Merit said. ‘That she sacrificed herself to destroy the Unmaker.’

‘Not exactly.’

Merit stared at Lord Brinian. ‘Tell me what happened.’

‘Every great legend needs a hero,’ he said with a shrug. ‘And what better hero than a humble housemaid?’

‘So what happened to her? The real maid?’

Lord Brinian’s eyes slid away from Merit’s. ‘The story works better if a sacrifice is made.’

‘You … killed her?’

‘*I* wasn’t born,’ Lord Brinian reminded her mildly. ‘This all happened five hundred years ago. People made choices. All wars have casualties.’

Merit’s mind whirled. The Bright Guard had murdered the real Maid.

So who was Tansy?

‘How do you know all this?’ Merit asked.

‘The account has been passed down through the Council to a select few,’ Lord Brinian said carefully. ‘The less who know it, the better.’

‘So why tell me?’

Lord Brinian let out a little huff of laughter. ‘Because you just spotted a Carrion Knight leaving our chamber,’ he said. ‘Believe me, if it weren’t for that, we would have happily kept you ignorant.’

‘We need you, Sir Merit,’ Lady Lyness said. ‘The Maid listens to you, that is clear. And we need her. We need her to play her role. You weren’t wrong about the impending attack. The Carrion Knights grow restless. Many believe that the Unmaker is returning, and our alliance is wearing thin. We need the Maid as a demonstration of Valla’s power. To keep the peace.’

‘But …’ Merit’s head was spinning. ‘If the real Maid died, then who do you think Tansy is?’

‘Honestly, we have no idea,’ Lady Lyness said. ‘But she looks like all our statues, and she couldn’t have arrived at a better time. We were going to pay an actor.’

Merit swallowed.

She thought of the raids. She smelled burning thatch. Heard screams from those who were foolish enough to resist. She thought of all the children, stolen from the homes of the innocent.

‘And the Carrion Knights?’ Merit asked. ‘How do they benefit from this … *arrangement*?’

‘We let them live,’ Lady Lyness said. ‘Just as we are brought together by our hatred of them, they are united in their hatred of us.’

‘What about the recruitment raids?’

Lord Brinian sighed. ‘Sir Merit, Valla has seen enough war. Under the Council’s rule, our people live in peace. Order is maintained. You know full well that the Carrion Knights only kill when faced with resistance.’

‘But the knights steal *children*. Those children grow up believing they’re monsters.’

Lady Lyness shrugged. ‘It’s a small price to pay for peace.’

Merit stared at the diamonds around Lady Lyness’s neck but said nothing.

‘I trust we can rely on your discretion in this matter, Sir Merit,’ Lady Lyness said. ‘Peace is a fragile thing. It is easily broken.’

Her words felt like a threat and a dismissal.

Merit staggered back out into the cold night air, numb with shock.

Her first instinct was to march straight to Tansy’s rooms and tell her everything. But much as she hated to admit it, Lord Brinian was right. Tansy was fragile. She was so tangled up in her loyalty to Lady Aster; who knew how she’d react?

Merit slipped a hand into her pocket and felt Anhelion there, cold and hard. She had the stone of power … now what?

She found herself in the grove of cherry trees, the air heavy with pale, scented blossoms. The trees looked ancient, twisted and bent, the branches curving gracefully. It was as if they were dancing, but so slowly her mortal eye couldn't discern it.

The first time she had seen the grove, it had taken her breath away. Like all of the Bright City, it was so beautiful it made her heart ache. But now all she felt was bitterness. The brightness and beauty were false. A lie being sold to the people of Valla. A pact paid with the lives of innocent children.

All Merit had ever wanted was for people to look at her and see something *good*, not a monster. She had dreamed of being a hero. A Bright Guard, shining gold and white-plumed. Noble and brave and virtuous.

But all of it was false. Carrion Knight or Bright Guard, it made no difference. All were complicit in the same charade of good and evil, using ordinary people as pawns.

You of all people should know that the real world is far more complicated than that.

As if in answer to her despair, her eye fell on a figure standing among the trees on a carpet of pale blossoms. Petals drifted gently around her as a breeze stirred the branches into motion.

Tansy.

She wore a white nightgown, thin cotton that fell to her ankles and left her arms bare. Her russet hair tumbled loose around her shoulders. Her face was turned up to the stars, her expression as anguished as Merit's heart.

Her hands and wrists were dark with dried blood.

She startled at Merit's approach, and Merit put out a reassuring hand. 'It's me.'

There was so much Merit wanted to say to her, but words left her mind as Tansy flung herself into Merit's arms, pressing their bodies together, hands clinging and mouths meeting desperately. Merit let all her questions, her doubts, her misery melt away, until all that was left was *Tansy*. Her skin, luminous in the moonlight. Her thundering heart. Her little cry of want. Her fingers digging into Merit's shoulders.

Merit tangled one hand into her hair, and splayed the other across the small of her back, pulling her so close she had no idea where she ended and Tansy began.

Petals fell around them like snow, their heady sweetness mingling with Tansy's familiar green scent. It was dizzying. Intoxicating. Merit knew she could never get enough of her. Of this.

She pulled back, ending the kiss, and it was like she had lost a part of herself.

Tansy's cheeks were flushed, her lips kiss-stained. Her eyes reflected the pale orb of the moon overhead.

'Talk to me,' Merit whispered. 'Please.'

Tansy disengaged from her entirely, turning away and casting her gaze to the carpet of blossoms.

'I haven't seen a single weed in the palace gardens,' she said in a quiet voice. 'Not one dandelion, or so much as a leaf of oxalis.'

Merit shivered, suddenly cold without Tansy's skin against hers. 'I'm sure there is an army of gardeners.'

'And this tree,' Tansy continued, turning her face up to the boughs overhead. 'Every one of these branches has been carefully pruned. Shaped by experts.'

'It's beautiful,' Merit said, but she wasn't looking at the tree.

Tansy smiled, a sad smile that made Merit want to gather her up in her arms and spirit her away to somewhere else. Somewhere uncomplicated. Back to Uyst, where everything had felt so simple.

'It is beautiful,' Tansy said. 'But it didn't grow like that. It's all fake. Like me. I'm not the hero these people want.'

The little catch in her voice nearly broke Merit's heart.

And Tansy didn't even know the half of it.

'I can't go on without her, Merit,' she said, a tear slipping down her cheek. 'I don't even feel *alive*.'

Merit wrapped one arm around her and laid her other hand on Tansy's chest.

'I can feel your heart beating,' she told Tansy. 'I can feel your breath. You are beautiful and clever and kind. You might not be the great hero that everyone thinks you are, but you are *my* hero …' Merit trailed off as something enormous rose in her throat and threatened to take her over. 'Everything I thought was true is a lie,' she said thickly. 'Everyone I trusted has betrayed me. Except you.'

Tansy kissed her again, her fingers brushing Merit's cheeks with a tenderness that was more than she could bear.

‘Run away with me,’ Merit murmured against her lips.

Tansy deepened the kiss, perhaps in order to avoid answering. Merit let herself be carried away on it, to a moon-drenched place where good and evil didn’t exist, and nothing else mattered.

Who could care about anything other than this?

But too soon she felt herself pull away again, lightheaded and dizzy.

‘Run away with me,’ she said again. ‘Truly, this time. We can go anywhere. We’ll find somewhere to just *be*. We’ll grow raspberries and keep chickens and forget about this place. Forget about *her*.’

Merit saw Tansy’s struggle to resist, gritting her teeth and squeezing her eyes closed. She let out a little cry of frustration.

‘I can’t,’ she said, defeated. ‘She’s everywhere.’

‘That’s not really *you*, though,’ Merit said. ‘You’re under a spell. She did that. She trapped you in the Oubliette.’

Tansy shook her head. ‘No,’ she whispered. ‘*I* did it. *I* trapped *her*. And then I abandoned her.’

‘Tansy, you saved the *world*,’ Merit told her. ‘What you did wasn’t a betrayal. It was an act of incredible courage. You did something that the king himself could not.’

She couldn’t stop thinking about the story Lord Brinian and Lady Lyness had told her. About how the Bright Guard murdered Lady Aster’s housemaid in order to create a hero worthy of legend.

She shook her head. Lady Aster had been a powerful woman. Of course she would have had more than one maid. But then why did all the statues look like Tansy?

‘But that’s not *why* I did it,’ Tansy was crying. ‘I didn’t do it for Valla. I didn’t do it because I’m a hero. I did it for *her*. Because it was the only way I knew to keep her safe. Merit, I know what she is. I know what she did. I know I should hate her. But all I want is to keep her safe. It *consumes* me—’ She choked back a sob. ‘It’s all I am. It’s all I can think about. It’s *killing* me that I’m not with her right now. It’s everything. Every part of me is for her.’

‘That’s not true,’ Merit insisted. ‘Remember the baby in Scata Delve? You were desperate to save it, even though it wasn’t real. You saved *me* when I arrived at the Oubliette. You looked after Bracken. You care about everyone you meet.’

Tansy turned her face up to Merit’s. ‘I want to believe you,’ she whispered.

Merit kissed her, soft and sweet, and felt Tansy melt a little against her. ‘This part of you,’ she said softly. ‘That’s not for her.’

Tansy sighed, resting her forehead against Merit’s shoulder. ‘This part is who I *want* to be,’ she whispered. ‘I want it so much. But it’s not who I *am*.’ She took a step backwards. ‘I can’t rid myself of her, Merit. You deserve someone who can love you with everything they have. And that’s not me.’

Valiant’s sword in her gut had not hurt this much.

‘You’re under her spell,’ Merit told Tansy. ‘There must be a way to break it.’

She pulled Anhelion from her pocket.

The stone glittered coldly, the colour leached from its facets by the moonlight.

‘No.’ Tansy’s voice was deep, a guttural, instinctive cry. ‘Merit, I will kill you if you try to use it. I swear.’

Merit believed her.

‘Get away from here,’ Tansy said. ‘Find some peace. Raise chickens. Forget about this place. About me.’

A gulf was opening between them, vast and impassible. Merit was powerless to stop it.

‘Is that really what you want?’

Tansy nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. ‘I … I think it will be easier for me. Once you’re gone. Knowing that you are safe and happy will bring me so much comfort.’

‘I don’t want to leave you.’

‘Please, Merit. My heart is split in two. Being with you’ – she splayed a hand over Merit’s heart, a caress, but also keeping her at arm’s length – ‘it’s torture. I can’t bear it anymore.’

Her eyes were full of tears, and Merit felt an unfamiliar wetness on her own cheeks. Carrion Knights didn’t cry. Ever. It was something they learned as very young children. Crying was for the weak, and knights showed no weakness.

‘I love you,’ she whispered.

Tansy let out a little cry of misery. ‘I want to love you back,’ she said. ‘So much. But I can’t. There’s no room in my heart for anything but her.’

Her words cut Merit, sharper and deeper than any knife. ‘I don’t think I can leave you,’ she said.

‘Please, Merit,’ Tansy said, weeping openly. ‘You will find someone else to love. You will build a life, and the thought of that makes me so happy.’

‘I want *you* to be happy,’ Merit said. ‘It’s all I want.’

Tansy closed her eyes. ‘I know,’ she replied. ‘That’s why I know you’ll go. For me.’

Merit hesitated. She had tried to rescue Tansy, but everything she did only caused more pain. Perhaps the kindest thing she could do was let the girl go back to the Oubliette.

‘Here,’ she said, and pressed Anhelion into Tansy’s still-bloody hands. ‘Use it to open a door.’

Tansy’s fingers curled around the gem. ‘Look after Bracken.’

Merit reached out a hand to cup the side of her face. Leaned in and kissed her, one last time. Their tears mingled together. Tansy’s lips parted in a little sigh, but she didn’t put her arms around Merit. She didn’t open her eyes.

Merit didn’t say goodbye. She couldn’t.

She just turned and left the grove as cherry blossoms floated gently down like falling stars in the moonlight.

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25
TANSY

Rue: Hang in the kitchen to repel vermin and mischievous spirits.

SHE MANAGED TO stay upright in case Merit turned around. Once the knight was finally out of sight, Tansy crumpled to the ground, her chest heaving with silent sobs.

She had lied to Merit. She had said that she didn't love her, to make Merit leave.

It had been the right thing to do; she was sure of that. Merit *would* make a new life, far from the Bright City. And she would be happy.

But of course Tansy loved Merit. She loved her with every part of her that was capable of loving. Her loyalty to Lady Aster was strong, threads woven deep into her bones. But there was something deeper than bones. Something warm and bright, like sunshine on a wildflower meadow.

It wasn't enough, though.

Her misery solidified into something hard and cold.

It turned out that you could be completely loyal to someone and hate them at the same time. She hated Lady Aster. Hated her for what she had done. For binding Tansy to her with these torturous lavender-scented threads.

She hated this place, too.

Hated every statue that bore her likeness. Hated the carefully sculpted beauty of the cherry trees. The golden turrets and towers.

A whole city. Built around a lie.

All she wanted was to stop *feeling* so much. So deeply.

Tansy closed her eyes, defeated.

She had been lonely in the Oubliette. But she'd take an eternity of loneliness over this yawning chasm of despair. She would leave this world behind and return to Lady Aster. She would smash every glass globe and throw the silver key that opened doors into the sea.

No reminders of the outside world.

She would surrender herself to the power of the Oubliette.

She would forget Valla. Forget stories of great heroes and evil villains. She would forget that she was the Maid and that Lady Aster was the Unmaker.

She would forget about Merit.

Clutching Anhelion in her hand, Tansy reached out into the darkness, moving instinctively, without thought.

And her fingers snagged in the fabric of the universe.

It was like the barrier around the Oubliette, but it was everywhere. Thicker in some places than in others, but always present. Soft and yielding as she searched for loose threads.

She tugged and worked away at it until there was a small hole. Then, with a single, furious yank, she tore it open.

It was easy, like ripping straight down a sheet of old linen. Reality frayed at the edges, revealing the cold, dark paths beyond.

She stepped through, turning to pull the ragged fabric together again, like drawing curtains. She wished she had a needle to stitch them closed, but the

edges seemed to be holding.

It would have to do.

The journey was easier this time. The pull towards Lady Aster and the Oubliette was strong, and Tansy let it guide her through the darkness.

She wasn't afraid of the Sleepers. She knew Anhelion would protect her.

Sure enough, she heard no rattle of breath and felt no icy fingers reaching for her. No cracked-bell voice spoke in the void.

The lavender threads led her to a stone door. She had left the little silver key behind, but she pressed Anhelion against the door, and it opened.

The Oubliette creaked in greeting as she stepped through into the second-floor passage, and Tansy sighed with relief. But the feeling was short-lived.

The air smelled like ice and gravedust, and there were deep scratches in the white-painted walls and on the wooden floors.

Sleepers had been here.

'Ma'am?' Tansy called as she raced down the stairs.

The house was in ruins. Wallpaper hung in ragged tatters. Windows were smashed. The ground was littered with torn books, crushed seashells and the destroyed contents of the glass globes.

'What did they do to you?' Tansy murmured to the house, laying a hand on the wall.

Lady Aster was nowhere to be seen. No Sleepers, either. Everything was silent and still.

A shadow moved at the corner of Tansy's eye, and she bit back a scream.

But it was just the cat, picking its way through the debris towards her.

'Where is she?' she asked it.

The cat shook itself, then glanced at the staircase.

Tansy headed into the kitchen and took the lid off the black iron kettle, depositing Anhelion inside for safekeeping. Then she went back upstairs to Lady Aster's bedroom. The door was locked. Deep scratches in the wood indicated that Sleepers had tried to break through but had not succeeded.

She glanced nervously over her shoulder.

'Lady Aster?' she called. 'Ma'am?'

There was no response.

'Let me in,' she said to the house, rattling the doorhandle. 'Please.'

The lock clicked and she opened the door.

Lady Aster's bedroom was untouched, exactly the same as it had been every day of Tansy's life.

The old woman sat in a chair by the window, illuminated by the glow of a candle. She was gazing down at something pink and smooth in her hand.

A seashell.

‘All I wanted was for her to be safe,’ she said without looking up.

‘I know,’ Tansy said. ‘That’s all I wanted for you too.’

‘Looks like we both failed.’

‘Ma’am …’ Tansy took a step forward. ‘I’m so sorry. I didn’t—’

The old woman held up a hand. ‘Don’t bother,’ she said.

‘I can fix it,’ Tansy said. ‘I’ll tidy up. Things can go back to how they were.’

Lady Aster ran her fingers over the curves of the shell. ‘She’s gone,’ she said. ‘All my memories of her destroyed.’

‘You can remake them,’ Tansy said.

‘There is no point,’ Lady Aster said. ‘The creatures will come back. Their master is searching for me.’

Tansy remembered the ominous voice on the dark paths. ‘Who is he?’ she asked. ‘Their master?’

Lady Aster turned ancient eyes to Tansy. ‘You already know,’ she said. ‘You’ve seen him before, after all.’

Tansy’s breath caught in her throat. ‘King Elior,’ she said. ‘He’s King Elior the Wise.’

‘He was, once.’ Lady Aster’s gaze fell back down to the shell. ‘Now he is just hate in the shape of a man.’

‘What happened?’ Tansy asked.

‘I misunderstood the stone’s power,’ Lady Aster said, calm and unhurried. ‘I believed that if it could create new things from the fabric of the universe, then it could just as easily destroy them, returning them to their original state.’

Tansy nodded, imagining intricate embroidery unravelling.

‘But I was wrong. When I turned the stone on those armies, those cities, on my king … They weren’t destroyed. They were sent to the dark paths. To where the fabric of the universe exists, before it is created into things.’

Tansy’s mouth fell open in horror. ‘The Sleepers,’ she said. ‘They are the armies you unmade.’

‘Yes.’

‘But why are they so … strange? Their eyes—’

‘Centuries spent in darkness will turn you strange,’ Lady Aster said. ‘I suspect they closed their eyes when they realised there was nothing to see, and over time their eyelids fused from lack of use. They lost themselves. You know what it’s like in there.’

Tansy shuddered. She knew.

‘Now imagine being trapped in there for five hundred years.’

‘But *he* is different,’ Tansy said. ‘Why?’

‘The Sleepers have been consumed by despair,’ Lady Aster said. ‘It has eaten their humanity. Their hope. But King Elior has been consumed by his need for revenge. It has driven all that he once was into a single, sharp point. He will not stop. Killing me will not satisfy his hunger. Nothing will.’

Her words hung in the air like a curse.

‘Did you always know?’ Tansy asked. ‘That they weren’t being unmade at all? That you were just banishing them to the dark paths?’

Lady Aster shook her head. ‘I had no idea,’ she said. ‘Not until one slipped through into our home along with your friend.’

Tansy looked around. ‘Where did they go?’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘The Sleepers who were here?’

The old woman shrugged. ‘I don’t know. They were here, and then they weren’t. My guess is they found somewhere else to go.’

Tansy remembered holding the ragged edges of reality, fragile and fibrous in her hands. She remembered how hastily she had drawn the pieces she had torn open together again, hoping they would hold.

How could she have been so selfish?

‘They’ve gone to Valla,’ she murmured as horror rose in her throat.

‘Probably,’ Lady Aster said.

Tansy balled her hands into fists. ‘We have to go back,’ she said.

The old woman closed her eyes, as if she were in pain. ‘I cannot.’

‘I have Anhelion,’ Tansy said.

Lady Aster’s eyes snapped open.

‘You know how to wield it,’ Tansy continued. ‘Ma’am, people will die. The Sleepers will come, and they won’t stop. But you can use Anhelion and send them back to the dark paths.’

Lady Aster’s knuckles turned white on the carved armrests of her chair. ‘You know what I’m capable of,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Do not offer me that kind of power.’

‘That was then,’ Tansy told her. ‘You’ve changed.’

‘Have I?’ The old woman’s expression twisted.

‘You said so. You told me that five hundred years in the Oubliette has given you a lot of perspective. You told me you regret the things you did.’

‘Put that stone in my hand, and it will all come rushing back. One taste of power will not be enough. I will want it all.’

‘Fine,’ Tansy said recklessly. ‘Have it all. Better Valla lives under your rule than dies at the hands of the Sleepers.’

‘You say that now,’ Lady Aster said. ‘But later you will wish you had remained silent, I promise.’

Tansy sank to her knees beside Lady Aster’s chair, her eyes falling on the seashell.

‘*She* would tell you to do it,’ she said. ‘Sunniva. She would tell you to fight. You regret what you did? Then face it. Fix it. Save these people.’

Lady Aster’s eyes grew misty as she ran her fingers over the smooth pink curves of the shell.

‘Please,’ Tansy said. ‘I believe you can do this. I believe in you.’

The old woman’s fingers twitched as she turned her gaze to Tansy, her aged face wearing a mixture of longing and fear.

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26
MERIT

Catmint: Eaten raw, it conjures courage in physical battles.

SHE HAD BEEN in her room, packing up her things, when Bracken burst in, barking urgently, ears flat against his head, fur standing up in a ridge along his back.

Merit hadn't hesitated. She snatched up her white steel sword in one hand and her black iron one in the other.

'Show me,' she told Bracken, and followed as the little dog streaked like a grey arrow to the cherry orchard where she'd left Tansy.

The moon was stained red, washing the ground with bloody light. Lightning danced across the sky, and Merit remembered Valiant's words in the little hut.

The augurs predict another blood moon in a matter of weeks. They say that a great sacrifice in the name of the Unmaker is required to enable him to return to us.

She could smell the sulphurous odour of salt-rain in the air, mingling with the sweetness of cherry blossoms.

Dread filled her lungs like icy water. Ghosts crowded in the corners of her eyes, like a darkling dream threatening to overwhelm her.

Other members of the Bright Guard were streaming in from their garrisons, pulling on helmets and blinking sleep from their eyes as an alarm bell began to clang.

She saw Lord Brinian, surrounded by guards, and Lady Lyness with a sword in her hand. 'The walls have been breached!' she cried. 'We are under attack!'

The Bright Guard formed ranks, looking around for the invaders.

Merit looked too.

The ghostly shadows were drawing nearer. The trees were thick with them.

Not shadows.

Silent as shadows, but far deadlier.

Merit cried out in warning, but it was already too late.

A black blade was held against Lord Brinian's throat.

'I suggest you throw down your arms,' Sir Valiant told him. 'Or else my knights will slay you and your guard where you stand.'

Carrion Knights emerged from the shadows, swift and silent, forming ranks. Row upon row of skull helmets stared, blank-eyed and grinning. Only Valiant was barefaced, his features carved in vicious triumph.

A few of the Bright Guard attempted to resist and were quickly subdued, their blood bright on the cherry blossom carpet.

Lord Brinian's white sword thudded to the ground. 'Valiant,' the Councillor of Secrets hissed. 'What is the meaning of this?'

'The Unmaker is returning,' Sir Valiant replied. 'You will all be slain in his honour.'

'We had a *deal*—'

‘There is no deal. Not anymore.’ The knight raised his voice. ‘Hail the Unmaker!’

Swords clashed against shields and black-booted feet stamped the ground. The Carrion Knights cried out as one.

‘HAIL THE UNMAKER!’

An old man tottered forward to face Sir Valiant, head bobbing under his elaborate embroidered headdress. Lord Aiken, High Councillor of Vows. In another world, it might have looked comical, a wizened bureaucrat standing face to face with a fearsome knight. But Merit felt nothing but dread.

‘This is the Bright City,’ Lord Aiken said to Sir Valiant, his voice cracked and wavering. ‘You tried to take us once, but we prevailed. We will *never* surrender to you.’

Sir Valiant regarded him coldly. ‘We are not asking for your surrender,’ he said, then raised his voice and his sword. ‘Kill them all, in the name of the Unmaker.’

‘HAIL THE UNMAKER!’

‘No.’ The words slipped from Merit’s lips unbidden as she strode to place herself between Lord Aiken and Sir Valiant.

Valiant narrowed his eyes at her. ‘Here we are again, Sir Merit. Our overlord is returning. It is a happy day, is it not?’

‘Does the idea of death make you happy?’ Merit replied.

Valiant’s lip curled. ‘Serving the Unmaker makes me happy. Fulfilling my purpose. My destiny.’

‘I don’t believe in destiny.’

Valiant shook his head, just a little. ‘It isn’t too late for you, you know. Rejoin us. Purify yourself in the blood of the unworthy.’

He glanced down at Merit’s two swords.

Black and white.

‘Which one will you choose?’ Sir Valiant asked.

Merit suddenly remembered crouching with Valiant on the riverbank, by armies of white and black stones, going to battle with each other.

But Merit wasn’t a white stone, or a black stone.

Perhaps nobody was.

Perhaps being a hero wasn’t about rescuing fair maidens or defeating dark lords. Perhaps true heroism was about giving people the space to make their own choices. To allow them to be whoever they needed to be.

Merit let both swords fall to the ground and turned to face the assembled ranks of Carrion Knights, her mouth dry.

She wasn't made for speeches.

'The Unmaker isn't a dark lord,' she said, raising her voice so they could all hear. 'She's an old woman, once powerful but now bitter and petty. You've been lied to.'

Her words landed like cherry blossom petals, light and insignificant. A few Carrion Knights chuckled. She had to make them understand. She gestured at the two swords lying by her feet.

'My whole life, I believed that this was my choice. Dark or bright. Good or evil. Right or wrong.'

A knight strode forward, sword lifted to strike her.

But Sir Valiant raised a hand. 'Let her make her pretty little speech,' he said, his voice darkly amused.

Merit cleared her throat nervously.

'When I was a child, growing up in the Halls of Order, I used to wake in the night, afraid of dark shadows. Of monsters.' She turned to look at Sir Valiant, but the other knight's gaze slid away from her. Merit swallowed. 'Then I started to go on recruitment raids and saw children playing, being held and comforted by their parents. And I took those children, just like I was taken. And it made me realise that *I* was the monster. I hated myself. I hated the Halls of Order, and I hated the Unmaker.'

A ripple of unease went through the assembled Carrion Knights. Sir Valiant adjusted his grip on his sword.

'But I'm not a monster,' Merit continued. 'None of us are. Five hundred years ago, the Unmaker destroyed armies. Cities. Families.'

She remembered the emptiness of Scata Delve, save for the howling infant. The bleak wasteland of Halsgarth.

'But not the children. She stole the children. Brought them back to the Halls and raised them as warriors. She made them believe that they were monsters. That they owed their loyalty to her, because everyone else feared and hated them.'

She saw a few knights exchange glances.

'We are taught to worship the Unmaker as our saviour. But she is nothing of the kind. She's a bitter old woman. A thief, hiding in exile.'

Merit turned to look at Sir Valiant, who was watching her, his face unconcerned. Why wasn't he trying to stop her? Did he believe that there

was no way his knights would turn against him?

‘We are taught that the Bright Guard are our enemies. But we’ve been working *for* them the whole time. We’re all just pieces in their games of power. And we deserve better. We deserve real families. Real homes. We deserve raspberries and chickens and picnics. We deserve *love*.’

Her voice cracked on the last word.

Sir Valiant let out a scoffing noise. ‘Why don’t you tell them what you really want, Merit? You want them to follow you. You want to lead.’

Merit shook her head. ‘I don’t ask any to follow me. I command no one but myself. I just want you all to have a choice. Not between good and evil, or bright and dark. A choice that’s just for *you*. A path where you get to make your own future. Your own destiny.’

Sir Valiant’s eyes glittered like the night sky in the depths of winter. ‘Somebody kill her already,’ he said wearily.

Merit’s heart thundered in her chest.

Nobody moved.

‘In the name of the Unmaker!’ Valiant cried.

A movement caught Merit’s eye. She turned to see a Carrion Knight pulling off his helmet, revealing a sweaty face and wide eyes. Some of his hair had come loose from its plait and was plastered to the side of his face.

He looked afraid.

Merit knew him a little. Sir Calibre, from Viper Hall. He was barely fourteen, had only been a knight for a few months.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

‘Soldier,’ Sir Valiant said in a warning tone. ‘Hold your ground. That’s an order.’

Sir Calibre’s hand was trembling. He turned desperate eyes to Merit.

‘This isn’t your fight. It isn’t your war,’ Merit told him gently. ‘You don’t have to take orders from anyone.’

Sir Valiant marched over to Sir Calibre and stood before him, the tip of his sword at the young knight’s throat. ‘Put it back on,’ he said in a low voice.

Merit held her breath.

Sir Calibre was ashen, terror written all over his face.

‘Put. It. On.’ Sir Valiant’s voice was low and deadly.

Sir Calibre’s chin rose, just a fraction. A tiny movement of defiance.

The helmet thudded to his feet.

Valiant swung his sword, so blindingly fast Merit barely saw it.

Sir Calibre’s head thunked to the ground and lay next to his helmet, eyes unseeing. His body crumpled, collapsing in the dirt, sending up a little puff of cherry blossom petals that were quickly drowned in crimson.

Bile rose in Merit’s throat.

She might as well have swung the sword herself.

Perhaps Valiant was right. Perhaps death truly was all she was capable of.

‘Who’s next?’ Sir Valiant roared, holding his sword out and turning in a circle so it pointed at all the knights before stopping on Merit.

‘How many more of your brothers and sisters will you see die?’ he said.

Merit didn’t respond. She had no words.

Thunk.

Another helmet had hit the ground. It belonged to an older knight, his plaited hair streaked with white.

Sir Keen, from Worm Hall.

Valiant swung around and snarled at him.

Thunk.

Sir Hallow. Merit had known her since they were children.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Everywhere, helmets were thudding to the ground, Carrion Knights looking up at Merit with a wild, uncertain light in their eyes.

Merit felt an incredible swell of emotion for her brothers and sisters as Sir Valiant wheeled to face her. ‘I’ll kill you myself,’ he bit out. ‘I should have done it properly in the first place.’

Merit looked Valiant straight in the eye. ‘Go on, then,’ she said.

Valiant snarled, then kicked the black sword over to her. ‘Fight me.’

Merit bent down and wrapped her fingers around the sword hilt. It was almost a relief to slip back into warrior mode. Here, she knew what she was doing.

Sir Valiant crouched low, his sword raised in guard position, his footwork immaculate. He and Merit had undergone the same training, but Merit was hopelessly out of shape. Sir Valiant was bigger and faster. He had a ruthlessness to his fighting style that Merit couldn’t dream of emulating.

She knew her chances were not good.

But Valiant didn’t spring into action. Merit saw a faint tremble in his sword hand and remembered the hitch in his breath when he had stabbed her in the gut.

That little boy was still in there, somewhere. The one who played at good and evil by the riverbank and knew how stories were supposed to end.

‘You were my best friend,’ Merit told him. ‘My only friend.’

Valiant’s left eye twitched, and Merit saw a passing shadow of doubt in his eyes.

She didn’t know her own real name – the one she had been given by her parents. New recruits learned quickly that it was easier to forget.

She remembered Valiant’s, though. He had told her, in their dormitory, after he was punished for running away from his lessons.

‘*Jude*,’ she whispered.

Valiant wavered, the tip of his sword dipping. But then the knight’s eyes went dull, his face twisting in a snarl.

‘Jude is dead.’

His sword snapped forward and down before he whirled away in one fluid motion. Merit managed to parry him clumsily and took a step backwards.

She should have gone back to training as soon as her wound had healed.

Valiant attacked again, a quick thrust, so fast Merit barely registered it was happening. Instinct took over, and iron rang on iron as she brought her own blade up to protect herself.

‘Let it go,’ she told Valiant. ‘You can be whoever you want to be.’

Sir Valiant bared his teeth. ‘I know what I am,’ he hissed.

He darted around behind Merit, swift as a dancer, raising his sword above his head with both hands and slashing, too fast for Merit to dodge.

Merit braced herself for the bite of black iron, but instead felt the sword slice through the knot of hair on her head.

Locks of soft black silk fell around her, and Merit heard gasps from her brothers and sisters.

Valiant could have killed her in that moment. Redirected his blow and slit her throat.

But he had chosen to humiliate her first.

Cutting off a Carrion Knight’s hair was the greatest punishment of all. It defiled you in the eyes of the Unmaker.

But Merit didn’t care what the Unmaker thought of her.

All she wanted was for this fight to end. She shook her head, and what remained of her dark hair settled around her face, reaching only to her jaw.

‘What do you think?’ she asked Sir Valiant with a ragged grin. ‘Does it suit me?’

Valiant let out a growl and surged forward again.

Even when they were children, Valiant had shown an aptitude for sparring. Light on his feet, he used his speed as a weapon, darting and wheeling and slashing. He could outfight other acolytes twice his size without breaking a sweat. And now he was fully grown, tall and broad-shouldered and powerful, but no less fast.

But this wasn't the training grounds at Crow Hall, and Merit was too out of practice to remember any of the fancy footwork she'd been drilled in. The only way she was getting out of this alive was to fight dirty.

She waited, dodging and blocking as best she could, just trying to stay away from Valiant's snaking blade. The other knight grew overconfident, sneering as he danced around her, feinting and thrusting, his blade a black blur.

He had always enjoyed performing for a crowd.

At last, Valiant made his first mistake, twisting away from Merit with a flamboyant spin. Grimly, Merit shot out her foot, kicking him firmly in the knee. Valiant's legs went out from under him and he sprawled in the dirt, his black sword flying from his grasp to land at Merit's feet.

She saw a flash of fear in his eyes, replaced in an instant with hatred as he looked up at her.

'Do it, then,' he spat. 'Finish it.'

Merit hesitated. 'Are you sure?' she asked. 'This is what you want?'

Valiant lifted his chin in defiance of her. 'In the name of the Unmaker.'

Merit remembered the slide of Valiant's blade as he stabbed her back in the village.

His hand reaching across to her in the dead of night, proffering the white stone.

Brave and strong and good.

She lowered her sword. 'Get out of here,' she said. 'While you still can.'

Valiant spat blood into the dirt and blossoms. 'You fool,' he hissed, rolling in the dirt, as nimble as a cat, snatching Merit's bright steel sword from where it lay nearby and springing forward, the blade levelled at Merit's heart.

Time seemed to slow down. Merit tried to raise her sword to block the attack, but she knew she wouldn't be fast enough. Sir Valiant's aim was true, and he had all his weight behind the blow.

But it never landed. Valiant veered off course, his legs buckling, and fell to his knees, the point of the white sword striking the dirt at Merit's feet. Blood bubbled from between his lips as he stared down at a growing wetness on his chest.

Sir Keen stood behind him, holding a black blade streaked with red.

Sir Valiant collapsed.

Merit recognised the look in Sir Keen's eyes.

Fear.

Guilt.

And hope.

Somewhere nearby, someone began to scream as reality split open and monsters poured from the void.

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27
TANSY

Yew: The tree of the dead. Throw dry branches on a bonfire to summon undead servants.

ANHELION WAS COLD and hard in Tansy's hand as she stumbled back along the dark paths.

'Are you sure?' Lady Aster asked, her voice small and strangely childlike.

'I'm sure,' Tansy said firmly, and pulled her through into a world of violence and chaos.

They were everywhere.

Sleepers, Carrion Knights, members of the Bright Guard.

The scent of blood and sulphur and cherry blossom, and the sounds of suffering and death.

Overhead, dark clouds gathered, boiling and sullen, engulfing the bloody moon and stars.

Beside her, Lady Aster stood frozen, staring at the monsters.

‘There are so many,’ she murmured.

They were too late.

Gold armour glinted dully as members of the Bright Guard stood alongside Carrion Knights, all slashing and stabbing at the ghoulish invaders. Tansy watched as one by one, the Sleepers fused back together, refusing to die, then she cried out in horror as the Sleepers clawed into the knights, wrenching open armour and digging bony claws into warm flesh.

Tansy remembered the way the Sleeper had dug into the shell collector on the beach in Uyst.

It was much more gruesome when the victim wasn’t full of sawdust.

The Sleepers were searching for something.

She put a hand to her own chest and felt something hard and sharp within.

A creature appeared before her, grey and tattered, its lids fused closed and its mouth open, revealing sharp, pointed teeth and stringy black saliva.

Tansy let out a scream. The Sleeper shrank back from the sound, cowering away, then scuttled forward once more on insect-like limbs.

A grey blur streaked towards her, and then Bracken was there, standing guard, barking at the top of his voice.

Armour clinked and she heard the heavy tread of running feet.

‘Protect the Maid!’ someone cried, and then she and Lady Aster were both surrounded by golden armour. A circle of knights, spears and shields raised to protect them.

She heard the ringing of steel, cries of pain and choking, gurgling attempts to breathe. The Sleepers were so fast, their movements jerky and unnatural as they clawed and gouged, pressing their faces into the warmth of living flesh.

Bracken clung to her ankles, ears flat, the fur along his spine spiked into a ridge.

Tansy saw the flash of a familiar face in the chaos.

Merit. Black sword in her hand, her hair roughly shorn and swinging wildly around her face.

She looked like a hero.

Through the ring of Bright Guards, Tansy saw Lady Lyness, her sword a blur as she cut and whirled and slashed at the Sleepers.

‘They won’t die,’ Tansy called helplessly. ‘The Sleepers. You can’t kill them.’

But nobody heard her.

A Sleeper clawed at Lady Lyness, and she staggered back, throwing up gauntleted arms to protect herself. More ragged figures surged at her, and she stumbled and fell. Tansy’s stomach heaved as a Sleeper pushed its face against hers, almost as if they were kissing. When it looked up once more, its grey face was crimson with blood.

‘Unmake them!’ Tansy cried, thrusting Anhelion at Lady Aster, who was watching the battle with detached disinterest.

Lady Aster did not take the stone. ‘There’s no point,’ she informed Tansy mildly. ‘They’ll just come back through again. You have to repair the hole you made.’

‘I don’t know how!’

‘Of course you do.’

She was just a maid. All she knew was making tea, washing sheets, fetching and carrying.

Anhelion was cold in her fist, a hard, lifeless lump of a thing.

How could a mere stone hold so much power?

The nearby Sleepers’ faces were distorted with fury and hunger. Tansy thought of the desperate way they dug through living flesh.

‘What are they looking for?’ she asked Lady Aster.

‘Anhelion, of course.’

This didn’t make any sense, but Tansy didn’t have time for questions.

‘Take it,’ she said, and thrust the jewel into Lady Aster’s hands.

The old woman’s fingers curled around the gem, and she looked down at it, amused. ‘And what exactly do you expect me to do with this?’

Tansy resisted the urge to slap her across the cheek. ‘Use it!’ she said. ‘Stop this!’

Lady Aster shrugged. ‘I cannot.’

‘Is there no way we can give them some peace?’

‘That’s not how these things work.’

‘Why not?’ Tansy asked. ‘Does power always have to be so cruel?’

‘It is what it is.’

Tansy glanced over to Merit. The knight was still fighting, even though Tansy could see she was exhausted, her face grey.

‘What if it wasn’t?’ Tansy said, almost to herself.

Lady Aster sighed impatiently. ‘I don’t expect you to understand.’

Tansy remembered struggling with the Sleeper on the cliff’s edge outside the Oubliette. How she had sensed its longing for sunlight and warmth.

She remembered standing among wildflowers on the hills outside the Oubliette, her face turned to the sun. The brine-drenched breeze in her hair. The sunshine on her face, trickling through her like liquid honey, warm on her eyelids.

Merit had come alive in the sunshine, her fear melting away to reveal tender kindness and hope.

If only Tansy could make the Sleepers feel that way. If only they could feel the sunshine on their skin.

Anhelion had made her feel that way, when she had glimpsed it in the memory of the Oubliette. But now the jewel was cold and lifeless in Lady Aster’s hand.

‘Do something,’ she begged Lady Aster. *‘Please.’*

Lady Aster sighed. ‘Oh, my child. You still don’t see the truth, do you?’

And the old woman hurled Anhelion to the ground, where it shattered into fragments.

A cry of despair escaped Tansy’s lips. ‘What have you done?’

‘That wasn’t Anhelion. It’s just a glass bauble. A trinket. A fake.’

Tansy stared down at the dull shards. ‘Where is the real thing?’

The old woman didn’t answer, gazing out at the battle, at Bright Guard and Carrion Knight fighting side by side. ‘What would you do?’ she asked instead. ‘If you could wield Anhelion. What would you give them?’

‘The sun,’ Tansy replied promptly, before she could even consider the question. ‘The Sleepers have been in darkness for five hundred years. They want to be *warm*. They want *light*.’

‘So give it to them,’ Lady Aster said.

‘But how?’

Bracken let out a little urgent yip.

‘You wanted a dog,’ Lady Aster said. ‘So you made a dog. Now you want the sun, so make the sun.’

Tansy shook her head, still not understanding.

A Sleeper lashed out at Merit, its razor-sharp claws tearing across her shoulder. The knight sprawled in churned earth and ragged cherry blossoms, her face grey and ghostly.

‘No,’ Tansy whispered.

The Sleeper bent over Merit, claws extended, ready to rip her open.

Tansy didn’t think.

She just ran.

The tangle of threads inside her grew warm and bright, warding off the deathly chill of the Sleepers. The sensation built and built, like sunshine on the wildflower meadow. Like the sunset in Uyst.

Bracken got there first, barking and bouncing with wild fury. The Sleeper cowered away, hands over its ragged ears.

Tansy ignored it, skidding to her knees before Merit, the warm threads filling her so completely she thought she might burst.

She pressed her lips to the scar on Merit’s icy forehead.

The world became very small suddenly. The sounds of ringing steel, screams, and even Bracken barking faded away.

Just Tansy and Merit, alone.

A single kiss.

A single moment.

Like warm sunlight.

Tansy threw back her head, her arms flinging out wide as bright threads exploded out of her, brilliant and golden.

The Sleeper shrank back, shielding the place where its eyes once were. Merit whimpered and flinched at the brightness.

Dimly, Tansy heard gasps and cries from the Bright Guard and Carrion Knights. She heard Bracken barking.

She scrambled over to the cowering Sleeper and knelt, face to face with it. It bared sharp teeth at her and hissed.

All around them was bright light and warmth, like a perfect summer’s day.

She laid both hands on the Sleeper’s sunken cheeks, gently turning its face up, into the light.

Its horrific features contorted and unclenched, and beneath the stretched, papery skin, she saw a glimpse of the man who had once existed, long ago, before darkness and cold drove the humanity from him.

‘Be at peace,’ Tansy whispered.

The Sleeper let out a rattling sigh, and then it began to crumble under her hands, dissolving into powdery flakes of ash that floated away on the faint breeze.

As Tansy rose to her feet, other Sleepers turned their faces towards the light, which was still spreading out around her. Colour washed through the grove – the rich bark of tree trunks, the pale pink of cherry blossom petals. Bright slashes of crimson blood.

Light lanced the heavy, sullen clouds above, boiling them away like steam from a kettle, revealing the rosy glow of dawn breaking on the horizon.

One by one, the Sleepers felt the sun on their skin for the first time in five hundred years.

One by one, they sighed with relief and began to break apart, the ashy flakes drifting away like cherry blossom petals.

Tansy turned back to Merit, falling to her knees beside her.

The knight was alive, but barely. The Sleeper had slashed open her shoulder, and she was bleeding heavily. Her skin was deathly cold and clammy, and she shivered as she looked up at Tansy with clouded eyes.

‘Am I dreaming?’ she murmured.

‘No,’ Tansy whispered, stroking Merit’s brow. ‘I’m here. I’m here and I’m so sorry. Merit, I should never have sent you away.’

‘No,’ Merit said weakly. ‘You shouldn’t.’

Tansy pressed her lips to Merit’s forehead. ‘I love you.’

Merit’s lips – blue from cold – curved into a smile. ‘I know.’

Tansy looked up from Merit and turned to Lady Aster, her heart nearly bursting.

‘You did it,’ she said.

‘I did nothing,’ Lady Aster replied.

‘Tansy,’ Merit whispered, struggling to sit up.

‘It’s okay,’ Tansy said. ‘It’s over now. They’re all gone.’

But Merit was staring at something behind her, her expression a mask of dread.

‘He’s here.’

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28
MERIT

Deadly nightshade: Sow seeds in midwinter to bring blight to spring crops.

MERIT WAS OVERCOME by a sudden coldness, so sharp and deep it made her eyeballs ache.

In front of her, Tansy's breath was coming in clouds, and she saw frost creep along the branches of the cherry trees. Bracken let out a low growl, his lips pulled back over his teeth.

The cherry blossoms around them began to fall limply to the ground like dead insects.

A new figure was emerging through the ragged tear in the universe.

Impossibly tall and gaunt, he was dressed in tarnished armour and a tattered, swirling robe. A pointed crown sat atop his head, decayed with age into weathered spikes. He held an ancient sword in his hand, dull and corroded.

He was no Sleeper. Black eyes glittered deep in his skull.

The coldness inside Merit crystallised into terror. This figure was the true embodiment of evil. This was the dark lord that she had dreamed of as a child. Looming over all with terrible power. That fear came rushing back, all-consuming, and Merit was an acolyte again, huddled in her bed, trying to cry silently so no one would know how weak and lonely she was.

The dark lord spoke in a voice like stone grinding on stone, deep and cold and entirely without emotion.

'WHERE IS SHE?'

She knew that voice from the dark paths. This was the figure that had hunted them there, in the cold, lightless void.

Tansy's fingers tightened on Merit's. 'King Elior,' she hissed.

Merit had too many questions, and no time for answers.

A member of the Bright Guard gestured with his sword at Tansy.

'You're the Maid,' he cried. 'Save us!'

The skeletal figure reached out and wrapped bony fingers around the neck of the guard who had spoken. The man let out a tortured scream, which was cut off sharply as his eyes turned dull and lifeless.

The other members of the Bright Guard fell back further, their faces blank with fear. The Carrion Knights did the same. Nothing they had trained for had prepared them for this.

'What are you waiting for?' Lord Brinian hissed to Tansy, his voice strangled. 'Do something!'

Tansy stared at him, utterly baffled. 'What can I do?' she whispered.

Merit stared at her. 'You just made *all the Sleepers* go away!' she said.

Tansy shook her head. 'I didn't do anything. It was Lady Aster.'

Merit knew it had been Tansy. But she also knew that look on Tansy's face. That closed-down look.

She was bound so tightly to Lady Aster, she could barely breathe.

King Elior had noticed that all eyes were on Tansy, and was starting a slow and predatory approach.

Merit's heart pounded.

Her two swords were within grasping distance, half buried in bloody dirt and cherry blossoms.

One white. One black.

But before she could do anything, Bracken exploded into action, hurling his little body at the dark lord, snarling and snapping his teeth. He tore at the king's ragged robes, and Merit saw a flash of skeletal ankle, paper-thin skin stretched over ancient bone.

King Elior looked down at the little dog. He didn't move. He didn't have to.

Merit heard a yelp of pain and a sick crunching noise. Bracken fell limply to the ground, surrounded by cherry blossoms and churned earth.

He did not get up again.

Tansy let out a broken cry, and Merit found herself on her feet, a sword in each hand, facing the king. Merit was tall, but Elior stood a full two heads taller. She felt like a child again as she gazed up at that sunken grey face, its expression twisted into cold, empty hatred. His ragged cloak floated in the air as if even gravity were afraid to challenge him.

The king turned to Merit, regarding her as a spider regards a fly, then struck out with his sword, a heavy blow that Merit dodged easily.

Merit dropped into a crouch and raised her twin blades. 'Brave and strong and good,' she whispered, and let her training take over.

She was weak from fighting Valiant and the Sleepers, and hopelessly outmatched, but what else could she do?

The dark lord was tall, but unlike the Sleepers, he was not fast. Merit knew she would have to rely on speed and timing in order to have any chance at all. She began to circle slowly, her two swords held out, waiting for an opening, forcing the dark king to turn to keep her in sight.

She just needed one moment. One slip of Elior's attention.

Her endless footwork drills paid off as she made circle after circle, moving in a spiral, drawing the dark lord away from where Tansy was cradling Bracken's broken body. Was the little dog still alive?

A bitter breath of ice brushed her cheek, and she lunged backwards just in time, the tip of the dark lord's sword missing her by mere inches.

Don't get distracted, Merit scolded herself as she resumed her circling. Her focus narrowed to just the dark lord and his blade.

The pain in her shoulder was growing worse with every movement. Soon she knew it would seize up, and she'd be down to just one sword.

An opportunity came, and Merit leaped forward, the white sword swooping down from above, and the black sword snaking out in a sharp thrust. She felt it pierce the dark lord's ghostly robes and crunch through bone.

But King Elior barely seemed to notice. Merit tried to twist and roll away, but pain screamed through her when she hit the ground, and she was too slow. The king's heavy sword sliced into her already injured shoulder. The cut was not deep, but pain lanced down her arm, cold and sickening, as if the dark lord's blade were made of poisoned ice.

Merit's bright steel sword clattered to the ground.

A great weariness overcame her, and she wanted nothing more than to collapse into the dirt. But King Elior was turning to face the Maid and the Unmaker, and Merit knew she had to do something.

She staggered to her feet, one arm hanging uselessly at her side, and rushed at the dark lord, slashing wildly, desperately with the black sword, as a deadly chill spread from her wound and threatened to overwhelm her.

The dark king struck out with one bony fist.

The ground vanished underneath Merit's feet, and she tumbled into darkness.

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29
TANSY

Fennel: Opens the mind to new possibilities.

TANSY BIT BACK a scream as Merit crumpled at the ragged king's feet.

For a moment, rage swallowed up the lavender threads of loyalty. She laid Bracken gently on the ground. The little dog's heart was still beating, but it was very faint.

She heard a shuffling step behind her and turned to glare at Lady Aster. 'You did this,' Tansy hissed. 'All of it. I *trusted* you.'

'I know, child,' Lady Aster said, and there was genuine sympathy in her voice. 'It isn't your fault. I made you like this.'

The sky overhead grew darker, and a cold wind began to blow, bringing with it shards of ice that cut like glass. Knights from both sides raised shields to protect themselves.

King Elior was approaching them. His head tilted as his black pinprick eyes bored into Tansy, hollowing her out and leaving nothing but howling ice winds.

'AH,' he said. *'I SEE.'*

Tansy smelled gravedust and ancient, tarnished metal.

The king's long, skeletal fingers reached for her, crooked and twiglike. He brushed the front of her white nightgown in an icy caress.

'No.'

It was Lady Aster, yanking Tansy away with surprising strength. One hand still clutching Tansy's arm, Lady Aster bent and drew a line in the muddy cherry blossoms with the pointed toe of her shoe. She was muttering something, words that Tansy didn't understand. The line glowed, and Lady Aster pulled Tansy behind it.

'You can't have her,' the old woman said to the dark lord.

King Elior stopped, unable to cross the line. The wind grew stronger, whipping up the fallen cherry blossoms into a whirling storm of pink and white and grey. It was like standing in the very centre of a storm.

Lady Aster stood behind Tansy, one hand wrapped around her and pressing on her sternum.

'Do exactly as I say,' she murmured into Tansy's ear.

Loyalty and lavender hit Tansy so strong, it nearly drove her to her knees. The threads ate up her misery, her rage, her grief. Ate up everything, until all that was left was obedience.

So she obeyed.

She still didn't understand the words that Lady Aster was saying, but Tansy's hands moved automatically, making strange shapes and patterns in the air.

They felt familiar somehow. Like she'd done this before.

Like it was a language she'd forgotten how to speak.

Lady Aster's words rang in her ears.

It isn't your fault. I made you like this.

She felt nothing.

She *was* nothing.

'What do you want?' Lady Aster hissed into her ear.

‘N-nothing,’ Tansy whimpered.

Lady Aster grunted with disapproval. ‘You have to want something,’ she said. ‘It won’t work unless you *want* it.’

Tansy looked down at Merit, lifeless on the ground. There was so much she wanted.

The loyalty pushed it all away, leaving nothing behind but Lady Aster.

She closed her eyes. ‘I want to go home,’ she whimpered, thinking of the cosy little cottage by the sea.

The wind stopped blowing, so suddenly that Tansy would have tumbled over had Lady Aster not held her in a vice-like grip.

Her ears popped as all sound was sucked away, along with light, and sensation, and everything else.

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30
TANSY

Thistle: Carry a flower head as portable ammunition against evil spirits.

THE CAT WOKE her up, batting an insistent paw against her cheek.

‘Is it morning already?’ Tansy asked it. ‘I was having the strangest dream.’

She glanced out the window and saw only darkness, a star-less void of velvety black.

There was a glass globe on her pillow, but the inside of it was dim and clouded. She tapped a fingernail against the glass, frowning, then climbed out of bed.

She pulled on her linen shift and petticoat, the cat watching with luminous yellow eyes. A brown woollen overdress came next and a white kerchief for her neck and shoulders. Then an apron, white cap, and finally stockings and a pair of sturdy brown boots.

The cat jumped from Tansy's bed and led the way down the narrow attic stairs, stepping over several more of the dark glass globes. The house seemed to breathe around her, creaking gently.

The dog was waiting in the kitchen, tail thumping on the hearthrug. Tansy felt relieved to see him, although she didn't remember why. She bent down and scratched him behind the ears, just the way he liked. Then she removed a glass globe from the hearth and lit the fire, her cold fingers stiff as she fumbled for the tinderbox, then went outside into the velvety blackness to fetch water from the well.

It seemed to float there, a few steps from the house. For a moment, Tansy felt uneasy about stepping into the void.

But if she didn't, then who would make the tea?

The cat followed her, melting into the darkness, only its lamplike golden eyes visible.

The dog watched from the back doorstep, wagging its tail nervously.

Somewhere in the nothingness, she heard the honk of a goose.

Back inside, she filled the black iron kettle and hung it over the fire to boil. She took the crock of milk from the larder and splashed a little into a dish. The dog and the cat jostled over it, knocking over another glass globe.

'If you spill it, there'll be no more,' she warned them.

Something was missing.

You need to find her, the dry voice in her head remarked.

'Find who?' she said out loud.

The sitting room was full of globes, the entire floor crowded with dark orbs, more crammed onto every shelf and surface. It would take forever to tidy them all up.

Lady Aster and Lord Elior sat on chairs in the middle of it all, arguing over a chessboard.

'You cheated!' Lord Elior said, crotchety and petulant.

Lady Aster shrugged. 'But I won.'

'It doesn't count if you cheat.'

'Winning is winning.'

There were *thousands* of globes. How would Tansy ever find the right one?

‘What is it, girl?’ Lady Aster snapped. ‘Why are you standing there gawking?’

‘I’m looking for something,’ Tansy said. ‘A … a stone.’

She was fairly certain it was a stone, anyway.

‘I think the other girl has it,’ Lord Elior said absently as he reset the chessboard for another match.

Tansy looked around. ‘What other girl?’

The old man looked up to her, and his eyes seemed to darken, turning entirely black. Tansy shivered. Then he shrugged and looked normal again. ‘She’s around here somewhere.’

Lady Aster squinted at Lord Elior as she moved a pawn into place. ‘Ready to lose again?’

‘Not this time, old woman.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

Tansy heard a creaking noise coming from upstairs, like footsteps on floorboards. She picked her way through the globes towards the staircase. The dog came charging through, making them all clatter together like a delicate storm.

‘Careful!’ she said.

The little dog sniffed dismissively.

There were more globes on the stairs, and even more in the second-floor passage. Tansy had to wade through them.

The passage was long. So long she couldn’t see the end of it. There were doors every few steps, door after door after door. She opened the first one and immediately staggered back, clutching at the doorframe.

The door opened out onto a swirling vortex of blackness. Tansy glimpsed things being sucked away into the darkness. A rag doll with a painted face. A paper cone. A mask made of intricately carved leaves. Above, stars studded a velvet sky. But when Tansy peered more closely at them, she realised they weren’t stars at all.

They were human teeth.

She could smell sulphur and wet sawdust.

The little dog shivered and backed away, and Tansy shut the door.

Keep looking, the dry voice urged.

She tried the next door, but it was the same thing. Churning darkness, punctuated with strange yet familiar items. Seashells. Raspberries. Sprigs of lavender and hemlock.

‘No,’ she murmured to the dog. ‘That’s not right either.’

Door after door after door.

Tansy felt urgency kindle in her heart. She still didn’t know what to do, but she knew there wasn’t much time left.

She looked down at the dog. ‘Do you know which is the right one?’

The little dog barked cheerfully and led her down the passage, scrambling over and around the glass globes.

He eventually stopped outside a door that looked exactly the same as all the others.

‘Are you sure?’ Tansy asked.

The dog sat down in front of the door and wagged his tail.

The door opened onto a little stream, gurgling through dense woodland.

A little girl crouched on the muddy bank, surrounded by carefully arranged pebbles. Most of the pebbles were dark grey, but others were pale.

Bracken wagged his tail but stayed sitting.

The child had something clenched in her fist.

‘Hello?’ Tansy said.

The little girl turned frightened eyes to Tansy. She had high cheekbones and a severe, pointed little face framed with dark hair, tied up in a tight knot. An angry red scar slashed across one eyebrow and down her cheek.

‘Are you a monster?’ she asked in a high, clear voice.

‘I don’t think so,’ Tansy said gently, stepping into the room and kneeling beside her. ‘Are you?’

The child shook her head. ‘I don’t think so either. But I don’t remember.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Merit,’ the girl replied. ‘I had another name once, but I don’t remember what it was.’

The name stirred something in her, Tansy she wasn’t sure what it was.

She smiled. ‘Hello, Merit,’ she said. ‘I’m Tansy.’

Merit was maybe six or seven years old. Tansy felt in her pocket for a biscuit and offered it to the little girl. Merit snatched it from her hand and ate it greedily, watching her all the while with those big, round eyes. They were beautiful, her eyes. Like twin galaxies, dark, but full of little sparkles of

colour. Tansy thought vaguely that she had seen eyes like those before, once. A very long time ago.

‘Tell me what else you remember,’ she said.

‘I remember chickens. And raspberries.’ Merit turned hopeful attention to Tansy’s pocket.

‘I don’t have any raspberries, I’m sorry,’ Tansy said, but gave the child another biscuit.

‘S’okay,’ Merit mumbled around a mouthful of crumbs.

‘What are you holding there?’ Tansy asked, nodding at Merit’s small, clenched fist.

Merit smiled, and her serious little face lit up like a sunrise. She unfurled her fingers to reveal a smooth white riverstone.

‘This is the Maid,’ she explained. ‘She’s a hero. She’s going to rescue me and save everyone. She’s brave and strong and good.’

Tansy felt a shiver pass over her. ‘What do you need rescuing from?’ she asked.

‘I … I don’t think I’m really here,’ Merit said haltingly. ‘I think this is just a dream.’

‘So where are you?’

‘Trapped.’ The girl’s face grew pinched and frightened. ‘Somewhere dark. Can you find me and help me get out?’

‘I will,’ Tansy assured her. ‘I promise.’

This seemed to bring the child comfort.

Tansy stood and held out her hand. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘It won’t work,’ Merit said. ‘I’m not really here, remember?’

‘Just try,’ Tansy said encouragingly. The child hesitated, then took her hand. Her fingers were small and cold. Tansy felt an overwhelming need to protect her.

‘I might have a pot of raspberry jam in the larder,’ she told the child, and Merit grinned at her.

Tansy marvelled once more at how her little face was totally transformed when she smiled.

‘Come on.’

She stepped back into the hallway, looking over her shoulder at the child.

‘Brave and strong and good,’ Merit said.

But as her foot stepped over the threshold, Tansy felt Merit's hand turn soft, like powder. She cried out in horror as the child's body collapsed into grey flakes of ash, her frightened galaxy eyes on Tansy's until the very last moment.

The little dog whined.

'I … I'm sorry,' Tansy stammered. 'I didn't know …'

She shut the door, then opened it again in the hope that Merit might have reappeared. But the stream was gone. In its place was an empty room, just bare boards and white walls.

'It was her, wasn't it?' she said. 'She was what I needed to find.'

The dog jumped to his feet and trotted back down the hallway towards the stairs, glancing back at Tansy and barking a command, sharp and high.

'Okay,' she said. 'I'm coming.'

She paused halfway down the staircase and stared at the thousands of glass globes that littered every available surface. There seemed to be even more than before, piled on top of each other.

'Is Merit in one of those?' she asked. 'She said she was trapped somewhere dark.'

The dog plunged into the sea of globes and vanished from sight.

'Wait,' Tansy said, and waded in after him.

The globes clinked and rolled around her. She was hip-deep in them. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

'Tansy!' she heard Lady Aster call. 'Where's our tea?'

Tea. She should go and make tea. And she hadn't even started the bread yet. What would they have for lunch?

'What was I doing?' she murmured as she waded into the kitchen.

Forgetting pressed down on her, thick as a wet wool blanket. It was suffocating.

But she had promised Merit.

She saw a grey hairy spike rise above the sea of globes. The little dog's tail, waving like a flag. She pushed through the globes, which seemed to grow heavier and deeper, until she reached the dog.

It nudged a globe with its nose. Tansy bent and picked it up, the glass smooth under her hands.

It looked like all the other ones.

Or did it?

When Tansy gazed into its cloudy darkness, she thought she could make out tiny specks of light. Like distant galaxies.

‘Tansy!’ she heard a voice cry. ‘Tea!’

Loyalty pulled at her, and she could smell lavender.

She’ll wait, the dry voice said. *This is more important.*

Tansy raised the glass globe high above her head, then brought it down, hard, on the edge of the kitchen bench.

The surface cracked, then shattered, fragments flying everywhere. She felt a kind of shudder from all the other glass globes, as if they were momentarily contracting.

Then they all burst, like fireworks of glass, each one popping and exploding in glittering shards and billowing dark mist that filled every corner of the room.

In that mist, Tansy could smell mud and fear.

The sharp tang of blood.

Woodsmoke and cloves.

Warm, salty breezes.

Raspberries and sticky tentacles.

Her memories came rushing back in a flood of sweetness and sorrow, and in the midst of it all was Merit, standing before her, grown up again and with a look of profound relief on her face.

‘You found me,’ Merit said, reaching for her with one hand as Bracken licked her ankle with enthusiasm.

Tansy buried her face in Merit’s shoulder. ‘I promised you I would,’ she replied, her voice muffled.

They stood there, as the steady thudding of Merit’s heart brought a kind of stillness back to Tansy’s mind.

‘I’m not leaving you again,’ Merit said. ‘Not ever.’

Tansy closed her eyes and, for a moment, allowed herself to believe it.

It isn’t your fault. I made you this way.

And she realised that *all* her memories had come back. Even the ones that she’d made herself forget.

‘Tansy?’ Merit leaned forward. ‘What’s wrong?’

The knight was gazing at her with such tenderness. She wouldn’t look like that when she found out the truth.

‘Oh, Merit,’ Tansy whispered, and an ocean of sadness threatened to engulf her.

‘What is it?’

Tansy took a deep breath. ‘I know where Anhelion is.’

She had tucked it in safely, nestled among dry sawdust with a sprig of hemlock to keep it hidden, breathing in the peppery green scent. Anhelion’s choral song had rung in her ears, its warmth on her face. Then she had taken a needle and thread and carefully drawn the soft linen fabric closed around it, securing it with neat, careful stitches. The stone would be safe there.

‘You do?’ The hope on Merit’s face would have broken Tansy’s heart.

But Tansy didn’t have a heart. Not really.

She opened her mouth to explain but couldn’t speak. Something was stuck in her throat.

She coughed and spat dry sawdust into her hand.

‘Tansy?’ She could hear the concern in Merit’s voice. ‘What’s happening?’

Tansy looked down to see her bone-handled kitchen knife, sliced right through her belly.

‘Anhelion is mine,’ King Elior said from behind her as sawdust poured from Tansy’s insides.

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31
MERIT

Purslane: A tincture made from the juice will keep shadows at bay – its power is strongest when all hope seems lost.

MERIT LEAPED FORWARD, but King Elion gestured at her with Anhelion, and Merit found herself frozen in place, totally unable to move. She could only watch in horror as Tansy collapsed like a rag doll, sawdust spewing out from burst seams.

It all made a kind of sickening sense. Tansy's unwavering loyalty to Lady Aster.

Her lack of memories from before the Oubliette.

She wasn't real.

She was a memory, just like the echoes they'd met in the glass globes.

King Elior thrust his bony hand into the sawdust and scrabbled around, just as the Sleepers had done to each of their victims. Merit glimpsed sprigs of hemlock and lavender.

Lady Aster stood in the doorway, watching silently as the dark king withdrew a gleaming gem from deep within Tansy.

There was a dreadful hunger on her face. 'Give it to me,' she snarled, and staggered forward, trying to wrest Anhelion from King Elior's grasp.

Merit had seen a lot of fights. She'd been in a few, too. But she'd never seen one quite like this. King Elior had been a terrifying dark lord in the cherry orchard. Here, he was just a little old man in a cardigan. He swung a punch at Lady Aster with his free hand, missing completely and nearly losing his balance. Lady Aster had both hands locked over Anhelion, digging her nails into Elior's wrinkled fingers. With a grunt of effort, King Elior managed to push her away, and Lady Aster went sprawling on the floor, next to the rags and sawdust that had once been Tansy.

Merit struggled against the supernatural force holding her still, but she could not move.

King Elior held the gem aloft in triumph. There was a flash of light, and a great cracking sound, as if the very earth beneath their feet were splitting open.

Everything changed.

The Oubliette melted away like candlewax, dripping and dissolving into blackness, until there was nothing left but the void, with Merit, Lady Aster and King Elior in the centre of it. Bracken remained too, pawing anxiously at what remained of Tansy.

The darkness started to turn around them, creating a giant vortex.

'What's happening?' Merit cried.

Lady Aster pulled herself laboriously into a standing position. 'He is unmaking.'

High above, Merit glimpsed objects caught in the maelstrom. The top of a tower. A statue. Trees, roots and all. There were other things, too. Vast creatures the size of mountains. Entire fleets of ships. She could smell salt and smoke and petrichor.

‘The boundaries between everything and nothing are dissolving,’ Lady Aster said, her voice terribly calm. ‘The universe will unravel.’

Merit felt as if she, too, were unravelling like clumsy embroidery, collapsing into a heap of tangled thread with no form or structure.

Tansy was dead.

She looked up and saw hot desert sands, cerulean seas, snow-tipped mountains. All draining away.

‘What can we do?’ she asked. She still couldn’t move.

Lady Aster shrugged. ‘Nothing. It’s over.’

Above them, whole worlds appeared, splitting and cracking and melting into each other in a riot of colour and texture.

The vortex became a spiral of colours and textures then, blending together as they drained down to one singular point.

To Anhelion, held high by King Elior, as the whole world was sucked into it.

Cities. Mountains.

Oceans and rivers.

Whole galaxies of stars.

Anhelion seemed to grow bigger, glowing with intensity as it consumed everything. Light flickered over its surface. It seemed … unstable.

King Elior’s eyes bulged, and veins stood out in his wrinkled neck.

The creation stone was definitely growing, churning with molten fire. Merit watched, still frozen in place.

Lady Aster rushed at King Elior, moving with surprising speed for such an old woman. King Elior stumbled backwards, and Lady Aster let out a croaking howl of triumph as she wrested Anhelion from his grasp.

Her eyes flashed from watery and aged to entirely black. Merit saw the power of Anhelion surge through her. She straightened up, a look of savage joy on her face, and her teeth bared in a snarl.

From the corner of her eye, Merit saw a blur of white, a feathered comet heading directly for Lady Aster.

It was the goose.

Neck arched, head held low, wings beating wildly. Hissing and honking at her in blazing fury.

It barrelled straight into the old woman, knocking her to the ground. Anhelion went flying from her fingers, no longer a stone but now seething,

boiling gold, expanding so rapidly that it engulfed Lady Aster, King Elior and the goose in the blink of an eye.

The spell holding Merit frozen dissolved, and she could move again.

There was nowhere to go. The last bit of the world had been sucked into the bright, blinding thing that was Anhelion. All that was left was Merit, Bracken and a pile of sawdust.

Merit felt tears sliding down her face as she sank down next to Tansy.

Lady Aster had made Tansy, the same way she'd made the Oubliette and all the glass globes. She had never been a real person, just loyalty in the shape of a girl. Lady Aster had made her, and then Tansy had hidden Anhelion inside herself, to keep it safe.

Bracken pawed at Merit's leg, staring up at her with so much trust in his eyes it made Merit want to cry.

'It's over,' Merit told the little dog. 'There's nothing I can do.'

Wrong, a dry voice said. *You can still save her.*

It was the cat, barely visible in the velvety darkness of the void. It sauntered through the nothingness with its tail in the air, seemingly unconcerned that they were about to be sucked into a churning sun, then sat down to wash itself.

'How can I save her, if she was never real?' Merit asked.

The cat paused, one leg stuck up in the air.

Humans are so preoccupied with things being real or not real, the dry voice said disparagingly. *Who cares if she was real or not?*

Merit thought back to the sea in Uyst. Swimming with Tansy, cool skin sliding on cool skin.

None of it had been real.

But it was the happiest Merit had ever felt.

'How do I save her?' Merit asked.

Give her up.

The cat got to its feet once more, padding over to the blazing, boiling fire of Anhelion. It looked over its shoulder at Merit, its eyes flat gold. Then it strolled casually right into the heart of the brightness, until all Merit could see was its tail, curved like a question mark.

'I don't understand,' Merit shouted after it.

The cat's tail vanished. Merit looked down at the pile of sawdust and rags. Carefully, she gathered it in her arms, breathing in the scent of sawdust, hemlock and lavender.

She cried, her tears spattering Tansy's painted face with dark spots.

'I think maybe *I* wasn't real before I met you,' Merit whispered to Tansy. 'Before I met you, I thought I was a monster. I didn't really know anything about anything. I didn't know about raspberries, or quarrelling, or chickens. I didn't know how good it feels to stand in the sunshine.'

She bit her lip. She wasn't made for speeches.

'You were real to me,' she said. 'You were everything to me.'

She stood up, Tansy still in her arms. Sawdust poured onto Merit's boots as the rag doll's head flopped and dangled.

Everything seemed to be moving slowly. Merit felt sluggish, as though she were moving through warm honey. The heat of Anhelion pulled at Tansy.

It wanted her.

The tears kept falling, and Merit tasted salt. 'I want her too,' she protested.

The pull intensified, and Bracken let out a sharp bark.

Give her up.

It was the only choice left to Merit. Keep her, or let her go?

She clutched Tansy to her, but the rag doll gave no comfort. There was no spell that could mend her seams.

'Okay,' Merit said at last. 'Take her.'

And she let go.

The sawdust and rags turned weightless as they floated up out of Merit's arms and were absorbed into the glittering, boiling surface of Anhelion.

There was a flash of light, so bright that Merit was momentarily blinded. She dimly saw a grey blur as Bracken leaped after Tansy.

Then Anhelion was gone, and Merit was utterly alone in the darkness of the void.

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32
TANSY

Rowan: A rowan twig wand will summon a guide through fairy realms.

SHE WAS IN a kind of labyrinth made of golden crystal, every surface smooth and hard. Sometimes the facets revealed little glimpses of other places – a tree here, a rocky outcrop there. But mostly it was just crystal, as far as the eye could see.

She looked down and noticed the cat was padding alongside her. Bracken was there too, tail up, his scruffy head held high.

'Where am I?' Tansy asked aloud.

'Inside Anhelion,' the cat replied.

Tansy blinked. ‘You can talk.’

‘Not usually.’ The cat glanced over its shoulder, back the way they had come. ‘The rules are different in here.’

Tansy looked at Bracken. ‘Can you talk too?’

The little dog wagged his tail.

‘Of course he can’t,’ the cat said witheringly. ‘He’s a dog.’

‘You said the rules were different in here.’

‘Not for dogs.’

They continued on in silence while Tansy processed this.

‘What happened?’

‘King Elior found Anhelion.’

Tansy remembered the bone-handled knife and glanced down at herself, but there was no ragged gash leaking sawdust. Her nightgown was snowy white once more.

‘It was inside me all along,’ Tansy said.

‘Yes.’

‘I stitched it in there, to hide it from Lady Aster.’

‘Yes.’

Tansy looked down at her hands, her bare feet. She didn’t *look* like a rag doll.

‘Was I ever real?’ she asked.

‘There was a real housemaid once,’ the cat said. ‘And at first you were a memory of her, made by Lady Aster and kept inside the Oubliette to make tea and keep things neat. You were like all the others, just a doll stuffed with sawdust – and lavender, to keep you loyal. When Lady Aster’s choices were putting her in danger, you decided the best way to keep her safe was to trap her inside the Oubliette. You drugged her. Made her sleep until she forgot. And you took Anhelion from her. Hid it inside your own body. It made you … more. Like the house.’

Tansy nodded, although she wasn’t quite sure she understood.

‘It’s you I’ve been hearing this whole time, isn’t it?’ she asked. ‘In my head.’

‘It’s a bit more complicated than that,’ the cat told her.

‘Who *are* you?’

‘A cat.’

‘A magic cat?’

‘Just a cat.’

Tansy didn’t believe this for a second. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘You made me.’

Tansy stopped walking for a moment. ‘I did?’

‘You made *him* first.’ The cat flicked an ear in the direction of Bracken. ‘Because you were lonely. But he got lost, because he’s a dog, and dogs are … well, you know. Dogs.’

Bracken made an indignant noise.

‘He found Merit,’ Tansy said thoughtfully. ‘Because he knew I needed a knight to rescue me.’

Bracken licked her ankle, and the cat looked disgruntled. ‘I concede that in this *one* circumstance, the dog did something that was not *totally* wrongheaded.’

‘So I made you next,’ Tansy said with a little smile.

‘Yes. Then the goose.’

Tansy blinked. ‘The *goose*? I made a goose because I was lonely?’

The cat’s dry voice took on a tinge of amusement. ‘Not exactly. You made the goose so it could hate Lady Aster for you.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The spell of loyalty she put inside you didn’t let you feel resentment, or anger. So you made the goose to feel it for you.’

A bubble of slightly hysterical laughter rose in Tansy as she remembered the way the goose had chased Lady Aster across the garden every day, hissing and flapping its wings.

‘I made the food, didn’t I?’ she asked. ‘Merit asked where it came from. I thought it was the house. And I made the seagulls and the insects when she pointed out there weren’t any. Even the coins in Uyst. I made all of it.’

‘You made the house, too,’ the cat said.

‘Lady Aster made the house!’

The cat sighed. ‘You’re not listening. Lady Aster used Anhelion to make the house. You *are* Anhelion. You made *everything*.’

‘But now it’s all gone?’

‘The ragged king unmade the world,’ the cat said. ‘Anhelion is all that’s left.’

Tansy shivered. ‘Where are we going?’ she asked.

‘To the end.’

‘When will we get there?’

‘Now,’ the cat replied, stopping.

Before them, Anhelion rested on a plinth made of crystal. Fist-sized, glinting with gold.

‘I thought we were inside Anhelion,’ Tansy said.

‘We are.’

‘Then what is this?’

‘Also Anhelion.’

Tansy narrowed her eyes at the cat. ‘You’re not being very helpful.’

The cat didn’t seem to be at all bothered by this. ‘Think of Anhelion as the ultimate glass globe,’ it said.

‘And nothing else exists,’ Tansy said. ‘It’s really all gone?’

‘In a sense,’ the cat said. ‘It’s more like … if the world was your herb garden, it’s reverted to being just dry seeds in a twist of paper.’

Tansy picked up the stone, surprised at how light it felt in her hand.

‘I wish I could bring it all back,’ she murmured.

‘So why don’t you?’

She frowned down at the creature, who gazed back with its lamplike yellow eyes.

‘How?’

‘That’s up to you.’

‘It’s too hard,’ she said, turning the stone over in her hand. ‘I can’t break open a diamond.’

‘It doesn’t have to be a diamond. It could be an egg, or a jug of milk, or a plump mouse.’ The cat licked its lips.

Tansy swallowed, staring at Anhelion.

The most obvious choice was a glass globe. But she’d had enough of glass globes, and in any case, she was barefoot and didn’t want to risk stepping on broken glass.

‘It could be a seed,’ she murmured to herself. ‘I know how to make a seed grow. But seeds take so long …’

Then she remembered her sewing box, and the many evenings she’d spent embroidering leaves and flowers on scraps of cloth. How long it took to stitch a design, and how quickly it could unravel. How if you pulled the thread too tightly, everything would tangle.

Tansy looked back at the stone in her palm.

Except it wasn’t a stone anymore. It was a spool of thread, black as the void.

‘Nice,’ the cat remarked.

‘Will everything go back to how it was?’

‘If that’s what you want.’

She thought of the wailing baby in Scata Delve. The bleak wasteland of Halsgarth. ‘I can’t change the past,’ she murmured.

‘Sure you can,’ the cat replied. ‘A creation stone cares not for the linear concept of time.’

‘But then everything that came after would be different,’ Tansy said. ‘If Lady Aster never became the Unmaker, then the Carrion Knights wouldn’t exist – Merit wouldn’t exist. It would be like I was unmaking *them*.’

‘Indeed.’

‘This is hard!’ she protested.

‘If creation were easy, then everyone would do it.’

Tansy thought about the loneliness she’d felt in the Oubliette. The longing for freedom. The tangled lavender threads of loyalty. She looked down at the spool in her hand and felt the power contained within.

That power was hers now. She could use it to remake the world.

A better world.

‘I could make a world where everyone is happy,’ she said. ‘A world where no one can lie, or steal, or hurt anyone else.’

The cat shrugged, as best a cat can. ‘You can’t control people,’ it said. ‘There will always be greed and jealousy and spite.’

‘What if I make it so people *can’t* feel those things? What if I make a world where there’s only love?’

‘What is love?’ the cat asked.

Tansy thought about this. ‘It’s wanting to be with someone,’ she said at last. ‘It’s wanting them to be happy. Wanting to look after them.’

‘Did you love Lady Aster?’

‘No.’ The word slipped out before she could stop it.

‘Are you sure? You wanted to be with her. You looked after her.’

‘But she made me like that. I didn’t have a choice.’

‘Did you choose to fall in love with Merit?’

Tansy thought about the moment she’d first seen the knight, helpless and injured in the pigsty. ‘I suppose not. But … it wasn’t forced on me. It … it grew, like a seed grows into a flower.’

She thought, suddenly, of the pretty blue toadweed in the meadow. About how she’d tried to grow it in her garden, but it had never survived.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I think I understand.’

The toadweed needed the chaos of the wildflower meadow in order to thrive. The other plants, the unpredictable weather, the uncultivated soil.

‘I can’t force people to be good,’ she said. ‘Any more than I could force the toadweed to grow on its own. If I try, then I’m just as bad as Lady Aster.’

‘There you go,’ the cat said approvingly.

‘People have to choose,’ Tansy said.

‘It’s the only way,’ the cat agreed.

‘So I can’t end all suffering.’

‘You could re-create the world without people. Then there would be no suffering.’

‘I’m not going to do that.’

‘Suit yourself.’ The cat seemed to have lost interest, sticking a back leg into the air and beginning to wash itself.

Tansy took a deep breath, pinching the end of the black thread between finger and thumb.

Then she breathed out.

And pulled.

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33
TANSY

Fir: Burn the resin to clean a space of malicious magic.

EVERYTHING – *EVERYTHING* – BURST forth from the spool of thread like a chorus of voices, building in perfect harmony a shimmering, glorious tapestry of sound.

It was a song of joy and sorrow, of oceans and forests and sprawling cities.

Great ships and soaring towers that seemed to defy gravity.

Glittering cerulean oceans and ornate black marble ballrooms.

Cups of tea and picnic blankets and raspberries and chickens.

People.

Kings and maids and knights and children.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ Tansy murmured. ‘But is there a place for me?’

‘It’s all for you,’ the cat replied through a mouthful of fur.

‘But do I have to stay here?’

‘Of course not. You can go wherever you want. Be whoever you want.’ The cat put down its leg and looked at her curiously. ‘Do you want to be overlord of everything?’

Tansy shook her head. ‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘I just want to be a real girl.’

The cat smoothed its whiskers. ‘Then you’re a real girl.’

Tansy blinked, and she was back in the meadow of wildflowers. Dusk was falling, and the ocean beyond the white cliffs was dark and unknowable. Lights glowed in the windows of the Oubliette. The sky was all deep purples, with a few stars appearing overhead.

Bracken chased a firefly through nodding flowers, but the cat just sat on the low stone wall and watched the night creep in.

Tansy looked down at Anhelion in her palm. It was a gem once more, glinting in the dim light.

‘I’d better put it somewhere safe,’ she murmured. ‘Somewhere nobody can get to it.’

She reached up over her head, as high as she could, trying not to think too hard about logic and reason and how far away the stars really were. Here, in the Oubliette, the stars could be wherever she wanted them to be. She carefully placed the stone in the velvet night sky. It winked at her, gold and glittering, indistinguishable from all the other stars.

‘Very good,’ the cat said, and it jumped down from the stone wall, following her back into the Oubliette. The front door’s hinges groaned cheerfully in greeting, and the house settled around Tansy like a familiar blanket.

Lord Elior and Lady Aster were still bickering over their game of chess.

‘Why do you always win?’ Lady Aster asked. ‘I want a turn.’

‘You don’t get to win, because you’re the villain, and good always triumphs over evil.’

‘You were evil too, remember?’

Lord Elior frowned. ‘I thought I was a king …’

Lady Aster sighed. ‘Just hurry up and make your move. I’ll die of old age before I get to have my turn.’

‘Well, at least I’m not cheating,’ Lord Elior retorted.

Tansy closed the front door behind her.

‘Is that you, Tansy?’ Lady Aster’s cracked voice called down the hallway. ‘We’re still waiting for our tea.’

‘Get it yourself,’ Tansy told her merrily, then laughed out loud. ‘That felt good,’ she confided in the cat.

‘I’ll bet,’ the cat replied.

‘What should I do with those two?’ she asked, nodding towards the sitting room.

‘Leave them here,’ the cat said. ‘I’ll keep an eye on them.’

Tansy nodded, then looked at Bracken. ‘What about you?’ she asked. ‘Do you want to stay?’

The little dog wagged his tail and let out a short, sharp bark.

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34
MERIT

Raspberry: Chew the seeds for luck.

SHE WASN'T COLD anymore, which probably meant she was dead.

There was no glory after death for Carrion Knights. If you died, it meant you'd failed the Unmaker. Death was shame.

But Merit felt no shame. Sadness, yes. Relief, a little.

There was a sweet scent in the air.

And what felt like a root digging into the small of her back.

She opened her eyes to see a canopy of soft pink petals.

Not dead, then.

She was in the cherry orchard, and somehow the trees were blooming again.

She lifted herself onto an elbow and looked around.

The blood and mud and frost were all gone, but the knights remained.

Carrion Knights and members of the Bright Guard sat on opposite sides of the grove, eyeing each other uneasily. Nobody seemed very interested in fighting. Helmets were off and swords were sheathed.

Merit looked down at herself and saw that she was wearing the daisy-embroidered shirt that Tansy had given her.

That didn't make sense.

And shouldn't she have a wound? She put a tentative hand to her shoulder.

Perhaps she *was* dead, after all.

Where was Tansy?

She looked around, but Tansy was nowhere to be seen. Merit remembered the bone-handled knife and the sudden cascade of sawdust.

The limp rag doll in her arms.

Oh.

The grief was deeper and more painful than any physical wound.

But whatever she had done in the void had worked.

Valla was back. The world was back, and there was no sign of King Elior or Lady Aster.

Merit had no doubt that it was Tansy who had made it happen.

She truly *was* the Maid. The stuff of legends.

And now she was gone.

A grey blur shot towards her, bursting seemingly from nowhere in a fury of wriggling and licking.

'Bracken?' Merit stared, uncomprehending, at the little dog, who had hurled himself into her lap and was desperately trying to insert his tongue into her ear.

'He's happy to see you.'

Merit's eyes closed when she heard the voice. She wanted to savour it, in case she had misheard. In case it wasn't really her.

But it was.

She was wearing a green dress that Merit had never seen before. There were flowers woven into her red hair, and her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright.

'Are you really here?' Merit asked.

Tansy nodded, holding out her hands. Merit took them, and they felt solid and real and warm.

'What happened?' she asked as Tansy pulled her to her feet.

'Nothing,' Tansy replied. 'And everything.'

'I don't know what that means.'

'I fixed it. That's all.'

Merit swallowed. Tansy was different somehow. More real. More *present*. Whatever had happened in the heart of Anhelion, it had changed her.

Was she still the same Tansy? Was she still *her* Tansy?

'Stop looking at me like that,' Tansy said.

'Like what?'

'Like I'm …' She blushed. 'Some kind of deity.'

Merit bit her lip. 'Are you?'

Tansy smiled softly and shook her head. 'I'm just an ordinary girl,' she said. 'Finally.'

She and Merit stood in the centre of the cherry grove and the Carrion Knights and Bright Guard gathered around them in a circle.

'The danger has passed,' Tansy told them in a clear voice. 'We are safe.'

'What happened to the Unmaker?' Sir Keen asked.

'She's gone,' Tansy told him. 'She will never return.'

Merit *felt* the wave of relief pass through the black-clad knights. Whatever they had been before, there was no going back.

A figure emerged from the Bright Guard. Lord Brinian, his cape torn and his cheek smeared with blood. His expression was sombre.

'May I?' he asked Tansy, making a gesture that indicated he'd like to speak.

Tansy nodded and stepped aside.

Lord Brinian cleared his throat and addressed both groups of knights. 'For many hundreds of years, the Carrion Knights have been secretly working for the High Council of Stars,' he said. 'Creating an environment of fear, to make the citizens of Valla stay loyal and obedient.'

A ripple of surprise passed through the Bright Guard and the Carrion Knights, followed by bristling anger. They had all been lied to. Merit saw councillors exchange shocked glances.

'It was a scheme that I inherited,' Lord Brinian continued. 'But I was a willing participant. I … I am ashamed of using the Carrion Knights. Ashamed of the suffering that I caused the people of Valla. I will step down

immediately as High Councillor and submit myself to whatever justice you deem fit.’

He knelt on the carpet of cherry blossoms and bowed his head.

The orchard filled with the sound of voices as knights and councillors all started to talk at once.

‘This could go very badly,’ Merit murmured to Tansy.

She nodded. ‘It could,’ she replied. ‘Or they might surprise us.’

‘The Maid should lead us,’ a voice called out.

Tansy let out an unladylike snort. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Yes!’ called out another. ‘The Maid saved us!’

‘Long live the Maid!’

‘Queen Tansy!’

‘Wait!’ Tansy held up her hand and silence fell. ‘I can’t lead Valla. I don’t know the first thing about leading.’

‘But you defeated the Unmaker,’ someone said.

‘Twice,’ another voice agreed.

Tansy screwed up her nose. ‘The first time wasn’t what you think it was,’ she admitted. ‘And she never would have come back the second time if it hadn’t been for me. I brought her back.’

The assembled knights didn’t seem to care about this at all. Tansy shot Merit a panicked look.

‘Help!’ she hissed from between clenched teeth. ‘I don’t want to be a queen!’

‘Are you sure?’ Merit asked. ‘You’d look great in a crown.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘Big gold cloak. They could carry you around everywhere on a litter.’

‘Shut up and help me!’

Merit performed a florid bow. ‘Yes, my queen.’

Tansy punched her in the arm and Merit cackled, then cleared her throat.

‘Lord Hoy,’ she said, raising her voice to be heard over the chatter.

The High Councillor of Laws stepped forward, his sharp chin held high.

‘Did you know about the secret arrangement between Lord Brinian and the Carrion Knights?’

Lord Hoy glared down at Lord Brinian, whose head was still bowed. ‘I did not.’

‘What about you, Lady Fara?’

The High Councillor of Coin rubbed a hand over her short dark hair and shook her head. ‘I swear I did not.’

Merit nodded. ‘A new High Council will be chosen, under the guidance of Lord Hoy and Lady Fara, in consultation with the other councillors and the citizens of Valla.’

‘And why should we listen to you? You’re a Carrion Knight!’

‘Merit speaks for me,’ Tansy declared. ‘And she’s right. A new council is the best way forward.’

‘What about *them*, though?’ a councillor asked, glancing at the Carrion Knights.

Tansy considered this. ‘The Carrion Knights are citizens of Valla, just as much as anyone else is,’ she said. ‘They deserve to be able to live in peace too.’

‘They stole our children!’ a member of the Bright Guard said. ‘Raided our villages. Surely they must face justice.’

‘We *are* those stolen children,’ Sir Keen replied. ‘They were our villages too.’

Merit saw this sink in.

‘So … what do we do?’ the Vallan knight asked, turning to Merit.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered honestly. ‘We can’t change the past, but we can learn from it. I think we … tell the truth. And we *all* try to make things right.’

Lady Fara spoke up. ‘The Carrion Knights are welcome to join the Bright Guard and become knights of Valla.’

The Carrion Knights exchanged uneasy glances. ‘You say we’ll be welcome,’ Sir Keen said. ‘But how can we know that’s true?’

Another nodded. ‘I never wanted to be a knight,’ he said. ‘I just want to live in peace.’

There were murmurs of agreement.

Sir Brinian raised a hand. ‘The Carrion Knights kept meticulous records of their raids,’ he said. ‘I … I would like to help each of you find your people. It would be an honour to do so.’

‘Or you could go to Scata Delve,’ Merit told them. ‘It’s where some of the first Carrion Knights came from. You could build something new.’

‘You get to choose,’ Tansy said with a gentle smile.

‘And we will help, where we can,’ Lord Hoy declared.

Merit saw the fear in the eyes of her brothers and sisters.

She remembered her first picnic with Tansy and how overwhelming it had felt to be asked what she wanted.

How overwhelming it had been to have *choices*.

‘You don’t have to decide straightaway,’ Merit assured them.

She had grown up believing she was different from the other knights. That her longing for companionship and affection made her weak. Defective.

But now she saw that longing in the eyes of every one of them. A murmur passed through the knights, and shoulders straightened. Chins lifted as they turned to Sir Keen.

‘What are we going to do, sir?’ one young knight asked him.

They were still following orders. It was Sir Keen who had killed Valiant, so now they were automatically looking to him for leadership. Merit’s heart sank. Could they ever really heal from this?

Tansy’s hand crept into hers. ‘Change takes time,’ she murmured, and drew her away from the crowd to a quiet part of the cherry tree grove. Bracken trotted after them.

‘You could go with them,’ Tansy said softly. She didn’t let go of Merit’s hand. ‘Help them start their lives again. They’re your family.’

‘Lady Aster was *your* family,’ Merit replied. ‘Doesn’t mean you should spend eternity with her.’

‘That’s different.’

Merit took Tansy’s other hand and hoped she wouldn’t notice that Merit was trembling. ‘I used to think I was a monster,’ she said. ‘That there was something inherently evil about me. And I longed to be good. To be a hero. But now … I don’t think there’s any such thing as good and evil. All we have are the choices we make, and we make them anew every single day.’

Tansy nodded. ‘You made good choices, Merit,’ she whispered.

Merit’s heart was thundering. She didn’t think she would be so nervous.

‘I want to choose you,’ she said. ‘Not because of duty. Not because of some magical compulsion. It’s *my* choice, and I make it freely. And I’ll keep making it every day. I make you no promises of forever, because I don’t want you to make those promises to me. We’ve both been forced to make promises we didn’t wish to keep. Instead, we get to make a choice. And I choose you. Right now. Today. I’m pretty sure I’m going to choose you tomorrow too. And the next day. I’m probably going to go on choosing you for all my days. But I will make that choice fresh, each day, so you’ll know I

really mean it. *I choose you.* Wherever you want to be. If you want to rule the world, then I'll stay with you.'

'I don't want that,' Tansy blurted out. 'To rule the world, I mean,' she added hastily. 'I want the part where you choose me. Just to be clear.'

Merit grinned, and Tansy grinned back.

'I choose you too,' Tansy whispered, and Merit hadn't realised it was possible to be this happy.

'So …' She raised her eyebrows. 'If you don't want to stay here, what do you want?'

Tansy's eyes sparkled. 'I want *everything*,' she said. 'I'm real now, Merit. Finally free of lavender and loyalty. I want to see *everything*. Experience *everything*. I want you to be there. I want mountains and grand cities and ballrooms and seasides. And when we've seen it all, I want to find somewhere quiet. I want to bake bread and make tea, just because *I want to*. I want picnics and quarrels and raspberries.'

'And chickens,' Merit added.

Tansy chuckled. 'And chickens.'

'What do you think Uyst is like now?' Merit asked.

'Let's find out.'

Merit thought her heart might burst.

At their feet, Bracken did his little dance of anticipation, shuffling from one paw to the other.

Tansy's fingers tightened on Merit's. 'But first, I want to show you something,' she said.

She bent to lay a finger on cherry blossoms at her feet and traced the shape of a door in the air, leaving behind a glowing edge. She reached out and grabbed a handle that hadn't been there before.

'Just an ordinary girl?' Merit said, raising her eyebrows.

Tansy laughed, and it sounded like the shimmering song of Anhelion. '*Mostly* an ordinary girl.'

'Is it safe?' Merit asked.

'There are no more Sleepers,' Tansy replied. 'And, well …'

She opened the door.

Instead of dark paths beyond, Merit saw a simple passage, whitewashed and neat, with doors leading off it. It seemed to go on forever, door after door after door.

‘I thought this would make it easier,’ Tansy explained. ‘Instead of all that spooky darkness.’ She led Merit through the glowing doorway and along the passage. It was still the dark paths, the strange insubstantial nothing beneath her feet as before. But it was different now. The icy dread was gone.

Tansy stopped and opened a door.

Merit’s breath caught in her throat as she looked out onto an ocean vista, studded with islands.

‘No,’ she murmured, leaning forward. ‘Not an ocean at all.’

The islands were floating in the air, suspended in the vibrant blue of the sky, wisps of cloud clinging to them. They were mountainous and deeply forested with trees as tall as towers, their roots penetrating down through the rocky structure of the island and trailing into the air. Waterfalls spilled over the sides of the islands and dissolved into rainbow-tinted mist.

Merit spotted great, white-sailed ships soaring across the sky, propelled by wooden blades that turned to catch the air.

‘Cloud castles,’ she said softly. ‘What do you think?’

Merit turned to face Tansy and took in her shining eyes. Her flushed cheeks. Her lips, slightly parted.

‘Beautiful,’ she murmured, and kissed her.

Tansy’s hands slid along her jaw and wound into her hair. Merit wrapped her arms around the other girl, and the kiss deepened, sweet and joyful as seaside sunsets and fresh raspberries.

Tansy was real, and they had chosen each other, and there was so much world to explore.

Behind them in the cherry grove, Merit heard the Bright Guard and councillors break into applause.

Tansy giggled, and as they pulled away from each other, she darted forward for one more swift kiss, a promise of more to come.

‘Shall we?’ she asked.

Merit grinned. ‘Let’s go.’

Bracken barked and joyfully bounded through the doorway.

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Acknowledgements

(STAY TO THE END FOR A SECRET POST-CREDITS TREAT.)

I am very, very bad at coming up with book titles.

So when I sat down to plan a new young adult fantasy, I decided to *start* with the title, in the hope that it would make things easier. The title I chose was

OUBLIETTE

Which I thought was mysterious, pretty, and most importantly paid homage to my favourite movie of all time, Jim Henson's *Labyrinth.*

The story unspooled from the title – the little cottage by the sea, caught in a bubble between space and time. Tansy, and Lady Aster. And then Merit, a dark knight who didn't want to be evil anymore.

The eagle-eyed reader will notice that this book is no longer called *Oubliette*, and many other things have also changed since that first rush of ideas. But the bones of it remain the same.

I cannot write a story alone – I need trusted advisors who can bounce an idea back and forth with me, editors and critique partners to dive deep, and many other friends and colleagues to help to bring a book to life.

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Are you still here? Thank *you* for sticking around. As promised …

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BRACKEN WOKE HER UP, claws clicking on the wooden floor as he snuffled around the edge of the bed.

‘Is it morning already?’ she asked him, sitting up and yawning.

Early morning light spilled in through the windows, drenching the room with a rosy glow. Tansy pulled on her linen shift and petticoat as Bracken thumped his tail on the rug. A green dress came next, the hem embroidered with a winding trail of raspberries. Then her sturdy brown boots.

Bracken got to his feet and did his little dance of anticipation.

Outside, the rooster crowed.

Bracken danced out the door and led Tansy to the kitchen, where the fire was already lit, the room bright and cosy. A fresh bucket of water sat by the door. Tansy filled the kettle and put it on for tea. She took the crock of milk from the larder and splashed a little into a dish for Bracken, who lapped it up eagerly.

‘You’re making a mess,’ she told him.

Opening the back door, she saw neat rows of herbs and vegetables – carrots, peas, parsley, marjoram. A rambling rose wandered over the warm stone of the cottage. Raspberry canes, supported by a sturdy trellis. In the distance, she could see a sparkling strip of sea.

Merit was in the chicken run, watching over her flock with rapt attention.

‘Buttercup has gone broody,’ she told Tansy proudly. ‘We’ll have chicks before long.’

‘Congratulations,’ Tansy said with a smile, and wriggled under the curve of Merit’s arm, turning her face up to be kissed.

Merit obliged, winding a hand into Tansy’s russet hair. Liquid honey spread through Tansy, and she sank into the kiss, feeling Merit’s warmth, her strength, her softness.

‘Good morning,’ Merit murmured at last.

‘And to you,’ Tansy replied.

Merit gazed up at the pink and gold sky. ‘It’s going to be a hot one,’ she observed.

Tansy nodded. ‘Beach this afternoon?’

Merit leant her head against Tansy’s. ‘Sounds perfect.’

Bracken barked in agreement.

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About the Author

Lili Wilkinson is the award-winning author of more than twenty novels for children and teenagers, including *A Hunger of Thorns*, *Deep Is the Fen*, *Unhallowed Halls* and the Bravepaw series. She established the Inky Awards at the Centre for Youth Literature, State Library of Victoria. Lili has a PhD in Creative Writing, and lives in Melbourne with her partner, child, a dog very much like Bracken, and some chickens but no goose yet.

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