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There are currently thought to be eight white dwarf stars among the hundred star systems nearest the Sun. With no source of energy, these bodies have no hope of supporting themselves against eventual, gravitational collapse. Once devastatingly hot-blooded, the stars redden, crystallizing from the inside out, going colder, and colder, until they are as one with the temperature of the universe. The process is not unlike the course of a slow, terminal disease.

In recent, albeit post-apocalyptic times, it has been reconsidered the immediacy of these doomed stars' complete bodily death, The black dwarf's elusive and desirous corpse has yet to be discovered, as the current, known universe is still too young to have quantifiably witnessed the complete collapse of such a persistent astral body. While devoid of its own ability to heat itself beyond the slow exhaustion of its internal storage capacity, white dwarves are capable of sapping material energy from a companion. He can't even feel it



The Key

"I can't even feel it anymore."

Autumn had flaked and Betty needed a new coat like she needed a hole in the head. The lining in the pockets of this thrift was so torn it swallowed keys, chapstick and lighters like a black hole or a tax collector or something of this poetic redundancy. The snarled threads now caught up in the wheel of her lighter is another little punishment for having so far staved off its attempts to drag her fingers-first into its depths; her bones crunching as they are sucked with careless brutality through a mouth the size of a camera lens. It didn't help that they'd narrowly missed the bus home, and it didn't help that the season had crept up while Betty's head was in the clouds, despite the second scarf there to choke her when it came back down. Her thoughts, a recounting of a passage on star death, falter in the wake of that little comment of his.

Reaching around herself, behind her left shoulder, she cupped his forehead with a hand. She had only followed the sound of his voice and it was a dead shot.

"You feel sick?" His smile cut a cold little gash at the nape of her neck.

"Not at all. *Interesting*, isn't it?"

"You thought about going to a doctor?" It's a silly question, Betty had to turn around, scan his face to know just exactly how silly, but when she did, Simon was already halfway down the block, turning back, just putting out a cigarette, trashing it. Meeting her gaze all blank like he didn't hear her, mouth already full with its successor. Shaking his head fast, jerkily as he stuffed his hands back in his pockets and started back, floaty. She'd given up on the lighter now, finding her key, seizing that instead, playing at trying to press warmth into the freezing metal.

"You think a doctor would know half as much about this as I do? I-I mean, at this point. This stage of the game." Betty could have predicted that. She did predict it. Everything that was about to happen lay behind her somehow, tugging at her sleeves, the hands of children, speaking in languages she's never learned. They were waiting for the last bus home, at the abandoned glass shop-stop with the four four-step stairways leading to reddish, busted doors that flank their cosmic drama, their perpetual engagement on death row. The brick running on either side into the dark is cut with a billion white veins converging a billion times over in the rusty sky-map, shaky, mottled, yet so perfectly equilaterally traceable.

"Hey," He was at her shoulder, now, a second hand inside her distended pocket. The moon was low and exposing its underbelly to the black sky, Betty could just hardly see it between the high-rises, the prick of the space needle. Simon likes to pretend he doesn't know what she does, where her mind goes. "You're smart to be so concerned - you're probably a lot smarter than I am, at that."

"I could have told you that." Simon was pressing his cold little fingers up her wrist then, so his thumb pushed into her palm and her glove started to slide off. They don't feel all that different out here. It was indoors that she sometimes thought with her hand held two inches from his shoulder she could feel his blue aura below her like an open freezer. But Betty was probably making it up. Why must something be wrong, something to fixate on, some catch? Maybe these were ill omens, allegorical tests of her will - she wasn't acing it, that was for sure.

"Betty, think about it." A fluttery thing about his voice at her neck. "Why do you think I started taping? Look, even if you don't want anything to do with it anymore, I'll make sure this time, your name comes first. Anything. It's a matter of...manifestation. Dictating our reality. Our future. Don't feel so hopeless."

As if she cared so much about the order of credits - but the rest was true. Iceland was a premature honeymoon, a glitch in time, something secret only the two of them and a sea-beaten fisher knew, with his black carpetbag of fog she signed herself away for, her little name in his mouth. She had begun to refer to it, half-jokingly, as Petrikov Effect - he was blessed with one of those sharp and clearly foreign names so aesthetically provocative in all

their pretentious Seattle haunts - it made Betty look good by proxy, she felt, even if the depth of their relationship did not *jive* with their academic interests. What was that effect again? She'd had the preliminaries all written out but didn't have a clue how to test it. No control, no variable. Fuck, she can't remember it. But she doesn't remember much of anything lately. Anesthetic, it was anesthetic. She lets him light her a cigarette off of his, offering it out to her as if it is a diamond. Even if she knows it will work its way all up into her head and start dragging brain matter out.

Alright now, where were we? The anesthesia. He always did have this sway over her. Simon always made things better. Nevermind. *Apathetic*. But she had never felt so weak, for everything she loved before to fall away, a big, blue artifice frozen in her ribs, everything else aching, everything else under the effect. A billion scarves, a billion books, a billion fingers encrusting the cold, waning core of a white star. A human in the image of their god, who, of course, must come in the image of their maker. *Copacetic*. If she is the princess, he is the king, somewhere her pride clings to life and demands blood for its spurned title-weight. Heavy on her tongue is the admittance dizzying even to admit in the confine of her own mind, *he made you, he made you for this, you're his torture device, his iron maiden!*

"That being said," His return frightens her in a very, very, very small way, deep inside her brain. "We can't stay here forever. In the castle. I think you know that." He's already said this, a million times over, and Betty still doesn't know what Simon's talking about, at least, not yet. She runs a finger down the teeth of her key.



All this set aside, she's got the key. Betty was given the key the day she woke up. Almost as long as her palm, the grip all rococo, the teeth notched like a maze, it teeters forever over the ledge of her ribs. It's *allegedly* the key to the entire kingdom, master to every room in the castle, every closet above sea level. Below, the icy roots of Simon's labyrinth stretch down, way down, and you can get lost, or fall into a ravine; these wounds haven't been filled in because you could always rely on the earthquakes simply undoing the repairs.

The castle sits nestled between badlands and more badlands, the ones to the east infested with vampires, the ones to the west perpetually and sickeningly drenched in that sort of oleo-saccharum no one seemed to know the source of. To the south is nothing, the two regions slowly encroaching on one another until they meet in the middle, and to the north is more tundra, an embryonic peninsula desperately extending itself as far into the sea as it can without falling in. You can run laps around the highest turrets and never see another shadow travel past the kingdom gates. You can stare into the sea from dawn til dusk, and never see a ship. You can beat him into the snow, screeching with laughter and half-undressed - love-drunk, that seemingly endless supply of dark, ichorous wine inexplicably powerless, and expect no contest. Everything inside you is in such perfect harmony you are hardly touching the floor. Music is always playing. The air is always incensed. No one -

Hell is other people, or whatever, hell is any time they are not in step with one another. Hell was leaving him for the first time after they had returned with the Enchiridion - it was probably why Betty had tried to run off to the warmer weathers of Australia. Here it is, her fantasy treehouse embraced by the unknown. You couldn't be happier when it was only the two of you and your hallucinatory kingdom. Destiny princess. Endless rapture. Anemic attendant "scouts" dressed in suites, the Disneyish, cutesy woodland animals, all tongueless, all content with her.

Except, Betty really sucks. Betty really loves screwing things up. Horrible, ungrateful girl as she is, with her beautiful half-husband and her satanic violins and the key around her neck, she still can't keep from lighting fires in the snow, way out by the balding coast where vapid courtsmen don't find you and the little animals have nothing to chase. She stabs away in the Old Master way from a wall of ice tall as a phone booth and surrounding the courtyard like a swimming pool, and trails the king like a dog, fighting to keep up with his brilliance, fighting to figure how he managed to escape from the crystal ball in her mind. She occupies herself, studying the night sky from an observation deck, tracing Regulus as it stalks the sun, knowing that when it arrives, it will open a chapel-door-shaped portal from which there will be no egress.

A long time ago, so long that a cold sheen lay over her memory of it, Betty had set this cosmic destiny of hers into motion. She had the odd suspicion that most of everyone in the world was dead at this point, which made this whole endeavor all the more impressive. It ascribed to her some importance.

“Do you think we should get married?”

Their rented car was tumbling through Slovakian country roads on an adoption quest for some statuette of infant Jesus they both wanted to be haunted by, and it was taking them to a chapel, somewhere that seemed so beautiful to be shut inside with a girl of avalanche velleity.

“You mean, uh, r-right now?”

What might have changed if she'd said yes? If she'd said anything instead of chucking him on the shoulder and going on translating the road map, would there still be this disquiet in the voice of the waves? No, she is thinking of it in terms too simple, too juvenile. It's the vestigial apocalypse that has her on edge, and it's certainly that *crown*. They had already pulled back up to the hotel, one cursed doll richer, seven thousand Koruna poorer, the night black and chilly and foreign, by the time he'd said yes.



She was cut from ice, and her veins were full of magic and she smelled like cinnamon all the time. She didn't turn out perfect, but Betty wasn't perfect, was she? He'd never considered that.

The whole issue was that she came out too smart, but of course she was. She remembered things she hadn't known. The king is surprised at the power this entails - he didn't mean to give her that, all the memories, when he pulled her from his dreams. His attention was vague. Now, what does that even say about a human soul? That Betty couldn't be Betty without first tumbling through all those little grains of sand silly humans imagine when

picturing something as straightforward as the passage of time? Funny, how it all comes back around to the butterfly effect, he realizes much too late, back pressing into the sharp teeth of the steps to the altar, trying in vain to draw himself up against a possessed doll-version of a princess, teeth bared, bisque skin scored as a birch tree without any blood.

How did he rationalize creating her? Well, he was making up for something, obviously. And God, he missed her, even now, no matter how that naivete intoxicated his actions. It was not enough, a church for her eternal funeral. The king had to stop saying and start doing. He was clear, he was capable, he was not a threat to himself, much less others. She would love him better now, that was certain. better than she did before - vacant, romantically inept, scared of himself. A wreck. He knew the finger positions now, what produced what sound, he would treat her better. He has. And will, for as long as he can hold out.

Everything she wanted, everything she might want. Before she awoke, he had made ready the music room, every single sheet of music he could find in the land - *what better way to pass two years?* - seven types of stradivari, all replicated in ice, of course, but each one finished with a little magic. They'd sound just how she would want them to, iridescent flashes across their chiseled planes from the thirty-foot windows behind her, all constructed of little shards of frozen this or that to mosaic pictures of all her favorite gods in every color. Of course she had to have her own library, it was hardly a question. The only other offering of note, aside from an occasional effigy, was the four-post bed almost as tall as the windows, that instead of draperies he'd managed to hang with strands of the littlest crystals, in prismatic shapes of stars and suns and crescent moons. They nearly glowed. He didn't use any servants, not to say that would be any less effort, if one really thought about it.

The true masterpiece was still down in the catacombs, waiting, dreaming, and he had done *such* a wonderful job recalling her, the way her nose turned down just right, the angle of her lids, the meticulously charted flurries of dark lavender freckles across her splayed arms elusively three-dimensional, sunk beneath surfaces satin thin and white as arctic poppies. Sculpted from the source with his own hands, glacial water from the ruins of Iceland. Finally, finally released from her little glass chapel. Eurydice playing the part of Snow White, gaunt and pinkish in the way of fresh bone, still flushed with the marrow. When he recited the spell, when he kissed her, her eyes would flutter, she'd frown and stick her fingers in them, scrubbing away

the frost that had grown in her tear ducts. Her spine would twist, she'd search for him and be relieved not to need search very hard, forehead knitting when she looks up at last, half-smiling, one awoken from a coma and not certain of its cause. It's hardly clinical. It's devastating. It's impossible. It's you and me, love, it's still you and me.

"Is it? Prove it."

Hold it for a second, you fucking charlatan. It comes to him that morning, stops him in his tracks at the most noose-like stage in the tying of his tie. Now what was the use in reparations if he didn't know what he owed? Tuning begrudgingly back into himself, the king finds it such a tired-out amplitude, the wet alleyway they often stalked each other in, safe from those funnels of wind that rushed through the empty city streets hard enough to knock you off your feet, to coax out a bloody nose. It spins the head. It seemed that they were always traveling back then, amnesiac nomad schoolgirls in their oddly coordinated fashions, always coming back downtown for some whim, slavelings to unreliable public transport that began to unravel the longer they let the night drag. The last time they'd been really *free* had been Iceland - and the product of that had generated so much work that their transience had to be sustained now on yearnings for concerts, an eight-ball, the Book of the Dead. They ran once to Anchorage, talking smack on animal cruelty, the Iditarod on acid - only sinking faster. Betty ran out of money, quit school. Simon ran out of patience, quit school too. The crown is their musher. The crown sets them free.

Quick, Petrikov, say something. Why demand such linear thinking of yourself? What could have possibly changed so - and-and I mean, are we not simply forming more comprehensive understandings of one another? Manifesting our own realities? Wow, dumbass, way to harp on mutual sympathies. Fingers numb, Simon was fumbling his wallet open like you would find a fire extinguisher jammed inside, digging between business cards, one fluttering down to rest amongst the tar spots, and thrusting at her the precious *ex machina*, folded twelve times. No, it didn't prove anything, he wasn't stupid, and neither was Betty. But he could finesse it.

"You're still here, aren't you? Have I ever left your sight?" Her stare over her piled scarves is daguerreotype stoic. "Have I?"



"No."

"No, I haven't." So that was that. Still, Betty was getting smart enough to identify when there was a spoon in her mouth, and when there wasn't. Collaring her throat in her hands. "By my side. All the time."

"Are you at mine?"

The warmth dies in the air, Simon still decoding the directions of the million little folds in that three-year-old note that would be so embarrassing to read now and so maybe it's sweet he keeps it despite that, because if Betty could recognize how dumb it must have sounded at this point, then who knows how dumb it sounded to *him*. Glancing up at a sharp angle, quizzical, closing the wallet - then smiling, a pseudo-sneer, as if she's said something truly unusual, which apparently she has. It is a logic of physicality as much as it is loyalty.

"Of course I am." And yet, so earnest, she can't help but laugh with him, and then she sees the eyes of a bus coming to them through the fog. And then, everything just started to get fuzzy, like the onset of some wonderful trip.



"Bad dream?"

Endless preparations for her, and he doesn't have the slightest idea what to do with that, her first words to him in centuries. *You or me?* He finds himself nodding, quick, uncontrollable

suddenly, over her, a loyal animal, the cased machine of her soft breathing the only oxygen tank left, and where was the mouthpiece - oh God, he'd known it from the start, he had made a deal no one should, he was going to die by this, she had his soul. It has been so long since he has been tasked with this feeling that he doesn't know where to put it down and ends up crushing it against her sternum, one of her perfect little hands already creeping up behind his ear.

Princess over and over and over.

"-the hell did you do to your hair?" A pool of tears is gently fusing the side of his face to her chest, he can feel it prickling, the matting of eyelashes, the pull of her dress. She giggles, and for a moment he truly expects it to have thawed, rises to find her head twisted to one side, down at her shoulder, staring at him with her white eyes, so impossible and yet so herself and Simon so himself even more than he was last they saw each other and the war has been won, really, there wasn't ever any war, in fact, she's come back like always, and this time, he can't let her go.



The Vampire

The kitchen sink is full of blood. Someone is going to need to clean it.

It was freezing in October. It didn't seem right. In a way so ironic and twisted it almost turned into nothing, Simon figured he was glad for the whole Halloween situation, the distraction it caused, the methodology behind the madness. Anyways, it really went to show how tensile his grip on reality could be when he didn't watch out - that when he got home, followed a trail of blood spatter across the linoleum (and straight into the corner of the bar; *hey, free bruise*, she would say), he found both sides of the sink and all its contents of crushed beer cans and broken glasses, swamped in gore. He was racking his brain for a counteract to blood stain ultraviolence before he'd even fucking remembered he wasn't the only one living there.

"Hey sweetheart, why's the kitchen covered in blood?"

"What?" The bathroom door squeaking, the clicking of her mary janes down the hall. She came up and stationed herself next to him. "Well, I don't know." She was dressed like a prep school kid, but all the whites had gone red, from her shirt to her socks. When her hand sprang up to knock back her headset, Simon noticed how the ends of her fingers had been dyed a faint pink.

Corn syrup and food dye, that was painfully obvious after the next few hours of looking at it. Just like the lipstick spots down her neck, just like the soft points of fake plastic-white fangs glimmering behind her upper lip as she hovered oddly in the bathroom doorway in the dawning light, dripping from everywhere her coat couldn't block the rain; this scary look in her eyes. His hands shaking so hard it was almost beyond him to put his keys away, and she laughed in that manic, giggling way that was cute before she went crazy, or he went crazy, or *ugh*, whatever. There are deep, skip-inducing scratches in the vinyl of this tail-end of their

engagement, in between days of her abandonment; leaving, coming back, leaving, coming back, trying to leave-

"Shut up and get over here."

So desperately they needed each other, however transformed - it was a testament. A heatless, rhythmic inclination such as the salmon or spider whose life mission seems one of brainless proliferation. Or, at that, the mantis who - in the same fervid devoutness that makes girls at parties roll their eyes towards you when you start down that path - dedicates himself to the inextricable physical natures of sex and cannibalism.

It feels so pure, kosher, inviolent with the princess now, to press together like fish, like siamese mermaids, his phantom limb, something familiar, washed in the blood of the...seal? At the worst of it, around the time of the war, crawling skin would intermesh with a spastic numbness, whole extremities suddenly divorced: both hands, an entire leg. Not quite a pinched nerve, it always plagued early mornings he couldn't quite sleep through, still high from a long work night and annoyingly needy, blood so thin it waterfalled through elevated limbs - right to his pathetic skull. Something taking root. Now, Betty is like a hand extended downwards from his forehead, completely within.

Betty had escaped him so long ago, escaped him and their demon daughter she had never known, left them languishing, skittering about in the wreckage of Seattle, agonizing on how to recover her, where she had gone, what black hole she had disappeared into. Wishing for her help, her direction, her groundedness - not that she would know any better what to do with that nuclear-fallout foundling girl. Not that either of them could ever be trusted with another life, or so they would constantly reinforce to one another in jest - it was an entire theory of Simon's that this was a special kind of room in hell he'd landed himself in for all that stuff he'd said the night Betty had left him. It fit nicely into the pre-accepted theory that he'd truly lost it and all this apocalypse B.S. was of his imagining, just like Betty always thought.

Now, as she rises, unsteady as a fawn, relieved when he dips beneath her and takes her weight, he realizes that he should have mentioned something to Marceline. But perhaps it

didn't matter. The little girl had taken it all in impressive stride, in her time, and she was ravenous now for playmates.

"Simon?"

Ah, yes, right. That's still your name, best one you've got.

"Yes?"

"Why are you still wearing it?" The crown. He had rehearsed the answer to everything from "where are we?" to "what day is it?" to "are we dead?"

"Well," He was going to make the princess a palanquin while she was still getting used to her new legs, but that meant attendants. So it was more of a dogsled, stuffed with a nest of bear fur, white fox, and a miscellany of cushions - it sort of looks like their couch would after Betty was done with it, a century ago. It operates just the same, too, propelled with skis alone, sans canine labor, oh, does he *love* being magic. For some reason, it ran laps through his head during this process - some half-conscious line from across a millenia, and even now as she falls into place, still halfway to frowning, her head craning to follow him. *We're acting like dogs, not people. Is that domesticity?*

"A lot happened. The war happened. Its powers are the reason I survived. Marcy-"

"The war came *here*?"

It's so far away, how - why would it come here? What does it have to do with us?

What doesn't it have to do with us? We're still human, aren't we?

At first glance, he thinks her vacant, joyless look is to say "not this again", "not *still*", but swiftly recognizes it as acceptance - and there are many truths, both bizarre and traumatic and equally wonderful, for his supplanted second lens to practice accepting. Betty's pale face, soft as a snowdrift with lips open, hardly moves as they glide up the throat of the host - his auxiliary

laboratory in which she's remained hidden while he smooths out the terms of their engagement - until their pretty mineshaft begins to render itself, transforming into something more recognizable, a corridor, no longer sconced, skylit, with gothic windows just barely thin enough to let the dying sunlight in.

"I've been busy. You want something different, let me know. I'll take it all down and rebuild it. I'll do anything."

"You used the crown for all this?" The horrifying prospect that Betty may never get over the fucking crown, dead or alive, momentarily grips him, but the king manages to let it slide. "Where are we, anyways?"

"We're in the castle. It's safe here."

When he built the castle, it was not from the ground up. The catacombs were already there. He didn't remember making them. He didn't remember filling them. For some time, he had lost hold, but no matter.

When he built the castle, it was from the outside in. The grand façades of Germanic cathedrals, palaces and places of worship crested by a spire out of Moscow and cradled tight by a wall like a silver cuff dropped flat between the snow-capped mountains. The ecstasy of the king's victory nearly drove him mad again, but then again, he always believed his best work was born of the most unpleasant or the most untrustworthy of emotions. This one was freedom.

"How long have I been out?"

"Just long enough." Something dizzying in Simon's strained and purified blood took everything he had once drawn out sharp and billowed it around, what might have been sexy and morbid emerging with juvenile whimsy. Betty's hand is out against the wall, finger following the serpentine twist of the wainscoting. "I envy you, really, you certainly didn't miss anything."

“No?” The only language she seems to know is questions, it’s become clear as they traverse the annals of the castle together, silent in the bright solitude, the wishing of the sled a soft, white noise. She was always inquisitive. He’d liked that about her.

“First and foremost, I want you to meet someone.”

The king wasn’t sure at first if it was a good idea for them to see each other at all, to risk one or both of them taking notice of the cut of their cloth, that it was the same. Yet, it seemed inhumane not to, even risking that. At the end of the day, their happiness mattered the most, and they were two creatures now more alike than any other in the kingdom. His demon would just be waking up now, the sun long gone and the plush lavender hue that the ice takes on in the darkness swelling around them.

“I found Marceline when everything was going to hell. She’s...” They are at the door to the courtyard, the sled cutting through the threshold as if it were never there. The courtyard, where he knows to always find her, at least at this time of night. Strange girl, catching lizards and trying to suck their brains out. Or whatever it is that keeps turning the nocturnal critters up with frostbite in the garden shed. It’s an awkward age, right? “...she’s...”

Betty finds her first. It’s just as if her hair was made of sugar, or whatever it is that the willow weeps, face obscured as she kneels, still quivery, beside her kindred animal, a curving obelisk marking some beautiful mirage, some manufactured spirit of domesticity. No one need give orientation to it. It’s almost terrifying: her cuppable little face looking up, dazed, Marceline touches her in a robins-egg colored tumult of anemone fingers, that Irish hand coming away a wooly polar bear richer.

Their skin is nearly the same color. You’d think one would notice, especially in touch. But it doesn’t seem to phase either creature. Did he do good? He did good. He did good. His little girl is smiling, tongue under her left fang. They don’t care to notice. Whatever it was in him, species instinct or vendetta, he follows Marceline like a pack animal with a barrel of diphtheria around its neck, always will.

No, silly, that’s the disease. What was the vaccine?

As if to spare him the agony, an ermine flashes in the short grass before the three of them, and it isn't long before Marceline is fixed on it. It's funny, he thinks, that when they had been human, the two of them would have already been peeling the skin off this thing. Especially as docile as it is, pooling into freckled arms, writhing in its eellike, rodent way. Bulging eyes shining like a cartoon. Deliberately, he had captivated his kingdom's wildlife in this way, high off his own lucidity and play-pretending Aurora. There wasn't a spark of anything but sugar and spice in the eye of any animal with its feet in the snow.

The ermine runs under the garden gate, the princess standing in the same place, arms still raised, like she's lost hold on a human baby.

"Is the rest of it out there? Can we see it?" Damn, he is trying to be gentle about it. Her willfulness is troubling. But the king still intends to offer the key, especially if it would cause her to feel secure, or less *insecure*, more secure than she used to be with him.

"*You* need rest, princess. And it's getting dark. It will be much prettier in the daylight, at that."

"Will Marceline be alright?" The little one cackles from the corner of the garden, she's been stalking fireflies. He's watched the demon eat those, too, thankfully, not in this moment.

"She's very capable. She doesn't sleep much during the night, never has." It feels strangely fallacious to say, since neither of them really ever slept during the night - they've spent ample time together for a pseudo-parenthood to function, and it's felt like decades since he's been able to lose consciousness without trouble.

"Is she the only other one here? I mean the only person."

He's drawing the curtains in the bedchamber against the nightscape beyond, now, its wet desert nature where she would expect to see an urban sprawl, but Betty doesn't seem to notice. Her functions are unbidden, her personhood migrated closer to the surface. Or rather,

lying raw. She's on the edge of the bed. He pleads with her raw spirit not to freak out at his honesty, then turns to her.

"I keep her alive with my magic."

Unconsciously, her blue fingers are unknotting the fur-lined capelet he'd had made for her from over the hospital-gown dress she woke up in. It swings open at her shoulders like butterfly wings, but does not fall. Her hands have gone stiff at the ribbons.

"Like me, right?"

"Like you. And like me." A polar bear was skinned for the carpet at her side of the bed, but he knees it aside now to get under her, uncomfortable with the prospect of stepping on the pristine fur. Betty's hands go around his face as if drawn by magnets. "See? I knew I was supposed to listen. I knew I was on the right path."

Neither he nor Betty were ever any good at keeping friends. It certainly leaves a stitch in the whole sledding analogy, but it still seems emblematic of their loneliness in this place. Are they all there is? He hopes so. If the antidote was called 'memory', you could count on them to rabbit-run through the snow forever, their journey sisyphian, heading nowhere because there is no one left alive to offer it for. And who is the driver? God? The crown? Is there one? Simon can't see them if there is, but the absence of a whip at one's back is not something to be questioned. The power to keep himself rigged up astride the red-nosed reindeer of this fairytale is not something to be questioned, either.

If Betty remembers too much, he'll just have to kill her. But she remembers just right, he thinks. Nearly *too* right. Her eyes are perpetually knocked back in her browline; the closer he leans, the deader she looks. Fixed like a k-9 unit on the crown as she is, he has bowed to her will as usual, left it at the bedroom door, the vanity he made for her, waterfall-style.

Deco, decadent, an opalescent chamber out of a fantasy is no different than a half-destroyed loft in once-upon-a-time Seattle. A concrete ceiling spins to a hum of a sideways rainstorm and sirens and traffic. The glow of it tracks ectoplasm in oxford-tread print across

the room, and is working its way back, coalescing with the scuff of abandoned boots crossing from the doorway to their bed. It flashes on a painted talon as it fishhooks one, then the other, the rubber soles smacking against the damp linoleum, then vanishes behind her shadow the second Betty steps around the side of the mattress. "It's like you're *trying* to get bitten." *Oh, no! Oh no, someone help me!*

Absolutely innocent. Maybe not. It's complex, damn it. Simon is typically too lightheaded to make it out. Luckily, they had a tendency to float before the war, and now that he has the crown and now that they won't be metered by book royalties and now that Betty is here, the wonderland lies open.

Betty, missing link, Disney heroin. Perfectly into place she slips, blue as an apparition, dizzy, she is still remembering how to breathe, her hand always low around her neck, where her metronome sits. Every absence is filled, then, the pockmarks in his world smoothed over, and in twenty-eight days, they have decided to have a real wedding - upon the opening of the Regulus portal, in the fashion of royalties of antiquity.

They whirlwind, on parade in fur, sedated in crystals, thrown across blue velvet. Every night, he plays a shy nurse, makes sure her heart is beating, that her eyes dilate, that she breathes deep and smooth. Betty had always been so intense, so charmingly assaultive, and that fact hasn't changed. Lying next to him like an anesthetized savannah, the side of her face turned to him dripping in satin, she watches him from under heavy lids, sometimes with his arm seized in her claws, sometimes with teeth. Sometimes saying his name so soft and hopeless when he's got the electrocardiogram out that this self-imposed game of premarital abstinence feels like getting waterboarded in sub-zero temperature. Always ticking away at a three-point canter.

He did good. He's made a crucial error. Wherever the truth falls, all roads still lead to Rome, don't they?



Lichen and brush speckle the plains. Baby-faced arctic poppies and roses with their frosty coronas, an infection of dwarf willow, pasqueflower with their fuzzy heads. Moss, steadfast champion. Betty had once kept birds of paradise. When she isn't in the garden where Simon has inexplicably started growing artemisias, watching Marceline play with herself and trying to make sense of what she is meant to do with her, she takes up an ice pick and chisels directly into the inner wall. Sculpture, weird things, revolts against nature. At first, it was all a mad dash between the mechanical and anatomical; Gigeresque, ribboning cords and cables that took thousands of repetitive little hits to chisel out. Brainless, sometimes forgetting to breathe, her hands numb by the time chimes would sound in her brain and she'd turn to a pair of knee-high boots that *must* give him two inches at least, try not to smile, and accept whatever he offered: a compliment, a fruit, a long stroke tucking her hair behind one ear. Simon doesn't care if she defaces the entire kingdom, he'd said so when she woke up one night - one of the first, they seem to blur - pressed against the wall, some pretty, sharp replica of a ceremonial adze from his sword room a handful of centimeters into the surface, but he'd find her some real tools. She's gone all studio girl. It's healthy to partake in the art of creation, he says. Especially now. Carry the torch, et cetera. 'Cause they're all that's left, now.

Brushing away nonexistent sweat, the princess forces herself to stop cutting and look at what she's doing. An impromptu wedding present, that was how she figured it, since she couldn't seem to avoid him, even in abstracts. It isn't clear if the king can tell, not at first, but today, she cut rays of sunshine into the top of his head, a circlet of artemisia. When he brings her tea, takes her hands, always talking to himself about being too rough, about gloves she refuses to wear because her hands are clumsy enough as it is, he pauses, stares. Flicking the first and second lenses of her glasses out from beneath the wing-tip frames, she looks at him untinted, so shockingly white in the aftermath of the redness that she has been sculpting in for no reason aside a change in tonality. Colorful hindwings on swing-arms serve different functions: magnifying, ultraviolence protection - the ubiquitous snowiness of their terrain sometimes felt like staring into the sun at any angle. He had made them in the shape of a

butterfly on purpose, the forewings shaped just like her ones before and their glass tinted the same phthalo of his own.

"You've getting good at this."

"Hey, thanks."

One of his pale hands ghosting upwards to the image of himself, she calls him the king, the babylonian *Sharru*, still crude, but she's got the motion right - right? He runs it down over his shoulder. He hardly lets her touch him these days, so she turns to the living image, *shespankh*, an outsider eye cast upon the sphinx. Something feels trapped in her, too. Simon let her go on using the adze.

At once, Betty startles, snatches his arm, pulling him back, away from himself. The skin is smooth where his fingers had caressed. For a moment, she possesses his wrist. The light is coming through his fingers.

"Don't. It's not the same."

"My apologies."

That may be. Betty is watching him out of the corner of her eye - not out of mistrust - as she goes back to work. Swaying in the battering mountain wind that never really felt cold, one arm folded under the other, doubtless considering how to undo his crimes, his wide eyes and tips of a smile, endearingly psychopathic, are those she once knew best over a word processor, across a more gentle winter spent piecing together their first book, slotting their *Mystic Rituals* chapters together across his living room floor to a screaming record. A half-dozen half-full coffee mugs in a half-lit half-circle around them. Betty twisting her head, hand curbed beneath a swiftly-dying cigarette, halts and pokes the cherry into the sharp mouth of the Monaco to her side. The open window drags it away without assistance, the same window that sickens the plant, cools the doorknob, reddens the cheek. A half-conscious half-written half-dressed half-life half-

“Hard to tell when one ends and one begins.”

“I haven’t finished.” Despite the clarity of his tone, Betty says it anyways, not entirely sure why, head all clogged up with girls. Studio girl, library girl. Office girl, apartment girl. Emergency room girl, bedroom girl. Alleyway girl, castle girl- but that just means princess, *princess*. Or, vice versa. Halfling, half-queen.

The crown cannot be to blame for the shift. Centuries have overlooked her lover, but still, they have passed. The changing is slightly more apparent for the fact that, despite his claims of unquantifiable “ages” and “forevers”, it’s still must be her Syoma because she can feel him blind if she has to, all the way down in her bones, and if Betty thought she had spent even a *single*, lonely year comatose, she would be able to figure it out. It would be easy to tug the sheaf of hair over his left temple that was dreaming of going silver, chart its course. Needless to say, that was a definite stitch in Simon’s logic, but even then, it’s clearly all just cosmetic: the white-blondeness of his hair, the feathery thing he is doing with it, even his voice lilts the same way even after the straightening iron was taken to his vocal cords.

The shift itself - over the course of the several weeks the princess has spent at the castle thus far, unschooled, unemployed, absorbed in her art and her housewife fantasy purely, Betty has begun to feel like a pet apprehending a natural disaster, in this displaced, untraceable way. It has to do with eyes, and skin, and it has to do with -

“Did you do something to me?” Best to just come out and ask. It hangs in the air, smoglike. “You know what I’m talking about.” She holds her throat with the hand that isn’t twirling the adze down at her side, the little tip grazing the side of her knee on every revolution. He’s very still.

“Well...nothing I wasn’t certain of.” The propped hand under his face kind of darts around, burrows behind his neck, that curtain of bleached hair. “I can, well, it would be trickier at this point to change, but no trickier than-” It’s the first time he’s even recognized their life before this, not fleeting and haunted and always about the war, but *their* life, though sometimes, it had been a war. A war with money and bodies and sometimes, their brains. Money, which they are at once completely beyond and childishly in love with.

1

If it is all an act, the king drops it like a plate smashed against a kitchen floor, his arms falling, suddenly annoyed.

"Come *on*, princess, I couldn't help some things, I wish I could have, but you *know* how it was, all the fucking wastes of time, all the hoops, 'doctors'." He says it with air quotes, leaning closer to her canvas so she almost has to look at him. "This is cosmic payback! If I could've asked you first, I would have. You just...don't understand yet."

And *he* doesn't understand, in his beautiful house and pretty clothes, that everytime her mouth opens, a phantasm Betty presses her cheek against hers and speaks the words for her. When she tried to look at her once, the reflection seemed terrifyingly correct, her pale eyes, her oil-slick hair, but what falls in her face is red. When she looks down at her palm, it is pink. She is succumbing to it, she thinks, Petrikov Effect.

"You would have cut off your fingers to change your voice back then. At least, that's what you said." Does her doppelganger still have all ten? If so, she hasn't held them open for Betty to take her due. Simon remembered so well. That fact is troubling. "And it was so easy."

Why does it bother her so? Dumb, to expect herself to be unchanged after...centuries². God knew she fought well enough for this, something as simple as a gentler voice, before the war. In her hand-forged cracks, the ice fluffs forth like a snow cone. She is digging it out from her self-portrait's italianate, concave pupils with her little finger and trying not to look at Simon or think about his deadish blue mouth and her own eyes above it.

"How did you do it? It must belong to someone."

¹ Yeah, only for its bestowance of drugs and designer fashion, dummy.

²cen-tu-ry

/ˈsen(t)SH(ə)rē/

a period of one hundred years.

"You need to start getting used to the word 'century'."

"Way to ask a magician his secrets." It's cute, sort of, how he smiles behind his hand, still spinning back and forth so gently it only rustles his hair. "It is your voice. Two years at most and it would be. It's been in my head for a thousand. I really *hardly* changed it." Well, it was apparent, she wasn't alone, nevermind how she once adored that teenage addict, pillow-screamer scratch. Are they perfect? Are they cured? Is it all gone?

There it was. The real stitch, the behemoth that dogged her, to stab at walls, to wander corridors at night with key in hand, trying doors, finding a world, but never hers.

"Where is everyone? Are they still out there?" Cocking her head over the parapet.

"In ways, yes, some." So he had done it, he had broken through, just like he had promised, and the world would be good to them now. The Petrikov Effect is just a hypothesis. Betty remembers that much, that it had never been corroborated. It is an incredible mystery, their entire lives. Are...they still alive?

"Princess?"

She hadn't been moving.

"You're alright, aren't you?"

Tearing her face into a tight smile - as what else is there to do - Betty finds the unsettling force taking its hands down and off her shoulders as Simon's neck snaps away from her, hearing something she can't. Eyes on the sky, hovering, then, with parted lips twisting.

A dark ghost snaps onto the scene, early in the evening to see the little girl. Betty didn't even have a clue. Pooling in her lacy, black-translucent arms is a penguin like a fat, lazy cat. Marceline is just as alright as Betty is.

"*Simon*, I found him on the beach eating the seal afterbirth *again*."

She has his inflection. There is no reason for this to bother her. It doesn't bother her. In actuality, there's something (I don't know, sexy?) about the gushing abandon of his friendship with the young princess that he must have cultivated all on his own, and under such strange circumstances - but they're a strange family as a general rule. Marceline included - for all her odd, albinistic and gothicky quirks, her lack of blinking, her hatred of the sun, her dazed ebullience and childlike wonder towards him screams of a well-restrained ingenuity that only lends to the concept of her immortality. All of theirs.

Even if Betty refuses to dwell on how these things can exist outside of her; voices and eye colors and little girls that have inexplicably come to be hers or the intensity of how an entire wardrobe-full of her clothes is picked over and recalled, it threatens to break her. Besides the restricted palette of the court dress angle they seem to have slipped into as easily as they used to one another's sweaters, she takes notice of craft-scissored sleeves on a sweater she desired once to give thumb-holes, a manufactured wine stain on a Sonic Youth shirt, not to mention weird and whimsical luxuries that go from true gothic to Sailor-Moony. Red things, ribbons, so many ribbons, she used to love ribbons. Innocence and dark potential. A ribbon tying her hair up, a ribbon slung around wrist and radiator, because he didn't always have a headboard tall as a Catholic altar.

You're alright, aren't you? You've dealt with this before, you know what to do. She has dealt with this before, this forgetful, autopilot brain fog. But, there used to be a bar she liked. There used to be a direction to walk. Her options have fallen away, trainless, aimless, in her sturdiest boots, pulling on a cloak, something Nordic, familiar, it isn't even so cold, what does she need to take? She doesn't want anything. The key.

The palace guards blink at her like goldfish, pass glances, step in tune against the doorframe without a word. The outer gate is the same song, and when Betty crosses into the land beyond those walls, a strong wind blowing her hood off in one clean gust, it irks her to be relieved. He is acting strangely again, but Simon isn't like he once was, he wouldn't go all crazy if he caught her leaving. *Man*, can't do anything right, can she? Not even take - not without playing a victim.

The tundra is familiar, she is heading south, in a straight line from the kingdom gates. The land is barren, but she's weathered worse, the ground nowhere near this leveled. Answering machine absent, Betty had left a note, even knowing the guards would be keeping stock of her for their king. They may have told on her already. She figured she would leave one anyway.

As the hours stretch on, marked only by the hide-and-seek dimming of the sun between drifts of storm clouds above, a warmth that settles and dissipates on the back of her neck, it would be naive of Betty not to be unsettled. She hasn't even seen a bird. The further from the castle, the warmer the air; as if the heart of winter itself lay buried in the catacombs beneath their kingdom. It was midday when she started out from the castle, and now, the pink horizon wet and dark as a tongue has half-dissolved the sun. She hasn't come across a thing. A car broken down, a towering billboard, the banners ripped off the bones. A highway. Something real. Something she recognizes. But no people. Wind gushing across the barren blade of a fan. Even the vegetation has seemed to retreat, despondent, a chronic lack of stimulation. Did Betty really believe the castle was the storm shelter Simon made it out to be? Did she really think there was anything beyond it that was more dangerous than a stark exhibit of humanity's failure? No. Not before the sun had gone down.

The unletting breath of the air could certainly cloak an incredible amount of noise, that's for sure, but it doesn't make her stupid. She can feel it in her skin. She hasn't stopped moving, having given up at this point on crossing paths with life outside Eden, but unwilling to turn around, the true reason still evading her. Now, suddenly, the wind isn't loud enough to stifle the battering of some hooved creature on the road behind her.

Unwilling to frighten, or battle, Betty stops short, for the first time all day, her body straining to carry on without her. She turns. Even in the quickly dying light, and fifty feet down the road, it takes half a second to identify the pale-haloed head over the white stallion that has been dogging her. It should not provoke her to keep walking - she's unable to place why she does. Because she knows he will keep coming?

In a minute's time, the equine shadow falls over her, the moon somewhere behind her now.

“Betty?”

She doesn't mean to ignore him, it's only that nothing comes out.

“I'm so glad I was able to catch you! Where are you going?” It's like he's trying to sound worried, at least, it's easier to believe that over the alternative. “I should have told you, but you really, *really*, shouldn't be out here at night!”

Was he on that vampire shit, again? Throwing a look over her shoulder, another sheet of lukewarm wind knocks Betty's hood back off.

“You have to come back with me, Princess. Please.”

Above her, he is shifting back in the saddle, unhooking himself from the stirrup, bringing their centaurian unit to a halt - Betty manages to do so without losing step, as if she has understood the horse's language. It would be easy to continue following the king's instruction, too easy, as if it is only a mirage in the desert and she is dying, his hand thrust down at her, fingers splayed. Something is strangely ebullient about his demeanor lately, in contradiction to the jumpy, temperamental energy of the last moments she can remember...back in Seattle. She studies the gaps between his fingers. He isn't faking.

“I'm not *faking*.” There's something perplexingly elven about him, *I mean*, she guesses.

The proffered hand is retracted, and for a moment, all Betty can think of is that he's given up, that he is going to leave her, jerking the horse around to face back north. When it's his right hand held down instead a moment later, she takes it unthinking.

“Hold these.” and he drops the light, leathery reins into her stiff hands, struggling with something behind her, then, rough enough to startle her, knotting the sleeves of his little riding jacket around her throat, over the hood of her cloak. Half-talking to himself, she only catches the tail end of his thought. “-nevertheless, I don't want to see them try.”

The questions snowball in Betty's throat until none will fit in her mouth. Something about how Simon's forearm locks around her waist, thumb through her belt loop, and his forehead hits the base of her spine and stays there, has Betty feeling that she really has done something she shouldn't. As if they've never before run out on each other. Eyes on the road, on the stars, startling at wisps of white hair that tumble over her shoulder in a sharp breeze, Betty is waiting for something bad to happen. She's feeling fortunate to be semi-adept at horse riding, heeding his warning and maintaining speed.

Every few minutes, it strikes her again, this whim, this instinct. To let him remain how she had once known, not as a savior, not as an iron lung, but as nothing but a starry sort of pipe dream, an author of fantasy, strange and demure and kind of dumb. Her primeval puppy-love.

This instinct tells her to run - and out of all the myriad destinations in which her scent might be harder to catch, it tells her to run back to Seattle, wherever it is, or was. Find a fucking newspaper, just anyone else at all, anything to check the pulse of the world, know that she and Simon didn't get their hands on salvia and not remember it, or that she isn't the amnesiac subject in some morally-questionable social experiment to analyze...Petrikov Effect.

One of these questions rips through her throat, just in time.

"Where is this portal you're taking us through, anyways?"

It is the heart of the lion, seventy-seven light years away. She knows where it is, desires only to feel him press against her, cheek against her ear, pointy finger disappearing into the black sky. Regulus is one of the brightest objects out there, even now. They must be so far from Seattle, for the biome to feel all tundra as it does in the dead of summer.

There is a plane, way up. A plane, unlit. No, it's a body, falling to earth, a suicide, a comet?

"Oh, you're kidding."

He has the reins, they're off, a kick and a sharp swerve onto the road's shoulder. The air is so much colder when you face it at a dead run, the both of them buckled over, arms knocking like four arrows in a quiver. Whatever it was she saw in the sky is somewhere due east. They aren't running from it on the road back to the castle, but astride it, yet Betty can hardly take her eyes off its spires to see what they've gotten themselves into. No, she has to.

The black sky is empty. Whatever it was, it's hit the ground by now, or it was only a shared mirage. A mirage - there you go, it's just desert madness. You've been out here all day. You don't eat. But didn't Simon see it? Didn't he sound terri-

Three things happen in very quick succession: there is a flash in the road that might as well be a lighting bolt, the distance of a bus in front of them; Simon's hands go crushingly hard on hers, jerking them back, to the side, half-turned off the road, and their steed goes up on hind legs and nearly throws them both. Betty is just about to take off again when the king's hands clap back over hers.

"Take this." The weight behind her disappears with the smack of boots against frosted grass, and something is pressed into her lap that she grabs at blind, fixed, frozen, on the thing in the road.

Instinctually, another human shape sparks a chemical comfort, even if Betty must know. The teenager with hands twitching is looking directly at her, not at the figure approaching, their ripped shirt fluttering in the freezing air. It's crusted with stains down from the collar, thin, brownish splatters, their once-white sneakers and cuffs of their jeans darkened in the same fashion. Their mouth opens, slow, not unlike the yawn of a cat and Betty swears that inside there were rows of little teeth, like a sandworm.

A more naive Betty would have staked her life on her capabilities against a terror such as this. From poltergeist to gorgon, she'd know exactly what to do; covering her neck was a stolen trick, after all. Something in her humanity twists, simmers. The kid hasn't moved, and the king is moving quickly towards them, twirling something like a glaive that seems to have appeared from thin air, bringing it back, low and slow, hand flexing. It's hardly crossed her

mind that she doesn't want to watch her fiancé kill some hard-luck teenager, even the image of one, at close range when Betty is shocked out of her delusion.

"Hey, Princess, I think you're going to have to use that!"

A hurricane of white noise. It smothers fear, swallows up the manic laughter of this snake-eyed kid with their blue hair matted around their mouth as they phase through the instruments of their demise smoothly as with a projection, and starts down the road towards her, scraped, untied shoes hardly brushing the asphalt. It filters through a coalescence of *cut the head off, hurry, just swing*, rumbles through a stretch where everything just goes bad, his weapon gone, Simon at their skinny back suddenly, a headlock, flinging them down and falling after them, one fist in snarled locks rammed downwards so their neck lies bare. It ebbs through *just start cutting, it can't phase out if it's in too much p-* They shriek, buck against him, their hands straining, claws out, at his wrists, and it shocks Betty out of her stupor for one pristine second. "Cut away from yourself, don't let it slip-" and her eyes return to her again, the moment she gets the blade through the spinal cord and it just falls apart, the kid's wrists in Simon's hands, and their body underneath, and even their head with its swirl of wet hair from rolling when it had come off.

She sits in the road for a while with him, the blood on her arms and the bite of the blade on the heel of her palm the last traces of the sudden assault on their reality, watching him absently spitshine the blade of his sword, a lavender scratch down the back of one hand and a dusting of blood - the amount of which unsettled her, as if their attacker had ripened. Betty used to feel all soft like that, too.

The pins have started to fall out of his hair. Simon had recently started pulling his hair back the same way she does. Her scrunchies started to disappear. In retaliation, Betty had severed hers a week later, right above the shoulders: though it will never curl loose and soft like his, however weightless.

"I didn't know they were still around." He's grabbing his forehead, the side of his hand still smeared with congealing blood. "Uh, w-we called them *wanderers*. They were a classe of vampires that could alter their...corporeality. I thought I was being smart, leaving you with the

only silver just in case they were running a hijacking or something. Silly of me.” Manic at the slightest turn, he’s up, slamming the sword into its sheath without looking, troublingly quick. “If there ever was a sign that you need to come back to the castle with me, hm?”

“I just wanted to see if I could find anyone.” He looks at her like she’s stupid, but it’s only a flash.

“Princess-”

“Where are they?”

“They’re *dead*.” He is being patient. She should know this. Right? “Bombed each other to fucking bits, lost their spot on the food chain, now whatever is left is probably hiding underground in their silly little, you know-” He is trying to stir a sensible word from the air, coming up empty. “Skin hats. Last I saw a tribe of them, they were planning some suicide mission on some ship’s carcass they stuffed with homemade parts. But that was...” Gaze fixed somewhere to the south. His hand goes over his eyes. Stray locks of hair stuck to his forehead with the dried blood, sharp against the ivory. With all the starlight, the land lying naked around them, so unlike the city they knew, this all feels so much more like one of their old adventures with an extra sprinkle of murder. Something inside her chest stirs, waking at last with the rest of her. “That must have been over nine hundred years back. It wasn’t hardly a ship anymore! So desperate.”

Nine hundred years back.

“But I’m here! And you’re here. And we need to get going.”

And that’s enough, isn’t it? The hummingbird thought knocks around in her head the whole ride back to the castle, the whole night, the whole time Simon is treating the little cut on her palm from his sword, washing dried blood out from under her fingernails with a silvery horsehair brush as if her hands were too heavy for her wrists to hold.

Staring into the speckled clamshell sink, the bathtub in the mirror the size of a koi pond and the slivers of pink-salt coastlines orbiting the drain, Betty realizes that this is something that has happened before. She believes that is why he takes the effort now, and so she allows it, this meticulous, gentle treatment of her so much like a jointed doll he taught to walk, leading her by both hands back to their princess bed with its cold, silky sheets and cosmos hanging all around them where nothing happens but she feels real inside, anyways, truly safe, and rampant with thoughts.

One of the first nights she was awake again, Betty screwed up. He was hurt or something, she felt it, something sharp under his shirt, low on the left side; she thought it might be a staple. When she grazed over it on an upward path, his hand rose hard under her chin, forcing her up, away from him, away from his bed. "Marry me." He said. "Marry me first. Then we can go on forever." There was no way he could know that. Oh, but wasn't it nice to pretend that he could? "I-I think it would be nice to just do a ritual here, I mean, in the castle. I know you've just woken up, and all. I've just...missed you, I guess."

It was the same jilted, direct turns that emerged somehow from the snarled mess of desire that he *sucked* at straightening out back when they had just met, no matter how desperately they pounced on each other, cataclysmic, arrhythmic, that made it unnecessary to have it all spelled out in the way that they wrangle the tangible. The same turns that felt real for that fact, shards of sea glass tumbling back out of the water. Momentarily, the princess forgets about the one that seems to be lodged between his ribs.

"For real this time?"

"This is the same time." With his finger still wrapped around her chin, he drags her back and forth, like she's some little kid, so naive, so silly. "*Rule* with me, princess."

"Okay." She can hardly hear her own voice, *how does he do this*, and oh, suddenly she is overcome with need to claw apart this projection of his beauty the same way she frees herself from her carving wall, exhume her weeping, desperate twin from its freezer grave. Binding it, harnessing it, and sewing it back into her side. They occult each other, a single spot of light sharp as a diamond, just where the lion's heart should be.

Completely wasted, tweaking and faced with his usual affliction, she'd given him a black eye once and didn't even know it. How devastating it was to her composure, fearful, angry with herself, being forced to look him in the face, teeth gritted against all his prying, all his reassurances. Bucking against it. The way he drew back, head craned away from her, biting his lip, bouncing on his heel like he did when he got really worked up, a human Vespa. *Look, I liked it anyway. Does that help?* In the grand scheme, that probably only made her worse. But who was there to care anymore? What now could hold them back? So when she said "okay" and he lit up, whirled away, and slid not five minutes later back through the doorway, hellbent on Regulus, she took one look at the fierce smile in that mess of stardust curtained by silver-leaf embroidery, the incredible brightness of him, and didn't look back again.

Memories light upon her on nights like this, now, the seventh time one of them proposed to the other, and the next to last, now. *Sweetheart, it's terrifying me. I don't think we'll ever be free if we aren't free now.*

When was that? A hole in the mirror where it should reflect, as if he is still saying it.

Sleep comes elusive, quiet, too thin, too lucid. Betty lays here holding the door of her consciousness closed with all her might until the fight goes out of her: one with the wind, with the twirling curtains, her head full of their bells. The two of them just staring at each other, always touching, playing their little mind games, the crown locked up for the night. Then, his eyes wouldn't open again, the soft smile lingering anyways, and alone, she doesn't stand a chance. Always at his heels, her gemini, her seahorse. But she wouldn't find him there, only hours of darkness, buried under the snow like one of those dead kids dumped in Oakland back in the seventies. Waiting, shivering, to be exhumed. Betty doesn't remember what it was like in her coma- she has started to get used to the sound of coma, a quick little word, like comet - but she imagines that is why she fears unconsciousness now.

Up, a couple of slow, wobbling bounds across the bearskin, praying not to make a sound, Betty notices that the moon is full. The gateway is to be in the light of a waning crescent. She wishes it were sooner. She wants to feel right, again. To be rid of the symptoms, the fleas. To forget the city, to forget the back of the bus, her favorite bartender, birds of

paradise, to surrender it, to enlighten herself, to evolve, transform. If she can't leave the castle, she'll just change her axis, pulling her cloak off one of the gilt boudoir chairs, a crystal decanter of something that smells like rum, but always seems to melt right through her. She's got unicorns on the mind.

A considerable stretch of the catacombs she has previously toured, the softly-lit paths and corridors, an underworked, crystalline aura seeming to follow her. Some of the darker passages are illuminated by enchanted and powdery-blue flames closed in prismatic, Spanish-style lanterns, hung from ceilings, dangling on skinny dark brackets fastened high on the walls. Then, sometimes the world will open up, and a cave will stretch so high that sunlight lays gleaming on the jagged ceiling. The crystal in her fist is heavier now than anything it once contained - just like the wino skeleton of her thoughts, guarding its castle on eternal overtime.

Some of the labyrinth makes sense, and some of it doesn't. Some passages have no floor, only smooth, wet ice she might watch the king glide down without a thought in those tall heely boots that she's witnessed him alternating spells on just to conjure blades from their treads. Half-bored, the next one Betty comes to: this one steep, set back, facing the way she came, she takes a chance on. It sits in a broom-closet orifice beneath a staircase that leads into one of these skylit atriums, the floor all tessellated like a ballroom, and she hasn't noticed it before. It is really half-stairwell, the passage round, the steps irregular, and it must decline for three stories, fading to black twenty feet in, then-

Something is illuminating the tunnel's end. At first, Betty thinks it is a lantern, it is someone else in here with them, and she can't seem to balance that glimmering hope with the fear that it is going to try to kill her. It glows as a fallen star that never touched ground, a terrible sunspot. A firefly?

Without light, Betty can't seem to remember how to see, all her fancy focal lenses she left in the bedroom upstairs certainly useless for this purpose, the firefly twenty feet out and down, but she does. The passage is cool and scarred like some stones, or rock faces on a beach, the channel that seems to stretch on all sides and forever, a gash under the surface of the earth. The air is beginning to smell like the sea, placebo or not, flaky with snow she nearly mistakes

for anglerfish. In fact, it is only that twinkle of gently drifting snow, and that atomic insect, that seems to emit light here.

Now deep inside, in a cloud of stardust, something rises, a façade, pillared and pointed, the color of a plum and so light it seems to melt right into the floor. It looks like a mausoleum. Her ribs seem to tighten around her chest. No, it looks like a chapel. She is up the steps, she is at the doors, the windows blacker than black, but with her face pressed to the glass, a distant twinkle calls across the abyss - the firefly? No, it is an owl now, blonde, churning into a flurry the shards of snow still falling, falling through the roof. When she shows her face to the darkness, the hidden eyes inside show themselves back, and seize her, ripping open a second eyelid, the key she has brought with her out of her cloak pocket and just about to slip into the ormolu door plate swinging back with an involuntary inhale. *Too deep, princess.*

What the hell is this? Was Betty finally able to pull a real dream out of her barren substrates? Is she capable of that? Transforming into a somniphobic child lost in the woods? No damoclean sword lies ready for her to wave around - anything could be in those shadows, there could be a million vampires under here with her, creeping up - why didn't she bring a lantern?

At once possessed by the fear of this, a clan of flying, bleeding, fiery ghosts trembling with revenge for their murdered kin, and of that dark chamber with its angelic dusting of snow, Betty makes it halfway to the stairs with her gaze still fixed on the windows of the chapel, completely detached from the plausibility of tripping, of there being something behind her, and covers the remaining ground at a dead run. The serpentine stairs are no comfort, slippery and infinite and turning like the facets of a wheel.

But she's only imagining it, after all, insecure from the vampire encounter - that should have been traumatic, really, the king had taken it in stride and she had followed suit. But still, then, there was the matter of the chapel.

When she slips back around the bedroom door, a slice just deep enough for her to go through sideways, Betty immediately notices it has drawn itself even deeper than she'd left it. For a second, she fears crossing his waking path, then wants it. Then, she sees the bed.

It's only Marceline, of course, perched right in the center, limbs out at all angles, as comfortable in being there as if this is all some big hallucination and this is their daughter only come to sleep in their comfort, this is the strange creature they might make of their biohazardous blood. Dead pale as Betty is. She is watching him. He is still asleep.

In the castle, every night is purple, blue, glossy, the moonlight ricocheting forever. Betty watches a breeze twirl the bead curtains around in the milky glaze of it, lying on her back. At the corner of her eye, Marceline is playing with her hair, whispering to her all the weird things a kid does. Betty has just about given up on trying to decipher her own forgotten history through this girl, much less through Simon. Yet, once in a while, she catches sight of a clue.

"We slept during the day a *lot*. Once we slept in a tree! It was a really big tree. I like being in the dark, though." Curtly spinning around, the mattress bouncing under her. "I haven't seen Simon sleep in *ages*. He said he was scared of the um..." Sticking her knuckle in her mouth. "Right, the demons!"

"Sleep paralysis?"

"Yeah, sleep demons! They sound cool, but Simon doesn't like how they always look like him. He's so weird." Coming out of the little girl's mouth, it sounds so teasing, as if she knows this to be true of him. But Betty doesn't know this to be true of him. Was it ever quite like this? Night terrors, sure. Touches of manic-depressive insomnia. He's alright now. Curled away, deathly still but for an occasional, shivery glitch.

The odd, canine little princess drops off still curled up at Betty's side, uninterested in blankets. Betty is running her fingers up and down her back, having lost track of how long, when she notices the stillness that has come over everything but her hand in front of her face. The milk has gone stagnant. The dripping icicle of her sternum garners its composure once again. The ribcage just that. The girl is certified *weird*, with sharp teeth, twisty, elven ears extruding from the peaks of her black hair, but when Betty lays a hand on her back and feels her still as one of those life-size dolls that always manages to be debatably haunted, she freaks.

She finds it, Marceline's breath, of course, a minute stir, sitting low under the surface. Why must she do this to herself? Reaching over, before she can think twice, she sticks two fingers under Simon's jaw. It had been like this before, slow, steady, gone, rabbiting back up. She's afraid of her own, takes a few deliberate, meditative breaths, then does the same. Faint, steady. But something isn't right. It feels almost as if it beats in three-four time.

The sun hasn't yet risen, and Marceline is gone again - what an odd child. Somehow Betty knows she won't come back, so when sleep has released her again, she edges across the girl-sized gap and takes hold of the sharp edge of the snowdrift with the platinum hair that twists, unfurls, then pulls them against each other. Still asleep by all appearances, tightening around her, slow, like a snake. She plays dead. Once the light returns, she's back at her wall.

Betty had never thought herself stoic, never, but she catches herself often now forgetting to blink. Apparitions of this waking creature plague her, with her even, sweet voice and blueness, in spiderweb-thin sheets of ice over troubled waters. The awkward, dramatic and flighty creature she really knows herself to be is straitjacketed somewhere inside. All lace and frost emulsified in an absinthe coating. A handsaw at her stomach, pushing into the angora.

This used to be a rabbit. The thought comes from nowhere. But wait, was it just another magic trick? Was the handsaw, too, the teeth that push soft as rubber against a vessel that should be of flesh and ringlets of desire for him and intestines, but feels like none of these things? Betty shivers and drops it, the soft roar of the wind over the mountains cut with a perfect, metallic *cling*.

Something is missing, she knows she's not well, is lost in the midst of some kind of break, knee-deep in a trip she doesn't remember taking. But it's been *days* - the circling of astral bodies is about the only thing that seems exactly the same to Betty anymore, and she's paid attention. Yet, she can't hardly eat, she can't dream, her head is light and her skin always feels wet and she isn't speaking in the same voice. *Ungrateful!* Does she not know in the back of her mind that she had survived? Survived what, she doesn't know, she doesn't look it in the mouth, she raises her chisel and keeps stabbing herself out from the mirror wall of the cliff-face until it stops looking like her and more like a creature of terror, something ugly and dangerous exerted over the soft reality she once occupied, a spike pit cut into her closed lips.

When she turns to the face pressed to hers, that emptiness, that darkness she found in the catacombs still squeezing her veins, the princess doesn't see anything. A vision of Simon through a T.V. screen shivering, eyes gone, crown in hand. Neither victim nor captor.



The Tape

Stumbling out of the freezer with a camcorder and a black eye like some kind of dandy from his opium den, Simon's clicked. Prophet-style. The mousy kid in the biomedical department with the cloyingly flat affect who is polite enough to stand for the bizzarity of his experiments' requirements while pretending to be vaguely interested from a...likely biomedical perspective always looks up at Simon when he leaves like she hasn't a clue where he emerged from. Tonight, she's actually looking him in the eyes and not the carpetbag under his arm like he was always smuggling an illegal animal inside to perform some horrible bout of chemical tests on.

Now, Simon doesn't really know for sure if the freezer is soundproof, and he's never asked. It seems perfectly natural to suspect any sane person of being put off by the course of his research, of beginning to notice - are his eyes getting worse? Since he started to take note himself of the remnants of every session with the crown, the things that didn't scrub out, he's lived in fear of Betty, of freaking her out more than he already has. When he realizes the lab girl's looking at him like that because of the black eye, he can't help but laugh.

It isn't just phenotypical, though, not at all. For a while now, he had been paying attention to these ghosts, these beings on adjacent planes of existence. They were mostly the fantastical conjurings of any hallucinogenic, but sometimes he studied that Infant of Prague doll he and Betty had brought back from the trip where she asked him to marry her and swore he could feel the breath coming off his chalky mouth. That, and the stalking thing. Either some poorly-handled little boy is trying to target him for God knows what manner of juvenile extortion, or he's hallucinating it for some reason, his skater-boy shaggy blonde hair and albino eyes and something off about him - he doesn't seem American, but Simon can't be sure of that one. Even if he's perched on the backrest of a bench in the middle of the scantily-lit, frosty, empty campus stretch he has to cross when he leaves the lab.

If someone else could only take notice of him, he'd know it was real, but Simon can't bring himself to approach the kid, never. He's not scared of a child in the dark, he's not, he's not. He needs a drink, he needs to steady out. It doesn't even *matter, though*, because he's *clicked*.

There were three voicemails on the answering machine, and the crows were coming back to roost. The first was from an asshole in Maine who wouldn't quit on this well behind his house he swears to be magical, polite suggestions of "It's not exactly an *artifact* - more of a, uh, landmark?", falling on deaf ears. Apparently a group of dumb kids had lowered one of their own into the depths, and he'd been pulled out speaking in tongues. The other two were from Betty.

Birdcall wafting around, as if ever there was a better omen, Simon braved the first two messages from her, halfway to the door by the time the accursed machine had screeched and begun to play the third. Key in the lock by the time it ended. *She can take care of herself. You breed this mutual dependency. You know you're doing it.*

I know I shouldn't have, not before asking, but I did, I'm probably just freaking out. It's not that I don't trust you- The fucking key is sticking, again.

I just...I'm worried about you. About both of us. We've been...spinning...

Simon lets his head fall against the brass H-one-zero-M-zero-eight gripping the door with half their intact nails, a microscopic slip of his will, the ringing in his skull metallic, a sleigh bell, a carabiner unclipping from a belt loop, swaying from a finger in the stairwell. A sphinx, the hallway's length her only riddle. Melt into the floor, do it. Die right here. Illuminate her *once* to the constant, circuitous fear of -

"Stuck again, huh?"

His hands are frozen stiff on the doorknob, a warm, ungloved hand passing over them, finessing the body of the key away from him, grinding it in, pulling out then stabbing back, arms rattling his so delicate, each unexpected touch sending a shock through him recalling an abused pet, but her hand is firm on his, so he doesn't dare move, not even to prevent a horrifying spilling of tears over her freckled wrist. It doesn't even cross his mind until the door

breaks open to her will and they're safe in the dark that Betty didn't even wonder if he was trying to get out or in.

Now, that night, his back pressed to the glass doors in their loft that should lead to a balcony but don't, just waist-high bars and floating graves of strawberries, it is all he can do to watch her. Beside him on the floor is a collection of Tennyson he doesn't remember leaving there, the cover bent upwards to him. He had cracked it open to find it split by a correcting pen, and - *oh, cute* - a passage circled beneath it. The one that went *again; the red fool-fury of the Seine; should pile her barricades with dead*. One of Betty's hidden messages.

Then, sometimes, he watches the weeping of a candle beside her that illuminates the reading she's in the process of, the hot spilling of red wax down its length and onto the shoulders of another riesling bottle.

Perhaps it wasn't very responsible, but it was economical, a slew of cheap candles and anything from empty bottles to abalone shells to catch the wax - she's smart like that, cornering the electric bill, that and cold showers, however lengthy, he supposes may cancel out the absinthe on the coffee table, not even touching the cost of the crown (it's going to pay for itself, anyways). Ascribing prices to ceremony, now, that is another story. They need these guiding lights, it keeps them steady.

As if to prove him wrong, the next card in Betty's hand hovers above the carpet for a heavy, hot pause, then, like a boomerang, slices through the air for a wonderful second before flinging itself upward, almost turning back around on her before toppling to the floor. It's still at arm's length and she wastes no time, pries it off the hardwood, and before he can even get a look at what she pulled, she's already dipping it in the candle flame. Well, it kept them steady as best it could. They're both so mad lately. Unemployed, childless, unfocused, and sad, and taking it out on each other in ways that didn't so much dissolve the curse on you, just left its slime all over the victim in the backswing.

So he laughs at her, little tendrils of snow from his latest trial emulsified in the crevasses of his consciousness, still below freezing point and not melting any time soon. "Which is it, love?"

“Star.” The short little flame glides over the laminate on the card like it is a duck feather. She was having problems with that one. If Simon were apt to ask spirits for help and they kept coming up with this dumb ebullient white baby straddling a horse with his naked legs and these two dogs and a lobster and all the fucking pentacles, he’d get sick of it, too, so he wills himself not to make fun, leans away when she rises with the singed card in the tips of her fingers and steps over the spread and opens the door and flicks it out and doesn’t even watch to see how far it flies. When she drags the doors shut again, a pillar of freezing air squeezes in front of them. He leans into the wash of it, kisses the back of her leg.

The little fires keep them sharp. Early in the depths of their retreat from the world in a scatter of book money and catching little pink tabs on their tongues like snowflakes, they’d both lit the apartment on fire, hours apart and under completely altered circumstances. It had been a bizarre glitch that only lent to their curiosity in the hallucinogenic lines of research of that distant Stanislav, Betty’s namesake, completely strangled by conventionality. And still, they had something he did not, a certain metaphysical truth. And, they were both *fucking* crazy.

Betty is so much smarter than him, so curious, Checklisting out to him on her fingers that are not wrapped around a volume on the Papyrus of Ani. Khabit, the shadow. Sekhem, the double. Then Khat and ka, the body and heart. All elements of the same being. It is this Voltronian way of looking at them that enables Simon’s contentment. When the physical becomes unbearable, he turns to those: khaibit, sahu - but, as any infection, ka is a well of poison that trickles out into his little heaven and stains it. It was this cursed body that the crown wanted and that was yearned for in return. When these terrible needs are eradicated, and the fortress recenters itself on him, things inevitably start to...burn. He’s a trash fire. But who ever said the body was all there was? There is a complex inside him, a gathering of elements, each with a different set of eyes, ones that he does not always recognize when they meet with his own.

Betty is never going to marry him in time. If she refuses to confront the importance of the crown to him, then how the hell is she to confront the rest of him? If her truth is all hidden in cards? Book or no book or academic recognition or love or money (which is simultaneously everything and nothing to him) he is bound up like a prophet at Golgotha - cursed by the damn situation to be simultaneously, startlingly aware of the cosmic time bomb and the blindness of

his peers to it, to the stars that had been catching fire as they gazed at their shoes and got high off things they could afford and fucked nightclub girls that at least probably loved them but wouldn't for much longer. All hail that great equalizer.

Well, fuck 'em, fuck 'em he's the king of the whole fucking winter. Joan of Arc. The cocksby second coming. In a frozen home-recording, a room of jerkoffs stared eternally dumb at a neon red thorny crown on his head announcing 'faggot!', and routinely failed at the how of it (this is strangely affirming). Luckily, in a sense, the kids in the scene kept their eyes rolled far back enough that darling Betty never had to pay the karmatic piper for leaving the office door unlocked, as she routinely managed whenever she came in to kill time before her evening class - *they had to stop, he should have quit working there so long ago*. Well, nevertheless, it was remarkable how densely his surrounding of idiots could pack around the banquet table but not fucking listen when he predicted to them the future - but come, now, even Christ was laying his disciples. You're just useless, clutching your holy book and speaking of the end, of otherworldly voices - you're not the only one who they clocked as a witch. Though Betty is sort of capable of being...everything and, and you're a-a-a Jesus freak on the street. Why the hell would you even keep that tape when you knew it came out unuseable, why did you think you needed it? Truthfully, he doesn't even remember what he put on it. Just that it did not lend to his thesis.

Now the disciples are a slew of crumbling bone and the things that don't rot and get carried off and littered around by the birds. The birds that lived, that thrived, that would have toppled a food chain if it wasn't already, The birds that overflowed in population so incredibly at a time that he once watched a vulture kill a seal. Reasoning himself a selkie, he nightmared the vision of it over until he had to go spear one of the fucking things himself, play cannibal, relapse terror, send the pain below.

Nailed it again! The coffin that was his famine-exacerbated disordered eating, that is. A seal was a creature pure as snow, so bloody inside the flesh was almost black. Hunted as they were to extinction while his vision wavered, that is all he can tell Marceline of their existence. He will not recreate them. He cannot recreate viscera. Only transplant it. The storm drain channel of his absent rib keeps this knowledge sacred.

It was a week before she last tried to leave, maybe, maybe two, three A.M. when he found Betty with sage, wandering like a sleepwalker, swaying in the dark to an Angelo Baldiametti score that had somehow hooked itself up to the speaker system of his shadow thoughts. Betty wasn't a sleepwalker, but he'd asked, half-shy from the doorway if she was awake, half-relieved when she put the theory away, only to go inside-out with worry.

"I had a weird dream. I think there's something dangerous in here."

"Doll?"

"No."

An owl groaned from somewhere in the park across the street.

Streetlamp-light was shooting under the blinds and crossing the living room floor, her sweater, the little plume of smoke in her right hand wheeling out as she turns to look at him. Oh, *fuck* off. He's not the one she's been talking to. He had *thought* he had extracted Betty from this recurrent red-room nightmare of his when she first awoke in his castle.

The king despises these dreams of 'himself', that pathetic creature that took Betty from them. The one who messed it all up, in his stupid suits, that dumb look on his face like he might cry at any moment. Behaving like usual, acting a fool in his work, acting a hysteric in his apartment, his hair falling into his face, those blown out pupils dark as holes. When the king tears his eyes from her dead, terrified gaze and faces up to the true object of her conversation, this Petrikovian *bitch* who has been standing right there in the hall like some kind of sleep paralysis demon, he gives himself one of those demented smiles like he's been waiting to be noticed. Undisciplined in his mania, biting his lip.

He thinks of attacking his twin right then and there. Fleeting, he wants to tell Betty to run. Before he can try either of these, he feels Petrikov's fingers stabbing between his - a perfect mirror, and they do run, out the door, down the stairs, and escape that burning building, screams all around. Betty must have also seized him or has been seized by him, for she is right in stride with him, hand trapped in his, fading into the thickening smoke.

Out of time and place, Seattle Betty has no logical home here, suspended in amniotic water with the king and fucking Petrikov, moving between stifled scenes Daliean, exploitative, tiny alleys and concert hall lobbies, mountain passes, an on-ramp crammed with half-gnawed bodies, the blood still wet enough to catch the sun - she shouldn't be seeing this, she shouldn't be this deep inside, she's much too sharp for him. She kisses the back of his neck. The yellow ribbons wound around her arms fluttering in the wind. Her hand wrapped around his mouth.

Something's amiss - he doesn't dare say it, but when Betty whips around now, teeth sharp and snarling, her hand in Petrikov's hair, everything seems to go shattered-thermometer red. A zombie has found her, and he takes note of how green her eyes are when they meet his.

Well, one of us has to do it, huh?

She whips her body back now, takes Petrikov stumbling down with her and she's tearing at him with her claws, ripping his outstretched hands, wrestling him back, and the king feels the blood cut off from his own wrists, his breath hitch. Something about his defensive fighting strategy, how he screams when her face is thrust into his throat, her hair falling all over him, is so stupidly girly.

The king takes a deep breath, reminds himself that he's dreaming, and thrusts his arm into the fray of them, not allowing himself the time to think about it - he's accomplished much worse with this methodology - and finds the throat under his desperate mouth, wet with blood fresh and warm, all red and pink, his teeth so tightly gritted, and holds it, watching his eyes go the color of ink, face twisted with betrayal. The sides of his fingers are brushing Betty's jaw - her smile through her matted hair, his red-haired reindeer-dog-girl, unlatching herself from his neck breathless, lips falling against his knuckles. They are a four-legged monster, two jilted paths perfectly impaled on one another, a chromosomal chimera - even if this is his path inside the circle of his hands that are slipping down from the force of his arching back and the slickness of the blood she drew, stilled the second he gets his thumbs back at the furrows of his jawbone, stilled until he wakes in a hypnic jerk, fighting to breathe.

Sleep comes slippery and mean, and not from arterial spray. And yet, yet. And the empty bed. For a beautiful, orgasmic moment, he'd won, he'd really won, he had shattered the mirror sleep had trapped him in as a spastic firefly. His hand on his ribcage as it sometimes is when he wakes up, prying his thumbnail under the rough tissue, but he manages to laugh through it.

"Princess? Are you in here?"

How wonderfully prophetic. Although, in the castle, it is typical to find Betty trying to *be* the things she once feared inviting into their home, wrapped up into herself like a bird in the far corner of the clawfoot tub, nightgowned, hair down her face, or once, with one leg over the windowsill, a cute ghost in fluttering curtains. Something hot creeps up like a migraine, then cools at the sound of a low whistle vibrating off the walls, the arched doorway. She is in the music room, the song one of prayer, a mantra, a deviation from her usual aimless pawing at the organ keys. She is playing that riff that descends the way it ascends. Over and over, backwards, forwards again, the tempo dipping intermittently. A variation on a theme, that's right.

Sometimes she acts just as finicky as he used to be. Amounting it to nerves, to her having to come to terms with the vampire situation - nevermind his recent medical trends with her - he's resolved to pay the princess more attention than even before. God help him, she is too smart for utopias. Skating around the patchy areas to a fault, he's tried his best, such fantasies, such adventure, trailing her along through endless forest, to the peaks of the mountains, through some of his more incredible projects that lay underground, hidden springs, dormant beasts. They play together, absent Casio and hand-me-down violin, the acoustics dreamlike, filling the entire castle, every crevasse, every keyhole. She stabs endlessly at his wall. She seems happy.

At her beck and call every moment, the king has never felt closer to his true self with Betty now, so tall at her side, tying ribbons everywhere, their kingdom spread out at their feet. *This is my apology, all of it for you. I've made it all right, all better, I can finally give you what you deserve.*

"Apology for what?" Damn, for what? She was so smart.

"For how I was before. For how weird and sick I was at the end of it." The "end" of it? It is so easy to dig oneself into a hole. Betty doesn't seem to have noticed.



Working out from beneath a blur of starched trenchcoats and video cameras, she was looking for Simon, resolute to get the fuck back home with or without him and wash that day's book signing saturnalia down with the spiced rum and a few pills and maybe turn the bathtub into a float chamber. Or whatever it would take to free her brain from the sounds of these press-jerks squawking around trying to build their tabloids off her back.

Simon had called her twenty minutes in, and failed to express just how impassioned the whole affair was going to be. *"Please, please, please, you know I'm no good at this, I'm still a joke to these people, they don't know you, and what if they ask about Shabaz, or-or-or bug milk, Betty, you know everything about bug milk."* Nope. Maybe she did write half the book, but she wrote it well, a full print-out of her brain, and she fears now that she has nothing else to offer. *"I know nothing about bug milk. Nothing."*

"Fine. I'll come skulk around if it makes you feel better."

"You're a saint." She keeps him safe best she can, even if her best isn't very good.

Establishing a sightline between the façade of a full-length library window and a wake of white-collared vultures, Betty tries to light another exported clove cigarette stolen from the hoard above Simon's kitchen sink, finds the wind too mean for her dehydrated little lighter, and takes advantage of the next die-cut suit with a thumb over her polar-roid dustjacket face so tiny in the crook of his arm to revive it. The magic word is 'Stanislav', it will get her anything, sweaty palms, shiny, hinged lighters that look as stupid as they feel to use, vodka-mixed drinks that taste like battery acid and apparently, I don't know, *girls?*

She is standing half-shadowed by a plastic trash bin someone has put out here for all the damn pseudo-intellectuals here under the impression that a record of electromagnetic flux in some early Roman child's barbie doll meant champagne cups somehow, metaphysically speaking, would from now on just wink out of existence once they left your preoccupied hand. Betty has taken up the study of the kids-size white lighter whose opacity masks its so-very-finite measure of lifeblood and thinking about how she will still be twenty-seven for a month, when a giant bird collides with the glass inches from her head.

"Save. Me." The bird is mouthing at her through the shifting, interposing glare of a million vultures. It is more of a pretty coyote. Stiff little tendrils of its combed-out bangs are getting trapped between its forehead and the window and unraveling as it slides; still pressing these soundless words on her, smiling in between its pleas and between its clawing, slipping hands Betty sticks the cigarette in her mouth to match with her own. *They're eating you alive, huh, sweetheart?* It's plain to see how much he enjoys it, this kind of momentary powerless-power that's been dropped in their hands, a scapegoat, maybe, a pseudonym for nothing, what might as well be Alice in Wonderland, a copy of a copy of a copy.

They are alike in that way. Playing pretend where everyone can see them, if only to express how far above everyone else they feel when together: *it's like they've forgotten how to be alive*, he'd say. *All of them dead. Not you and me, we're scrappy. We're survivors.* Here at the glass, a single shadow of a corpse rises behind their forbidden union - just in time to see her tap with surgical precision the cherry of the cigarette against the cloud of Simon's breath on the library window. The rest of him held captive in second-hand Chanel, darting away quick as a delinquent caught by a security guard.

Oh Syoma, circle of life or whatever hahaha Betty telepathizes at the empty glass.

They speak so little now, having developed this impossible language through the veneer of sleeve-tugs, jerks of the head, sequences of blinks. These squirrely fanatics, always the opposite with their memo pads and tape recorders and their business cards, make little sense to Betty, dead or alive. Perhaps she is disillusioned - never, however, disenchanted. Simon and her might discover Atlantis and still she'd set them away from human society, all attention bad attention if unprotected by book covers, dark glasses, snow white feathers stitched in rows like

laminar armor down to your ribs, nothing underneath. Tracking down abandoned castles in Spain for the scene of their elopement. This was before they found the crown.

The crown.

When Betty was younger, she didn't even need a crown. She already lived in the sky, magic angels dancing around always to protect her, a horse she dreamed of as a little kid and couldn't figure imaginary, a goddess, the scary kind that eats you whole or whatever. These and the rest of the pictures silhouetted in glowy stars that lost their grip far too often from the popcorn ceiling. Flat on her back on the shag carpet until she fell asleep or was ordered to school, music lessons, so many useless things - he's an appaloosa, no, a blue roan, no, both, chimera, powdered sugar freckles on his shoulders. When the sky had bested her, there was no way to go but down. By the time earth had bested her, gravity had become frustrated trying to help. She wanted the ocean, hundreds of miles of it with no resistance, concussed herself against the floor of her neighbor's pool, dialed back and started digging.

The angels gathered above. They craned their necks down at her and whispered their riddles, aimless on a train; on a sleeping bag at the foot of a mountain in Pakistan, a polaroid in her hand; shivering under open bedroom windows. She used to write stories for them as a wild, weird kid more afraid of the dark than a snake, anxious about sleeping and anxious about not. Great battles, quests for strange, magical artifacts of legend. They started as twins, a blue moon and an orange sun in a dichotomous way a teenager with a weak grasp on poetry might find profound, until one night she looked up and found them locked together, and the one she was calling Casper at the time had discovered this odd attentiveness, this strange way of gesturing with the arcs of his wrists, fingers like coral tentacles. Eyes always covered. They both had to die. She tried to cut them out of her, pour their liquid organs down the sink and follow it with a turn at the garbage disposal, but they were too real by then, never quite letting her reach the keyhole valves at the napes of their necks. When they couldn't seduce her out of it, the two always managed to wrench themselves away, slippery and cold as fish.

She feels so thrust from her old ideas now, all that she does in the name of Simon Petrikov. He is in her bones, but she seems to exist in the imagination of the king like a pretty ghost, a heavy-handed reanimatorre.

Betty is happy here, but sometimes, she wonders what it would be like if she did truly feel nothing at all, how long he would keep leading her body along - and how different it would be from her current state. She can't hear her voice over her shoulder anymore, she is too accustomed to it, which was a little mental victory, but now that Simon's reminded her, she can't seem to kill the memory of someone who she hardly is anymore folded up on a street corner with her arms over her head, and somehow, even though he was the one freaking out on her to begin with, wishing and half-expecting Simon to be the one to come save her.

Not that he didn't, after all. That night was the first time he'd put on the crown. He didn't know what he was dealing with, that was why he started making those tapes. Of course, Seattle Betty did not think this. She struggled against it, she was so naive, thinking herself some kind of chic wizard, so receptive to the radio signal correspondences of the outer realms that she went antichrist-in-a-churchyard whenever Simon so much as brought it into the apartment. Even if he was probably smuggling it in, anyways, he who wears certainly cursed amulets over cashmere sweaters like peace signs, he who converses with everything from keyboard to the rain, yet remains insistent in his skepticism to the death. He needs it, needs it pretty bad, she has come to accept, and not just because it is their ticket or key or whatever.

Sometimes, still, she catches him conversing with the princess, which is what she calls her angel on the fritz, her blank shell of a supernova, with which Betty has a way of getting confused. In ethereal sequences of travel and seance she nearly forgets her own name, especially now with all this magic wound around her, the postpartum high of their success at *Mystic Rituals*, at seamlessly interweaving their writings on all their treasures, going so hysterically affectionate when they finally found it on a library shelf that they were kicked out - fuck a post-graduate degree. Fuck all degrees. They are bound together now, her bipedal balance a thing of the past. They needed to stay that way.

Click, the tape starts to buzz from inside the television's body, *click* goes an imaginary front door, and in the time it takes to register on the sharp blue square in front of her, Betty rushes to the bedroom door, closes and locks it, her reflection in the mirror hanging on the back of it bug-eyed and clearly guilty. Not that she wouldn't be totally hopeless if she was caught this way anyways - what unworrying reason would she have to lock herself in here? She

thought to take the stolen tape out of Simon's apartment to watch it, but couldn't think up a convenient vessel capable of playing it. Furthermore, its contents made her anxious. December 14th was all he had penned on its side, and then, obviously after the fact, "*ocular albinism*".

Clearly something was wrong with Betty if she couldn't even see him through a T.V. screen without smiling, even darkened with the silence and concentration of someone who had been locking himself away to make these "documentary" tapes since they flew the crown back - really, since they had found out that first night how powerful it was.

He's stoic, meditative. *December 14th, 1997, ten p.m., currently-* he reaches through the upper wall of the screen, up on his knees. *Zero degrees celsius. Since the findings of our previous session, I believe the best way to continue my research is by standardizing the temperate conditions of each session* - His head turned down, clearly taking a note as he talks, then bouncing up, as if talking straight to her, a white glint through the left side of his mouth. *I promise I don't enjoy hanging out in meat lockers. We're not so psychopathic just yet.*

It goes on like this. She's biting her nails again, didn't even notice, and even if she doesn't fully trust yet how Syoma is choosing to deal with the crown, something twists in Betty's stomach every time he looks at her. *I broke my own rule and watched a couple of these back, and I noticed something, or I may have, so* - his left hand suddenly in frame, that glaring bright circle around it - you had no way of even knowing how long he had been holding it - and already on his head.

The last time Betty saw this happen, she'd ran, and it turns out the instinct persists, just a little. His other hand reaching towards her, the frame now way zoomed in, half crown, half face, staring, something flickering, a twitch, sometimes darting away. His eyes are so hard to meet she spends ten seconds watching a kiss-curl on his temple and not even noticing that they aren't his anymore, that they have been erased.

When the frame pulls back, he's smiling, not his press-smile, the little white bird dancing in his iris swirling, wild, her love an acrobat, beautifully troubling, the pure hubris agonizing. Betty could have told him! He was always so skeptical, so unlike her, so *confident*. On

the verge of screaming, she's rocking, half her nails in her teeth by the time something settles in him, the cold of the locker, hopefully, and it's off.

There were a dozen of these tapes now. She hates that fact even more in this moment, finger hovering on the eject button, the slow movement of his eyes somewhere to the left of her, as if the filming of this doesn't even matter anymore to him, or hasn't yet returned. Staring, lips parted, then with both hands on his face, then softly, slowly. *I keep returning to something Foucault was...was speaking of, actually. It seems to help. Enkrateia, it's...Aristotle or something. I'm fucking cold.*

Then, as if to pluck it out of the air, he reaches out and replaces himself with darkness.

It is better to see Simon focus than not. Lately, it's been electrical-fire hazardous, centipedal trains of fairy lights, VCRs and telephones and those little tape recorders (the voices change, he insists, he's doing some long-haul research project on it that he has taken to a back burner since the crown). Astronomy, heart surgery. Lepidopterology - Betty was in the habit now of plucking dead moths and butterflies from city streets, hand cupped beneath the breakable thing in her pocket, spilling them across the kitchen island mortuary slab. The feng shui is in shambles - their eighth-floor palace looks like a futuristic library beset by thieves, like a changeling-gone-serial killer's psychedelic lair. The king can be...wonderful, but he can scare her to pieces, too.

"We're in denial, you know."

She met him at the corner store - he was early. Three blocks down her route to him. Or Betty's made herself late, wasting her time on that tape like she didn't trust him, then following her whim of scrubbing the dry-erase marker off every mirrored surface in the apartment. It had been that way for a week, but it was starting to get frustrating, these half-legible and half-allegorical affirmations-delusions that crossed out your face in a runny scribble when you stood in front of it.

When Simon turns into the wind to light a cigarette and they lock eyes, the smile grows onto his face like blood spreading under a shirt. He gives up on the cigarette which is probably

sensible because it's about to rain, Betty can smell it on the air, even though the sky is already that watery dark of twilight. He doesn't have the crown with him, dangling a red and white plastic bag from one wrist, the neck of a bottle of rum poking out, shoulder bag propped against the brick with the escaped slushy straws and cigarette pack plastics. Gathering her up like they haven't seen each other in centuries.

This slips away. One night, he comes home and strips their bedroom wall bare, murals it in mini rollers and secondhand spraypaint bottles with Gothic arches, ruby red, all abstracted roller-streaks like a palette knife. Fairy lights and cheap candles. The next night, he's counting forgotten years-old antidepressants on the edge of the bathroom sink. Sometimes, he's only a locked door, as if she didn't know he was using again, or he couldn't face up to the fact that he was. These are the things she remembers. She kisses him so hard their teeth smash together, yanking his head back so she can't look at his black eye. Something else that has slipped away. *I deserved it/ I'm so sorry for messing it all up/ please don't leave, princess.* It's becoming hard to decode these signals, run, stay, run. Every time she leaves, he falls apart; every time she stays, she gets a little harder. Death awaits at either angle.

"I'm not sure we're coming through this one. At least, I'm beginning to seriously doubt it. Notice how we didn't even have an autumn this year? That's how it works. Gets you in its sights while your brain's still on vacation-" a cigarette caught in his mouth for a moment with his bag drawn around his hip, wrangling the plastic-clothed bottle into a burrow only as wide as a handrail, brutalizing loose notes. "Pants down around your ankles. No chance in hell."

She had been getting sick of this wartime poet façade, but not too sick. There is something edgily romantic about it, the bombings across the sea, and here, everything so cold and dark, where you had to choose to live either in fear or anticipation - or denial. And they two engaged, the only living girls in Seattle.

"So why are we wasting our time being all, like, dour and reflective?" The twist of his head, back and forth.

"You're so sweet." A wistfulness in his voice. They play the usual game with two way-traffic, edging into the street with locked arms just slow enough that it'll give time for a

handful of southbounders to cross before they get there, but not enough time for the ones going north to intercept. It took such synchronicity of judgment. "I-I-I don't know, I can't shake this, this push." His thumb and forefinger latching around his forehead. "It's not helplessness, but the feeling that I *can* do something, that there's some dragon I'm supposed to be slaying." *Right on the nose, doctor.* "I guess I do just feel helpless." *Idiot.* "But I *really* think I'm onto something with my research, I do! It's one of the only things that feels...comforting? Certain?"

"I feel the same way." The two of them had breezed through Scandinavia weeks before this whole foreign conflict Betty doesn't even have it in her to keep up with, and Simon was smart in this way, brandishing this ruby-laden sunbeam like this is all a PR stunt, like the allure of such a powerful artifact uncovered in Iceland, as it was, in the shadow of all this cosmic, frighteningly Biblical drama, was only juiced by the carnage that dictated every newspaper headline. But it isn't their fault, after all, and Betty is trying to find a job, she is, shunning classes she no longer cares to finish, and Simon's trying to dissociate himself from the whole university before the gentle harassments regarding their academic relationship turn to legitimate rumors - hey, at least he has pride, right? Even though Betty is playing broken record saying it won't make a difference if anyone knows about them - and she's trying to keep up this regiment with the injections, and-

"We have *got* to get married, before it gets any worse."

Betty is repeating it to herself like a spell, this is the key, just believe in him, just a little longer and everything will be okay. But one day, she will be sick of wrestling his strengthening nihilism back from that unwavering belief. He is her shining one, her brightest star, occulted by ambition, by an invisible entropy in his head that is metamorphosing, threatening to shake him out of the sky. Betty knows this. *Enkrateia*, he says. His claws are dug in, hers too. They will reach it, this doorway soon, this kingdom in the sky circling her head. There has to be a way through, some kind of interdimensional portal, one that runs no risk of spitting them out the same as they went in.



“What happened to your mouth?” Certainly, he was going to notice and ask about it eventually. It doesn’t mean Betty’s thought of a lie. So she tells the king the truth, swirls a hand in the air, looks up, looks down, doesn’t look at him.

“It’s a personal... cathartic thing. I’m not exactly sure I-I don’t think I remember doing it.”

“Cronenbergian of you. And see how you’ve outlived it all?” A magic spell in reverse - see, she can do it, too. His head snaps in her periphery, a pale blur. “What was that, the-the Japanese manner you were infatuated with so long ago?”

“Ero guro.”

“That’s it.” You’re so perfect, princess, you’re so smart, you’re so-



In dreams, a memory, a handful of blood. He has to pull Betty’s away from her face with his one free hand still wet, twisting it, clamping it down on her forearm. Even though she doesn’t let him go, her head sinks down even further when he does, hair swinging forward, hidden. It feels like floating in a swimming pool with your wrists tied to your ankles. Gagged and blindfolded with the ribbons that are starting to feel more like avant-garde mummification tools than the sweetest way to hide her little curse. The water gone iron-red.

The portal, she kept claiming, you remember, right? We were trying to find the portal? Looking straight at him, crazy-eyed, as if he should know that, This time even worse than her Isabelle Adjani stunt - next chance at clarity it allows him, Simon needs to get that bread knife out of the bathroom sink - and instead of it getting easier, the incredible gnawing of sharp teeth on every soft thing inside him builds into a tearing, a brutalizing. *They’re getting tighter, every time we go through, it gets a little tighter, doesn’t it?* One mental stumble away from slicing his own arm open, pressing them together, or letting it drizzle in - feeling through his own blood,

even after it escapes, feeling it from inside her. This is what he was thinking when he magicked himself numb and broke his ribcage in two places, the pain still horrifying enough he had lost his voice. It was what he was thinking when his hand was inside her mouth.

If he were less faithful in the universe, the king would find the sculpture the princess has been carving into his wall as brazen an omen as acid rain. That, and the lovely verisimilitude of it, her endearingly cannibalistic inclinations on display - whether or not consciously applied, the lacing together of their bodies, bandaged in flowing silk at once high fashion and baroque under their upthrusting haloes. If it is an omen of the gate they climb towards so excitedly now, the spires visible over the horizon, then so it is. And yet, a startling lack of owls.



The last tape still fresh in her memory from that afternoon, she had gone back. Back to the chapel. She was brave now. She had brought a weapon. Her adze. It was already in her fist when she decided to go back. To pull back the veil. But Simon was onto her. He had shortened her leash. Had she broken the rules? He'd taken her key.

It's what she hisses down the phone at Babette, who didn't bat an eye when she was all but handed a dorm room to herself two years ago because of Betty's so frequent absconding to her uptown kingdom or even further. Who doesn't care about much, but is always talking smack about things her errant friend does that don't seem smart, like *this* didn't seem smart. But Babette still owes her, something, anything, she thinks, shaking in the phone booth. *I don't know where else to run.*

When she does not run, Betty hovers often against the bathroom door, half-shoed, waiting for the sound of keys in the lock in the hallway that meant Simon wasn't just out for a cigarette but was disappearing again, her relief at avoiding another altercation outweighing her concern for his stability. She'd cut him to pieces, that psychotic Osiris, if she thought she might sew them back together in a manner more functional. Erase the spell from his brain that he

couldn't keep from his mouth, the one that made him bad, or slice the chords that gave it voice, or the tongue that lifted it into the freezing air. Feeling them out behind her back, the wing-clipping scissors in the desk drawer, their location long since memorized. No more fingers with which to lift the crown onto his bleeding head, no more fingers stretched to the floor, tapping out one-handed echoes of the most despondent Radiohead tracks on that battered Casio for long hours of the cold nights, no more separation from him if she didn't want it. She could carry it forever, his ring finger, the one with the scarred knuckle from an uneven punch to a shattered window; his eye, the one that always looked milky, paler than its twin; his upper left canine. Maybe Betty is the crazy one. No, no, she absolutely is.

“Betty, what the hell, man,” Fluffy static sigh. “How is it like this?”

“How is it like *what?*”

“This like, existential, all-consuming shit. It’s not good for you. You’re still as naive and obsessed as you were before you even met him, you see that, right? I get that you have the book, and stuff, but that was like...a year ago.” The sides of the phone booth rumble every time she kicks it, drowning out the bullshit. Had it even been that long? What was she thinking? And there’s no way she can speak of the crown to someone on the outside. “Maybe you just, you know, pick a direction, go do something else with your life, that astronomy study, with uh...uh...Egypt, right? Mummification stuff? Or just come back to *class*, for a start. One way or another, you need to say bye-bye dreamland already.”

“Fuck you.”

“Open your eyes.”

“No, *fuck* you. You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

One of her last bridges burned, then. How the hell did Betty stumble into her wildest dream, in the flesh, and it felt like she was screwing herself? Perhaps she was guilty of stifling even the concept of outside friendship, canceling spring break plans from train stations, riding down love on a line of stardust. Emergency excursions to fucking Madagascar, short-circuiting

the whole city's power only for to see him better. Look, he's even got you saying shit like *perhaps*. Stupid girl. But their loss, right? They'd never see it, they'd still be staring at their hands with their mouths full of her awkward work, blink at the back cover and drop it back in the library depository, the princess of Seattle with her hood pulled up and the other half of one of the last clove cigarettes from the kitchen, bouncing on a street corner and waving to no one. Free. At once betrothed, dumped by the side of the road like a mutt, and free. Always in orbit. She mulls it over until the wind smokes her cigarette for her, watching something in the wash of a streetlamp that looks like a peacock butterfly, but surely couldn't be.

"Chauffeur?"

Talking to bugs, are we? No, dummy, this is a special butterfly, she knows enough of entomology, just barely enough, so fucking noncommittal, her usual angle. An angel!

He's going to come save you.

A lure? The shimmering wings bobbing around the corner of the city garden, between the flayed bodies of empty trees. A will-o'-wisp! *Where is he?* But the answer is on the back of her tongue, he's gone too deep. Okay, so *let's play each other's part*, she decides, hot on the butterfly trail. She knows Simon's in there, in his tower, but he's been made a prisoner of the evil spirit that snuck in after them from Iceland and he can't come to her.

Yeah, damn right she's in dreamland. It's no different than any foreign country, all you have to do is play by the rules. So she will find a way to undo the curse, flaming sword, her poor-girl's lyre of Orpheus and a length of horsehair dangling two halves of her snapped violin bow from either end.

As usual, the princess is being a little dramatic. Betty still has her key, after all, still turning it over in her fingers deep in her pocket, but Simon must have changed the locks while she slept or something, or he had to have done it while she was in class. It just couldn't fit right, anymore. *His* key is the one that always sticks in that ancient lock. She's exhausted her pocket change trying to call him. She's pounded on the door until the neighbors came out. A pang of guilt still racks her every time she thinks about the last tape, about how she came back like she

said she wouldn't until he evened out and couldn't bring it up, couldn't ask if he was okay, couldn't keep him safe. Betty is supposed to be the one kept safe. She is the one who doesn't seem to know her own body and its place in the universe, running in circles, she is the one who goes too deep.

So she doesn't cry the next afternoon when her tilted orbit leads her, *smack*, around the corner of the bodega aisle, armful of cheap wine, straight into him. She claps her free hand over her face. She keeps her mouth shut. She stares at the freezers, their glittering perma-frost windows. *Were you hiding from me in some other dimension? Trapped behind the T.V. screen? Prove to me you didn't just slip out from that freezer door, prove it, Simon, why else do you look like this, St. Laurent and all clean-shaven and your eyes all pretty and sparkly-*

"I've been looking for you all over town, sweetheart, where were you?" Their arms all a tangle now, voices low, hidden like they would have been when they used to care about reputation. This is so stupid, she thinks. This is so stupid. The window into their bedroom has been open this entire time, even if it faced the back of the building and the fire escape; she could pull it until her fingers were red, it wouldn't go back down. He'd fused it open or something. Hey, it's *your* apartment. It is his apartment.

"Wait a minute, you're the one who disappeared on-"

"Can we get out of here, first? Then we can talk?" A fluorescence does seem to be trying to chew on them in this terrible butterfly house of car juice and chemical candy. They all but run. He asks if she wants to keep running. She does. A club, a fucking library, anything, please, can we just take another new combination of turns until we find a new gas station like we used to do? When she couldn't keep circling the block the night before, and she didn't know what else to do, Betty climbed a tree, fell asleep. She was used to getting drunk in the park. Tagging messages to him in forgotten language on well-traveled streets. Waiting, just waiting, telling herself it was just like always, just one of his little breaks, that it was better to be free this time, and not trapped in there with him.

It is a war of dissonance between the future and the past. A dissonance between the many selves, projections and shadows. Simon and her lost somewhere in the crossfire, half-escaped.

“My key is broken.”

“Hm?” A candy wrapper skids across the aisle of the bus floor. It looks like a butterfly, too.

“My key. It wasn’t working. I thought you locked me out. I was worried maybe you’d-” His face totally blank, eyes glazed, fixed on her, Betty flounders, lies. “That you were mad I watched your tape.”

It’s the wine they swapped between them waiting for this bus, bleeding her so conspicuously handled backpack dry in under ten minutes like they are catching the last bus out of Seattle, and they are the only two who could feel the ground shaking with each approaching missile strike. Betty no longer drinks to keep up - an underage drinker's common naivete - she runs laps around him. She’s so lightheaded her hand isn’t even cold in his, clammy, prickling when Simon unfastens them and turns from her, only long enough for her to blink, then it’s back in her lap, a ring of keys inside spilling into her open palm. She pulls the keys from her coat pocket, slowly, disbelieving.

“I need to get that lock changed. But you can’t run out on me, now, we have to stick together.” When Simon holds his hand out for his stolen keyring, he does it palm up, then twists, quick, and takes it from her fingers instead. Allowing only for a short glimpse of the bruise in the center of his palm, or maybe a burn, reddish-black.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that, you were in a hurry.” What could he possibly be doing to cause something like that? Was it any worse than the frostbite in her brain? The same hand is now on top of her head, fingers a dome, pulling it to the side with no resistance. “See? On perfectly straight.” They go into one another, his hands, and they go over his face, fingers bound together like a book, chin atop hands atop knees. Drawn up, mud-scuffed italian leather oxfords wedged into the bracket of the bus seat in front of them. *But you changed it*, she wants

to scream to this entire bus of zombie-people on their way home from classes they'll die before they pass, jobs they'll never finish, *you did change it, you did, you're scared of that tape, aren't you? I know you way too well to believe you. Or I did before this. Admit you changed it, that you were scared.*

"I certainly was scared, how couldn't I be? What if you slipped out the back gate, or worse, and something happened?"

Oh, don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare. But she's talking only to herself. The channel is closed. Maybe Betty should heed his concern just as well, her jaw set, staring down at the frost-dusted carpet in their Beauty-and-the-Beast library where she found him in the seizure of his research, half-draped across a chaise that looks like a diamond with his elbows on an atlas-sized astronomy volume. There's a cigarette holder balanced between his lips, a long, noir-style one, but there isn't a cigarette in it. When she tracked him down to confront him over the key, the king had recited his explanation with such levity that it gave Betty a head rush. Enkrateia, right? Is that right?

"I wouldn't do that. I didn't know before."

"And what doors do you so desire opened, darling?" *Oh my god, it isn't about that,* Seattle Betty screams, but Princess Betty, for some reason, flashes hard back to that slice of darkness she found in the catacombs, the mausoleum-chapel she was too frightened to unlock. She's still working on an answer when he takes the cigarette holder between his fingers and jabs the page in front of him with it like he'd do to a slide. Betty hadn't noticed the Book of the Dead is lying face down on the polished floor.

"Look, this is the only door we need, isn't it? Whatever you're looking for behind all these locked doors, I'll get for you, or I'll find for you, or I'll make for you. Or kill for you. Or be for you." The tail end of that list spoken around the pipette in his teeth as he shuffles pages around, raised upon one swanlike arm. "Marcy wants to be a crown-bearer. She wants to ride in on a wolf or goat or something like it's a horse. Did she tell you that?" His laugh is short, high, mad. And yes, Betty *has* been helping him plan their wedding, quietly working up with him the time, the place, the conditions, another one of his impromptu "spells".

“It’s so close now, you know? The portal.” She’s not thinking of flaking. It was her idea to begin with.

The next few minutes all play out before her: would the king really ration it worth the concern or the effort, frankly, to prepare the sentries for another fire-escape-scape, another ‘Adjani Stunt’ as they call it, another ribbon? He’s gone from blue to yellow recently, the spool must have run out. Anyway, why would she want to upset herself right now by pushing it? That’s how they get to these points that they do, these bloodlettings, these alleyway fights these circuitous, abandoning trips, through realms metaphysical and terraneous. *Shadow work*, he’d call it, it’s healthy, sweetheart. Consensual chaos. *Enkrateia*.

So, petrified, Betty cannot answer, hardly capable of meeting his eyes as she finds him now so beautifully macabre, bleached ends and blueberry-muffin grey, bizarre, biological. Slowly revealing it to her in mirrored rooms, this unruly, kabukian creature Betty lets herself accept has always swam in these chlorinated waters and is not frightening but rather an elegant, psychosexual being that contained and coveted the source of power. Its flaming pearlescent eyes orbs of light reflecting red and gold as it works as ark and conduit to the energies of the crown. The crown which was not taking over her Simon but was sort of unfurling inside like those magic-grow dinosaur capsules, and sort of was him after all. Or at least no less of him than this newspaper clipping of a press photo, desaturated and grainy with her one eye caught like a drunk butterfly in the bottom left, or these polaroids bookmarking every volume Betty has never finished reading, tulip-headed, dizzy-eyed Hindu Kush forest fairies lost and forgotten between the annals of Foucault and Fight Club. Perhaps Simon is not entirely alone in that labyrinth of his.



Simon’s blonde-headed boy hovers in the street where the bus should be, watching him with eyes so blown wide and pink mouth trembling, he almost considers acknowledging his presence. Betty is pressed up at his shoulder, again, where she belongs (her words, if she’d ever stick to them). She smells like peach schnapps and a cigarette burn on the collar of her jacket.

They're both drunk, but something else is working on him, chiseling away up there, a lobotomy from a poltergeist.

"Would you love me if I was a butterfly?" A lobotomy from a butterfly. With little bug tools. Cute, cute, *so* cute. "I should have been a butterfly. Or maybe I'm screwed and that's where I'm heading next, and it's-it's the universe giving me clues, or...or-" Her head is almost completely sideways on his shoulder. Arms criss-crossed, gripping her shoulders.

"Simon?"

He can't really hear her, is the problem, not over the screaming. The boy is calling to him in Icelandic, he's figured that much out, but Simon only remembers enough from their trip up there months ago to recognize the articulations, more of a whiny yelling than a scream. Whatever it is, it's seriously wrapped up in the crown, which is seriously, carefully wrapped in a sweater in his bag now, its electromagnetic feelers buzzing once in a while down his leg. No coincidence, this kid is a long way from home. He should jot it down as best he can and translate it, because it's sort of repetitive, his calls, each lilting at the end. *Oh, come on, now.*

"It's a *sphinx*."

"What?"

"A sphinx. Guarding the portal." Carefully, Simon slips his hand under the flap, and forces through its wrapping and to the metal, the tips of his fingers vibrating at the touch in a way not unlike the caress of an electric fence. He lets it trickle up to his head, cascade back down as glittery rain.

"How many children were killed over there this week?" Betty's turned just enough to look at him, face slack, eyes narrowing as she processes this question. Simon wishes he could tell her this isn't her fault, but that he's so glad, so glad his fist is wrapped around the crown and he feels so, so, in control, and getting closer to fully comprehending that control. "More than usual? That's why he's been following me. I finally get it." Betty follows his gaze into the street. It occurs to Simon the same way an open flame left unattended might, that they never

talked about the tape. That he doesn't even know what's on it, and he should, because the way she looks at him now makes him feel weird and angry. He tightens his hand on the crown, and everything else loosens.

"Simon."

"Do you know? Neither do I. Wow, this is crazy."

"Simon."

You know, I'm really glad we're never having kids it would just make this harder--

"-Don't." He remembers it like it was just last week, clear as day, though the Simon Petrikov in this scene probably should have been institutionalized, so far gone he was blind even to the little things like the half-conscious, desperate jab in her voice.

"I really am. If not all the evil in the world, we would find some way to kill it ourselves, right? Betty, what the hell are we doing, anyways? Why'd you come back? A-are you sure you meant to?"

He had meant it.

Several feet back from him now, she had thrown her hands up to her neck like she knew that, like she had heard the four words that he, or whoever's voice it was, didn't say. Because it wasn't him, it wasn't his voice, at least not back then. *Betty! Betty, I'm sorry, you know how I get, I'm your selkie. Or, maybe you're mine? Isn't the idea of that silly, the two of us in the shallows trying to rip off each other's skin with our soft little paws for three years? Marry me. Now. Damn the rules, damn the stories the fucking stories what do they know and what does it fucking matter it's not real none of this is real in fact this is all something we made up to take the edge off and you know that as well as I do, sweetheart so it's alright in the end, whenever the end does come.*

Now they know how to communicate without talking over one another, him and this misty, white star Betty made of him through some kind of horrible, forced cytokinesis, who just

can't die because it still lives inside him. They sit entwined. He needed to only ask, and it told him, just as he once dove, blizzard-blind, into the labyrinth of his head to request, please, lead me back to her, show me where to find her, and it gave him that, drew him back into step. The madness wouldn't kill you as long as you made love to it - and it could read your thoughts. It could move your limbs. It could use your mouth.



Black tears up in a line from the bow in the king's lip. It breaks the curse. It always breaks the curse. Little scratches on his ribs, hardly cracking apart the skin in little pinpricks, a handful of bloody noses. Seattle Betty had convinced herself one dizzy night that there was something wrong with her inside, something evil snarling up her veins, her head going foggy, and not sure if it was how heavy they'd gone on the self-medication earlier that day, or if she was losing her grip on an instinct she had so far been able to keep docile, but she had awoken to her left arm dead asleep and curled beneath a canvas of wobbling binding sigils finger-painted in flaky, dry blood. This was all laughable, of course, forgotten the moment he shut the door on the subject. He's smiling at her now, mouth half-open in surprise, then pulls himself up on one arm, cigarette holder rolling between the cushions, and runs the tip of a finger across his upper lip to collect the bluish runoff, welling thick as a raindrop at the end of the gash.

"I-I wasn't sure you still could anymore." Eyes flickering up between hers and the blood he smears away with his thumb, as if confused by the bizarreness of her claim - but *come on*, that was fair. It certainly doesn't look healthy, or human, or-or-or... And she is all but a corpse, herself.

"I deserved that, didn't I?"

"I'm sorry." *Enkrateia, princess.*

His skinny hand up to his chin, which collects another little river from his busted lip, the king is staring at her like a begging animal, smiling in that constant way that he does, now. Immediately, the princess knows what he means, slings the key around her neck and into his palm and watches him smear his other thumb across its gears, hovering a centimeter away, changing it in midair. He had all the twists and turns of it memorized?

It's a tricky business, their twin victim complexes, their possessive nature. The violence that gripped her, the only possible evolution of Betty's fanatical young idolization, the satisfaction of simple victories such as the side of a hand on a page, an image in a photograph, three-finger touches only leading way to more possibility - a borrowed scarf, a tongue, a bed, binding rituals, names. The princess takes the bloodied back of his hand and holds it to her lips, then, when his smile breaks once more, sharp and glowing, drops it, drops to one knee on the edge of the chaise, and takes his face in her hands. Twists it, and licks his mouth all the way across, a dark smear over his stupid, dazed smile when she pushes him back.

Would Betty have done that back in Seattle? No, they had both lost themselves a bit more, that was why he kept using that mantra of his - he was failing at keeping it in. In the same way she blames Simon for seducing her into a violence she once did not know, she has become a catalyst to his delusions and knows it - they'd always gone off the rails easier together, shy, geekish alone, dangerously flammable in each other's sights. Pushing it, pushing it, locking the door, hiding the key, drink me, take me, roll me and smoke me, please, please, I don't care, I don't care, worry about it later, until she couldn't see anymore, couldn't breathe, so deep inside she still doesn't think she'll ever have the strength to pull away.

The first time they had done this, this licking of wounds, it hadn't been by design. Before Simon had invited even the idea of evil to her, Betty had smuggled it in herself, walking right through his door with the blood still stinging against her sleeve, and they were getting way too close with one another now for him not to notice. A moment's touch on the spine of a book at shoulder height, and he was half-dragging, half-pressing her into the bathroom, not giving her any choice in the matter, tunnel-visioned in an enchanting way, but humiliating still. Hand on the back of her head, yanking loose her ponytail. Two weeks before, he had finally killed her. He had finally kissed her for the first time. That zombie virus had started going around. Or it was the vampires, but one way or another, she suddenly couldn't get deep enough, trying every

door, letting herself run free only to languish in these fruitless, clawing efforts to break into his torso.

“There.” She had opened her eyes to his hands at her wrist, pulling something sharp edged and still soft, the ribbon from her hair - into a bow. Such a perfect bow, his fingers pulling the ends of these tight and even not quite yet committed to her memory. “*Doesn’t that feel better?*” And it did. So she let him keep doing it.



“February the eighth.”

“This tape is not to be included in the body of work I have compiled up until our last entry.”

There is no use, now, in watching this tape. Simon simply wakes up loading it in the VCR, as he said he would, telling himself he needed to see it, to see what Betty saw. Whatever could he have done? What could the crown have done? At the sight of himself, his hands go into fists, then spring open just as quick, leaving him hissing in pain. The frostbite is getting worse. He is addicted to making it snow, ever since that last night Betty ran out, a pattern he has started to process easier in the past few weeks, that maybe she would vanish for an hour, two, creeping back in under the cover of night, shutting all the windows she could, turning off the ceiling fan, Petrikov pretending to be sleeping, her moving soundlessly around, drunk, an errant flake of snow, only to collapse in a breeze of nicotine and sweet wine, burrowing into him like she didn’t remember what happened between them, either.

Now, these mountains of quilts surrounding the dark gashes of his window-eyes lie untouched, twisted in the piles he built of them to fruitlessly guard the silk from dripping paint, and the heat bill beckons, but he really doesn’t care. With luck, this stretch of Betty’s little portal wouldn’t last until the first of the month. How he can gauge this whatsoever, Simon can’t explain, only lay receptive to the soft gush of wind moving through the open windows, over the bed, transcribing each note, turning it around. They’d talk for hours, this feral, bitter,

needy thing with its promises of grandeur, him casting the snow up at the ceiling fan, repeating each syllable as they die as tears around him on a bare mattress. Something Betty did to him kept this fever away, and she's been gone, again, and he isn't sure if - and a whispery, powdered sugar voice says *she's gone, Simon, don't worry, let's do it again, she can't try to stop you, you don't have to hide it anymore, what you really want, what you really need.*

Long distance call. The signal is touchy, because the crown isn't here right now, it's in the ceiling panel above his desk. It hurts not to need her more than this, but Betty really has to stay away, or he'd ask her to go bring it back. She'd do it too, and she'd know she shouldn't, but she'd do it anyway. Simon's sending out a message of his own, under his own radar: *Betty, you have to help me get it out. Please. I can circle exactly where it is inside me.*

Always looking inwards, Betty has this way of reaching around inside and conjuring up something in there you didn't even know existed, apparitions and storybook villains and surgeons and kittens. All he's ever found is entrails and little pieces of metal and new stains to soak away in the bathroom sink. She flicks his mouth open like a latch and draws a violin bow from behind her back.

If the king knew it to be so easy, he would say to her *look, let's take this apart, let's really sit together and unzip and take our notes, does this look a few shades wrong to you? Is this supposed to be moving a little faster? This is too cold - hey, you know what, is the organ store open this late? The snow has all but melted and there's that place across the street that sells the sake in those cute little cans you like those little cans-*

Or *Here, no, hold it vertical, drag down. It must be easier to do it on oneself. But you don't even know if it'll make you feel better or worse, sweetheart. Why open this door, when it hurts and it's all messy, and look, maybe I remember the steps of a thoracotomy, but, let's be serious, here, love-*

Or *What, you're hungry? Here's a bone to gnaw on!* That's how he sounds. Not as if he feels good about it! But with the crown, they are both hard as diamonds, he knows for a fact that his organs are a wreck, that he probably wouldn't live five minutes if the power decided to go out.

*-so what difference does it make if you think there's something wrong with your heart, huh? Like I said, I remember the steps, I'd never let anything happen to you.*³

The king had found he was more powerful than expected when separated from the crown, but he's still no good at unfeeling. It's been freezing the skin off his palms like stigmata, and it's worse now than it was last week, or the week before, and Simon hasn't even been paying attention, but the second he does, he can hardly hold a cassette anymore. Keys are out of the question, bottlecaps impossible. What he *can* do is turn the tape back on.

"I'm not sure what this is for. I felt lucid. I wanted to take advantage. I wanted to...uh, what, get to the point? While there's still time? If there is?" Questions, questions, questions, who the fuck are you talking to? Who?

The screen's angle is fucking jagged, but the king can still glimpse the edge of a doorway above his reflection's head every time it moves, and it's easier to look at it and think of its intrinsic promise than it is to look in any mirror these days - it's his eyes, every time they meet, it's someone else, the way acid or some childish play-pretend Bloody Mary games could fool you. Stand there and look at yourself until your body starts to resist it, until it starts to slough off what you've spent a lifetime micromanaging, and the truth comes out - that you don't know who this is at all, that you're just a consciousness, only possessing a physical body that you were convinced since birth was only yours, and could not be usurped. Ocular illusion, that's all, *maybe if you didn't shill out for a doctorate of dead shit instead of the few things still living, you'd know that.* There it is, your breakthrough! In film, in living-ish flesh.

I get it, ok? I get it, you don't have to keep telling me. I knew it was stronger than me, and I didn't care. I still don't.

"It's this war. I have to blame it on that, to some extent, right? It's telling me how it will end, and with me at the crux of it, right where the tide turns. Compelled to...to get it over with, but to survive, too. To allow this power to move me, with all its rage. But...I find it hard to trust this rage, these terrible

³ In the interest of clarity and never lying to you, it's really only easier to tell you this than it would ever be to tell you you've caught my schizo and you're on me again, that there's nothing wrong with you, you're just a little high and dry, princess-hate-machine girl.

impulses. The-the hallucinations, they are so...primordial. They cannot touch me, but I-I feel them inside still. Crawling, needing something from me I don't know how t-to give so I just sit there, let it take-"

Smack, somehow it works, the screen swallowing itself up once the remote hits its frame in the vague location of the power button. If only it were that easy to knock out your batteries, to break the glass, huh?



She finishes it in the middle of a sleepless night. Right on schedule. The last night before the opening of the Regulus Portal. Betty was never any good at finishing anything without Simon. Theses, engagements, projects like this. It brings an unfamiliar, rushing high across her, with tools thrown aside save for the adze that has managed to stay hooked through the sash of her dress, up against the back wall. Strangely out of breath, as if she had to tear them out of herself by hand, a mess of ribbons and cables in tight coils of strangely pornographic rigidity, not unlike medieval torture device scans in books she used to like, the snaking lengths of these questionable and surgical devices gripping jagged flesh of withdrawn arms and ankles, Bouguereau's Psyche in reverse, and maybe somewhat forceful, but only for the fact that Betty never fixed her mouth, left it ragged, a black hole. It was poignant or whatever. Before that, it was dumbed down to an approaching kiss.

Freehandedly scaled one-to-one, it's an organic mirror, that's all, deliquescent and still. The serenity and elegance of sainthood powder-puffed all over a scene from Dante. If things were still normal, this would be an open invite to a spiel of the king's on the act of creation, on Frankenstein's folly. But there is something stillborn in it, no matter how you look at it. Releasing them from their icy grave could not invoke, what, life? Much less a couple hundred pounds of flesh and bone. It's only an effigy, a true shesepankh. Ha. Haha.

"Betty?"

This time, he hasn't snuck up on her, is moving across the shadowed wall like a wraith, going quiet for a moment, careening to a halt. He's looking at it, for real, wavering, arms clamped around his ribcage, the rest of him a ghost's tail. Betty can't seem to open her mouth, and maybe she truly isn't allowed that, but it is not dissimilar to the iron choke of silence that came from all wild creatures wandering into your path or campsite. Petrified.

The king, index finger out, swiping it across his carved cheek.

"Couldn't sleep?" He is like a star. It's only a trick of the ice, the princess knows it well, by now, just like she used to know the rain, the moonlight dashing across it, ricocheting all around them. Every plane of his creation with faces turned at him, a thousand of his victims fainting as he turns on his heel, laughs, backs away until he hits the wall. Right under the façade of her face.

"I could ask you the same, couldn't I?"

"You could do that."

Maybe all his dramatics would be lost on someone else, five seconds leaning, twisted, against the wall, against his own shoulder, shadowing it, his whole body a perfect curve, then dropping the act, striding over, quick, falling down next to her. For some reason, when he nears her, she thinks she feels warmer.

"I can't handle my dreams."

"Blame the moon, it's getting close to full." As if to remind herself there still is one, she cranes her neck and sets her eyes on it, waning, thinning herself, but it isn't all that different from the view to her left. "Never?"

She turns to face him when he doesn't answer, and on cue, his head swings halfway to meet her, cornered between wall and shoulder. Eyes somehow bigger, or glossier, reflecting the

dark of their past hue, eyelashes still as long, blonded. Something behind them cuts into the princess in a way that she can't feel but *knows*. Disrobed. Deassessioned, if only for a moment.

"I can't..." The piece of metal they treat like a golden fleece has not followed him. Betty watches how he grapples with himself without it, weird and kind of soft all of a sudden. It's funny, what a difference of character could result from a change so simple, when you didn't really belong to yourself. "You know, sometimes, it gets really uh...quite angry with me, if I try to stave it off. Makes me sick." Simon was sick when all of this went south, looking as he does now, this deadening expression and breathless, feverish affect. Acting as if nothing was real, clearly hallucinating sometimes, so that Betty could only stare at him and wait eagerly for some fucking explanation, the answers to any of her mounting questions. It never seemed to cross his mind that she was owed even one.

At least now, he seems to have evened out - didn't they used to love taking their expeditions together to the z-axis? Doesn't their kingdom prove his faculties - and doesn't Betty see yet how right it was to run, to lock themselves away together, waiting, safe and hidden, for a portal to take them out of there forever? Before they run out of magic? Their little corner now, in the shadow of their twins on the wall, is starting to feel like a bubble. An invisible chamber with an air supply clearly demarcated.

"It-it can bring me right to the edge, until I have to open my mouth just to breathe, and it's always, you know, cocked and loaded." There they go, his hands, their glossy arrowhead points, always painted now, roaming around, entangling each other, wrapping around his jaw, hiding. Dancing around his mouth as if he isn't sure whether or not he needs to shut up. "It doesn't sleep when I do. And then, there's this spirit, hallucination, whatever that always comes as an owl, a big, golden owl, and *he's* not going to let me be until I solve his little...sphinxey riddle." One hand fluttering around at that, illustratively flippant, tonally hopeless. "*Fuck*, princess, I need to tell you something."

"Anything." This clarity of his has her on edge, desperate, fallen against the wall, all but sunk into his shoulder. His hands over his face, side to side, his tousled hair swirling around.

"Alright." Hands down, flat, smack, against his knees.

Not looking at her, but her wall. She knows it's going to be bad.

"Marceline...we sort of...we fell out. A long time ago. But she'd be around and, well, she knew this girl - I mean, not even human, but she sort of looked like you. Acted like you. God, I don't remember anything, just how bad it hurt. And it was so hard to go on after you left, centuries just...gone. As if I didn't know what direction I had been running my whole life, and my legs didn't work, anymore, and all there was left was my needing you and this...this body that only lived as a vehicle for the crown, that uh...that creature inside of it. Hypnotized...braindead, really. But so angry. So angry that I didn't have you."

Some horrible beast is stirring under the princess' skin.

"Anyways, I guess there was this whole thing, then, you know, I realized that she wasn't you. I was so out of it, I don't know what it was I did, what...magic I still had control over, but somehow...I-I don't know, I don't remember. I just know she became sort of obsessed with me at some point, and I just realized how messed up everything was. How pathetic, that-that I would just blindly...throw myself at anyone who even reminded me a little bit of...of..."

He still can't look her in the eye, but it's telling, how his thumb has been drawing, very subtly, across that place on his ribcage he doesn't let her see.

"Well, somehow, it gave me the clarity to realize what I had let the crown do to me, what it was turning me into, the creature that it needed for a host. So...so I-I learned to mediate it...but...but things still aren't right."

"What happened to her?"

"Whatever happened wasn't my fault." A quick little parry. "But I do, I plan to make it right! *Everything* right! That's what tomorrow is about."

The parasite inside her is twisting her brain stem into knots. It was the mention of that magic. The concept that it was the source of his power over whoever he wanted. Was the magic

to blame for every time Betty came back? Every time she tried to leave him and lost? No, no she thought it through every time. She cannot think herself so dumb.

“Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Yeah, alright.”

She’s smiling, hardly noticing she is. So Simon had always been just as obsessed with her as she was with him. The princess doesn’t even have it in her to worry about some other fill-in-the-blank girl that occupied a space in her absence. She just doesn’t care. Should he expect her to care? The look on his face is impossible, slack, his breathing slow, heavy.

“Do you want to go skating?”

When she was getting her footing back post-comet, fuck, post-*coma*, they’d spent hours skating. Whatever it was that had possessed her, exhausted her power, this ritual mitigated things, took her back to a familiar place, and it kept her quiet, preoccupied. Their focus on one another always so intense: gliding, sometimes only standing still, a night breeze gently pushing at them across a lake as wide as a crater. Simon must have fallen into it hard, he’s become so *good* at it without her, but he was always like that, throwing himself into things unheeded.

Study him, in this case. Drop him in a room with anything like a piano. Put him in skates, ivory leather. You can’t make sense of it. *Whatcha doing with Psychofag, Betty, tag-team Frankenstein? You gonna summon him a dick to suck?* “Hey, not a bad ide-” *crack!* Half the USC goth scene bore witness then to that insignificant player hooked three feet back before toppling over in a muddle of chain and ratty hair, and Betty never even had to stop walking. *I think I just broke my hand*, is all he ever said about it, wringing it out, sliding across three octaves. He didn’t break it. He didn’t even sprain it. Betty is suddenly reminded of the vampire they had killed together.

Anyways, he's obviously holding back for her. It's so wonderful to not have to worry about when or where the ice is safe, he keeps saying, and she thinks of the manufactured rink in the city that sucked them in every time they tried to pass it, high, always attached at the fingers, sometimes only spinning each other around in misshapen circles. In the forest extending behind the castle, every tributary is another road, even if the ground surrounding the ice cannot be traveled. You can follow this forever if you want to, the king tells her, sliding backwards into the dark of the holloway, it never goes back uphill. Trusting him, she lets go, the wind taking her, because where is there to go, if not after him? The banks of survival are something she cannot touch, despite them burgeoning on all sides of her, Betty lets her gaze drop to her skates and finds herself moving unheeded, only reflections at her feet.

Then, one of the truest sensations she thinks she's felt since she came to the castle bursts from the slush of fluid in her skull, and the veiny trees start to tighten, and things start to get dark, and-

"Hey, Simon?" Why should she be worried? Should she even care? The river turns into a whirlpool in the dark that she spins on the surface of like a leaf. Then heavy, quicksandy, something she used to think about so much, when she was at least semi-autonomous, all that time once spent in Florida marshland, knowing good and well it wasn't like in the movies, but wanting it to be. Sacrificing rocks into the depths when finally she did find some, mind on a Björk song she can hardly remember now, only the melody. Her bones are so dense now, and yet so crystalline, as if supported by butterfly wings extended behind her, certainly not belonging to either of the two of them, but familiar as her own.

Everything swims, everything that escapes this hurricane, running to the basement of her, anyways. Swish, swish, swish, the smell of rain on cardboard, spattering against brick and concrete with every passing car. A dead rat. Giggling. No, not her, her head, but from what it lays against. Scrunchie holding on by a tangle. A hand cold as death slipping against her side. Not a stream of black syrup on an ice cream cake, but an alleyway flooding.

"Fuck. *Fuck.*" Again? Right now? Betty is gathering her bearings, an unfamiliar scarf, the body behind her. The slushy ground under her boots tooooooo smooth. The second she starts to look around, hands appear around her, her entire body coming into existence in a

bang. Sharp corner of the abandoned glass factory. The holographic glow off the bus stop sign. All of this of her, and all of this tangled in the yoke around her back.

“*Wrong portal.*” Something very tenebrous and hard about this little joke, a subdued breathlessness beneath it. It takes a moment for Betty to register it. Cold, cold. Is this what it is like to be an ember? Is it cold, the flesh that suffocates you? All he would have to do is twist his wrist towards her with the right tool fluttering silver in his fingers, and she'd be an ember and he'd be a scar, wait, no, a star.

Stifling the tremor it causes with a free hand, his chin pushing into collarbone-well, that immortal smile that wasn't quite grimace, wasn't quite psychopathic, wrapped around something...weak, animal, the soft underside stretched out, there for the breaking. If she had held her ear to his chest, Betty might have been able to hear him.



Without Betty, nothing survives. At every turn is a vampire, a zombie, and the worst of all, a body that could only lie still. Sometimes, it was laying bare in the open, leftovers like so many chicken bones down the side street from the sketchiest joint in town, crammed between that and the neighboring hookah lounge's dumpsters. Sometimes, they had something you needed, so you had to check every single pocket. For every single body. A few memorable bodies:

- ◇ Gas station clerk, blood and rancid sweat contaminating a starched uniform that could be pieced into so many bandages, their three terrible cigarettes, two cracked by the deadweight press of the back pocket of his jeans against the linoleum.
- ◇ The rooftop anorexic, teenaged in a wedding dress, the bodice that juts like a figurehead five inches from the chest splashed with something that looks like laundry detergent. Water-damaged notebook tumbled into the storm drain that he couldn't bring himself to touch.

◇ A torso, turned to display its woodblock-aqueous color tattoo of a dharmic figure with fox eyes lowered, her cheeks still rosy, untouched by the mud soaking through her canvas' circumstantially cropped sweater.

It takes no more than twenty-eight days for both of them, but mostly Petrikov, to regret lab girl, who once upon a time and looking much too worse for wear for the accuracy of her propositioning to truly be embarrassing, offered up the crown from her backpack, a crumbly, limp ziploc of half-melted snow, to use the telephone for four terrible hours. Not a single one going through, finally giving way to that excruciating moment when she finally let her stiff hand off the receiver that divebombed, the cable bouncing limply from the weight of it before twirling to a violent halt against the doorframe. Her whole family would be dead, then, he's sure. Truly a broken record, in the space of her silence Simon catches the rigored arm of the needle beside him that has been dead in orbit since her arrival. It's seventh sense to him now, the coordinates in space of My Iron Lung.

Peripherally, he takes note of the full-body shiver going through lab girl. Her jaw slack above her series of upturned collars. Wavering under the weight of her stuffed bookbag. The king supposes she isn't going to leave, even if it's entirely puzzling how she tracked down his number, even in desperation. Was he really that high on the list of those left to trust? Well, Betty fled, after all. Gave right up. Soooooooooooooo, *lab girl, you can't stand here in your ash-filmed glasses and dumb stare like you're fucking her or something like I'm at all in a position to be your fucking protector or mother or fall for any of this shit again* (cause she knows Petrikov is gonna fall for it and that's why she broke into his office and got it for him, because she actually understands or she's pretending to under stand because they forced the dorms evacuated or they're all still fucking talking about it up there *CHRIST* kill half of them and they'd only talk louder, and hey, anyways, fuck you, he would rather save the passenger seat on this rocketship for Betty and if for nothing else, he wants people to know that, well, you know, if it was his choice it would be Jackson Pollock in two flavors across this...this *grift*.

Even if it was only a handful of sidewalk chalk in a box fan, a blizzard was rolling in.

"You need to run."

"Are you running?" He can smell the fire on her from where he has been watching her botch her apocalypse plans, back pressed against the wall, far as he could get from the door, the box television aside it, behind the screen of which he has been keeping the crown, just in case, but which lies empty now.

"I'm trying to tell you it isn't safe here." It was all so heavy, on the tip of his tongue, but the crown was right there beside him, still wrapped up, and even if he wasn't afraid of telling her, he just seriously had no faith in anyone but Betty believing his story - god, what is her name, anyways? No, no, don't let it find that out. Keep it away. It's the hopeless hope that is all he can grasp for Betty, she whose name is written all over his arms and legs. "Quick, before he comes back." He had figured, and figured right, that it would be just enough to scare her.

Out into just what, he'll never know. The city was emptied fast, trains swished full with the unaffected. But Simon always figured her dead, for some reason. It helped him later on, rationalizing away his lack of confidence in protecting Marceline in favor of dumb, blind preservation - he was not going to make this mistake with her. Even though he sort of did.

Even yet, there exists this realm of love and beauty, a paradisiacal lion's den hiding in their bedroom wall, the king can feel the vibrations of the avalanche that is coming to wipe it clean, piling over all the high-rises and the dirt and everything not worth loving or living, anymore, if they ever were deserving of such to begin with. When the snow settles, he terrorizes his consciousness with a kingdom of stardust, gleaming white at the center of this emptiness, and the new truth, that only the right incantation and the right conditions and the crown, of course, can garner the magic energy to allow them through the gate. He and Betty.

That is all he wants, Betty, Betty, Betty oscillating as usual, he is going to go find Betty and drag her back home from the depths of her solitude, if he has to, once the fever passes. They will get through this together, or not at all.

"It's so wonderful, you know," when he finds her, when they have settled, up against this evergreen, the impossibly-high branches a canopy of needles."Once you have faith, and peace, you know, *enkrateia*, or however Foucault put it. Take control of yourself." the hand on her hip slipping, taking hold again at her belt, his chin hooking tighter around her shoulder.

“Do you...you think that we’ll know? That we’re there?” Betty asks him. He can feel her shiver through his opposite hand in hers, isn’t sure how it is possible.

“I have confidence in our ritual - you know, the experiment you were wanting to do. That hypothetical *effect* you always refused to tell me about.”

Is it...weird that he’s speaking in the past tense, or is she just high? Is she dreaming?

“You’re not falling asleep on me, are you?” Managing to shake her head. “Good.” *Swish*, another car sending up a shower of half-frozen gutter glitter. It begins to set in, the concrete steps under her boots, one of the red doors at her side, a strip of paint fluttering barklike. She can feel the breath at her ear like a puff of laughing gas, an illustrious circlet around her waist that ends in four tangled hands. Betty picks her head back up. The cold is seeping in again.

“Simon, did you...go back in time? Is that why you’re taking us through this portal?”

“Oh, *no*.” Skipping upwards into the side of her neck. “Yes, actually, yes. Not yet. It’s just mental, princess, you know, you wrote the book on that. How ruinous - ‘black hole theory’ is what you called it.” Betty wishes she could see his face. She knows all his tricks. And he knows that she knows them. “Even remembering is a sort of black hole, isn’t it? And it *sucks* just as hard.”

The Petrikov Effect is this “black hole theory”. With one stone, she can kill, like, four paradoxes. Trying to fight his war is like trying to light a fire in the airless vacuum of space. There is so damn much everything, it might as well be nothing. They are so much a part of each other, they never communicate, their lives no longer their own, and still they elude one another. All roads lead to Rome, and that’s where they’re heading fast, but in a city of immigrants and refugees, how would anyone get to know your name? It’s in thinking all of this that Betty doesn’t see the headlights of the bus until it has driven straight past them.



The Sphinx

He is sucking her in. They know this waltz better than any other. Simon runs until driven mad, fallen to pieces, tripping onto scuffed palms, then runs more. Betty moves like a vulture. Always sneaking touches, leaning in, she is staring at his back and trying to telekinect. Tipped over the corner of the mattress, curled around the bedpost as if it is a tornado she fears, not quarantine.

“Do you think you should check again?” A slice of him in the bathroom doorway. The mist bleeding down the thin, dark hallway smells like an Icelandic waterfall and the air is wet and her heart is keeping a time it was not calibrated to. When she asks this, one of her most deliberate riddles, a silence scores the buoyant flash of the robe over his shoulders, the first twinge of her possible regret at watching the casket close, lower into the earth: covering itself in a fleeting reflection off the serpentine wall. He is tying it off with a slipknot, the violet white stream of hair over his face untouched and wet, falling weightlessly-heavy over browline and jaw, reminding her of the draperies of illusory carrera virgins and the martyred Christ. Living images to leave one crying alchemy. The gravitational tug under her skin teeth-grindingly annoying then deflating in a stifled sigh of relief when the king halts in his path, hand on the vanity table where the crown resides like the pet of some terrible mob wife, pressed against the sharpness of the arched entryway. He keeps it tucked away behind the mirror, the glow of it lining the shining edge.

“I’ve been paying attention all night. Is this something new?”

“Yes.”

Concern seems to slide off his tongue, unaffected to him. She takes herself up from the foot of the bed, flips onto her back, waiting as usual for him to kneel down beside her and drop his head against her chest to make up for these public prods of convenience at her wrists and

jaws. Flicking long, wet blades of his hair over his twisted ear to do it, though a handful of droplets manage still to find her. Someone is drawing near, her fingers moving, stealthily, up his back, searching for that deep, muted tempo to follow. Her shadow is creeping down from the ceiling. It is on the headboard, now.

“Certainly accelerated. But you’re alright.” Eyes on the freezing stain across her chest below him, he rises, swipes his hand across his chin where more runoff is eager and weaker than him, flips across her and hits the sheets on his back, arms up around his head, still unmade from their first attempt at slumber. Hoping against hope - it’s so stupid of her to need to see that cut this badly, on this final night of travel towards the gate. Blame it on the moon, on her delirium, the closeness she felt back at the wall, the diaphanous shroud across it, or the newness of its existence. Sure, he could look frighteningly like her very own snuff fantasy in the making, always bruised in all the right places like those sponged-up and oddly emaciated ball-jointed dolls, but there’s something different about laceration. She wants to go back and watch it happen. See how much blood it would have conjured up. *Fuck*. It is easier for Betty to let herself bend to possession than it used to be, as if there was some unhealable ravine in her where the tethers of healthy attachment were once suspended.

For months now, his ribcage has vexed her, far beyond all else that sleeps in that bed of his with the broken box spring, the trompe l'oeil church-window headboard, the light coming through the window from downtown Seattle, all of it at her hands now, moving still across the arc the king has dragged her on by tumbling over her, but they’re not strong enough. Up on her elbow, her outstretched paw is snatched up, held still in a cage of fingers at the gate.

"How am I to trust you at all, when you’ve been acting like this?"

They’re not themselves lately, but it’s only a mask, she’s starting to understand that. It’s in the way his eyes move, in the minute changes and stutters, the lapses, an energy that brushes just close enough to hers that it rocks her with a fresh spray of his thought. *You’re just going to make this more difficult, princess.*

“Syoma.”

“That bad, hm?”

We’re supposed to be getting married tomorrow. They are so close to the gate it is laying its window-frame shadows all over him.

But it is something bigger than that. It is not pretty, not jeweled and light. Does one politely ask skin to open itself? Betty’s hand falls to the side, loosed, drawn up even closer now, chest to his hip. Locating it, his fingers still trailing at her wrist, like a light switch in the dark. It is a dull blade of a switch under a fabric like milk that at the touch, forces him entirely still. No protest. No armageddon. Eyes shut. Mouth shut, almost smiling, as if he has some kind of punishment at the ready. Glimmering energy rolling off him, the curve of his ribcage through these faltering, very silent breaths, through his tightening fingers between hers. Her chest and all its contents about to explode on him, as if the very marrow of her bones wanted free.

“It can’t be worse than anything I’ve done for you.”

For you. Betty hadn’t meant to say it that way. Those defensive hands draw away from her with that lattice hem of microscopic snowflake, but the look on his face when his eyes open, when Betty pulls it back, is stolid, almost condescending. It makes one want to really take him down a notch, speaking plainly. It’s distracting even from the four-finger stitching that reveals itself, finally to her, in a curve down the length of his precious floating ribs.

She thinks it will be cold, like water underground, or a true black hole, the dark gash in his side, all drawn together to keep it from drawing you in. Thicker than kitchen knife cuts and surprisingly rough, as if he sutured it himself, and still so fresh. Who cared for it? His scouts and attendants? When not even she was allowed to touch it? Have they kissed it as they kiss his hands, the heels of his boots? Or is this truly meant for her, as she thought without thinking?

All her stupid, freeversed poetry fails her. Was this the famed emptiness of space, a warmth only seconds away from that in your core? A learned comfort? Stepping like a careful cervid across patches of black ice as she was coming home from school, she often thought of dead stars, of the gaping holes in the fabric of her universe that could be entrances for malicious and unforgiving infections that could swallow whole her little, blue planet and were

swallowing many others around her, but could be, maybe, egresses as well. So like the toe of her snowboot, her tongue is a fish under ice and impatient to be hooked. Cars streaking by in warp speed sleet, gusting across her face, the ribbon tails cutting her cheek as she stared into this great crack in the sidewalk; her aqueous reflection inside it all blues, the eyes, the corners of her mouth beginning to twist as she lost focus.

The tongue remembers in a way unconscious and minutely disturbing, straining against her teeth until, not a word having passed between them, not a move, only the rushing of their broken breaths, she lets it go. His sharpened fingers are pulling at a suture, they tremble, she may not have noticed if her eyelashes were not bent against his wrist.

It must hurt, to even run her tongue across its length, a surgical cut. Betty feels it, it twists and burns, and it startles her to feel it outside, too. Bared claws that seize a handful of her hair and the side of her chest, landing awkwardly, wrist twisted, the placement so deliberately mirrored in the same flashing second his whole body buckles around her when he tears loose that gossamer suture, even his head wrapping around hers, biting his mouth shut. The sound it makes both deep inside and entirely outside of their sphere, falling over the whole world. Has the portal's radiating magic turned them inside-out? Is that why her tongue-tip is a slick arrow rocketing into her side when she feels it slip past this barrier, just the very tip of it under the skin, a fairy only several inches tall, a doll she buries in a cemetery to iconify her own death, the weight of them in an effigy. The cure, her anti-body, in a desperate injection off a dirty needle.

"Fuck-" The hand on her ribs flying back, up against his mouth, shaking.

It's what he always wants, right? It's what he needs her for, to moonlight as the hospital technician that will save him from himself. Wasn't that his job, too? Is it not still, a quick costume switch during blackout, and *scene*!?

But it isn't enough. It's the hand at the nape of her neck that crushes her mouth now hard against the kennel bars, something breaking. Intensely aware of a forced stillness in her limbs, a total numbness outside their points of connection. One arm wound around his twisted

torso, the other lost, grasping at everything, her blood so thick it wires her into place, even if it's only the intensity of his grip commanding it.

Her head rolls when he lets go, the princess' mouth coming off wet in a smudge down to her chin, breathless. His cheek dragging soaked strands of her hair with it as his head falls back hard like he's been shot between the eyes, still screwed up and shivering through an endless stream of curses. It must be Sagittarius cutting them down, catching wind of their dangerous orbit, closer, closer. They collide and she dies, time after time after time.

Now, Betty can feel the cleft of an arrow against her temple, and she is so close to him she can taste the atmosphere. Licking the pad of her thumb, she swipes away the oily smear below her. The bowstring buzzing as it's pulled back, she can't help smiling at the thought of it, distantly aware of the cracks of thickened blood around her mouth, dry as the veins of Europa.

"Doesn't that feel better?"

No way in hell or here that shooting-star snap of his head upwards is to say he remembers saying these words to her, or why they come out now. No, no, no, no Betty thinks she knows what it's meant to say. There's more than one way, out or in, Was that the key to his sphinx's riddle? How was Betty, with her crazed faith in ceremony, meant to ascribe to such a simple, nullifying explanation?

One, two, three, four. All in favor - north, west, south, Simon makes this drawn out, self-pitying kind of noise typical and overdramatic by virtue, smiling, pained, behind the back of his hand in a corona of snapped icicles. We're really coming onto something, here, that's what she's thinking, *we're onto something*, as she twists, records the point at which the crest of his kneecap catches the moonlight as it swings around, her train of thought giving way to ballerinas, silhouetted illusions that spin backwards, forwards, out, in, limbic, narco-leptic, lucid, comatose, purgatory, purgatory, purgatory - let's cross-reference, here, my martyred one. Ex. A, *fuck, where'd my surgical marker go?* She's remembered it at last. The hypothesis: the contingency of his possession - and of hers, upon full sacrifice of self. The blastocyst of a theory on, *ya guessed it*, Petrikov Effect.

“You took one out, didn’t you? Where is it?”

Months without him, forgetting the intensity of her instinct that something has been awry, so possessed with the promise of him that the princess has let slip the shape of the cut her fingers skirted over that first time, weeks ago, before his most recent proposal. Now, he is touching it almost instinctively, as if he thinks of it constantly, his fingertip across the length of it, the little point of his nail tracing the lavender halo. The smooth, fibrous stitching of it where it hasn’t been torn is so shiny it looks to still be wet, mid-thaw.

“Well, sweetheart. I’m not sure how to tell you this, but, um, I’ve put it in you.” Finger-combing his tangly, damp hair - she’s made such a mess of it and doesn’t care - gazing down at her all smiles. “Insufferably poetic, I know. Call it...call it preservation.” His index finger, appearing from nowhere, tracing a loving arc down a ripple of silk in her nightgown. The same spot it gravitated to before.

“Preservation of...what?”

“Of...of a part of me I want to go on existing. Also...I just wanted to.”

It’s so funny, somehow, or she just chooses to find it funny instead of sad, to feel like a jam jar or a coffin, something sealed and immune to inception. An orbital body, something to take out and put on when she was needed. Fionna Apple’s oh-so-extraordinary machine. A freeze-dried heart locked in the bedside chest for an emergency fix.

“You did this in my coma?”

“Well...yes, I mean, of course, when else?”

There are but a handful of times in her recollection that Simon ever talked to her like this, not in interlinked similes like one continuous hallucination, or short, stuttery and cherry-picked phrases, or scientific dissertations on all the little, insignificant things surrounding them. One was his tape, a conversation she stole. The other was a time not all that long ago as they laid in bed together, just like this: *You should run*, he said, *please, it’s only going*

to get worse. His hands were not tied and he was tapping his fingers on his ribcage in some silent melody, both arms crossed over his chest, glasses pushed up and eyes shiny like they could get. Betty thought he was playing, until she turned from the ceiling and looked at him beside her. Whatever she was on that night, it made his eyes look like polished spheres of opalite catching the candle glow. She couldn't see past them. Still, their spirits were spinning on the wall, even if they weren't watching her right now. She can see them through the mirror, even if they are gone when she looks up, in her own reality.

“Man, I still can't tell if you're trying to dump me or kill me.”

“Dump you? I'm trying t-to hang you around my neck.”

Betty loses signal again. In one, piercing beat, all her pinks go red, all her blues go dark as the blood on his chest. This was what happened last time she ran out and crossed his path again in the corner store, when they were waiting for the bus home. The air around her face billows with rising heat, and her heart strains. His smile, sharp at the corners and so big with the cut still on his bottom lip - and like a feral child might touch a digital screen, the promise of warmth, something so alien now, so terrifyingly distant, her fingers go around his white eyes, staunching his laugh, his denial, then, with the words on her lips before her mouth tasted something there:

“You can't carry both.”

“As if I'm not?” His ribcage still pushing against the skin like a battering ram, the words all slurred at first, taking no notice of the tears trickling around her thumbs, dyed to the color of dirty rainwater⁴. The air through the bedroom window is stagnant, pulsing with a distant siren - she cannot feel its cold. His hand flickering one way and another, towards the upper edge of the bedroom mirror. The twins. “As if they ever leave eachother's sights?” Betty's heart collapses and her head raises.

⁴ Your own cheap mascara. You know the scent, nevermind the tone of that reddish geeky red. As if we couldn't tell. As if he wasn't coming home with half the pink from his lips already wasted across his vessel of choice.

“Simon, *what-*”

Recoiling only enough that her grip falls all the way to his mouth. “You...you made me like this, you know that, right?” But his hand is still pointing up. “Nothing changed, the crown didn’t change. I don’t plan on letting my, my whatever you want to call it, affliction, *curse* keep us apart. When have we ever been able to take orders from anyone but each other? Look around, princess, open your eyes!” Rabid now, head jerking up as he says it, in a manner as familiar as it is startling, then, drained, falling back to the pillow in a snowy heap. “This is all yours. You blame the crown, the crown is a catalyst, the crown is for you, it-it always was for you.”

This is an odd, tickly, warm feeling from somewhere in the back of her throat. How could he say that? Without provocation, this reality flickers to life, gleaming, neon, warming the irradiated snowdrifts below.

“Isn’t it lovely? You’re my *god*. I fear you are the-the only one with the power to destroy me. And you gave *me* that power a long time ago, didn’t you?” Never would he say something like that to her without the crown, but there’s that kind of stutter, that twist that meant she had to say yes, you’re right, don’t worry. But she doesn’t need her mouth for it, not when they careen so close now they can read one another, see one another without lenses over their natural ones, occulted as their vision often is by such earthly vices.

When Betty had left the castle she convinced herself that she was promised to a ghost. A ghost that you could touch. Now, it feels that they are all that is real and yet, dying, slowly, of an affliction that cannot be scanned or quantified. Should this prove something to her about conceptual solitude? About dedication? About nothing except how her funny, obsessive mind works? She fears now, as she has before, that they are destined to lose each other. That they are of one body that is threatening to go to pieces and let them escape, untethered space cadets, suspended in thin air. And she had eaten the bomb.

“I guess so.” You idiot, you fucking zombie. He’s lighting her a cigarette from the scaly guilloche table-lighter on the nightstand, twisted forty-five degrees at the waist. Drawing himself back, trying to change the subject, usher her off his doorstep.

“It's the only natural outcome, really, if you think about it, the whole marriage thing. Religion has seemed so silly since all this war nonsense. But I started to pull it all apart, early on, you know? Fit it into the context of whatever it is I've become. All the things I became in between. We're obviously still *here*, princess, o-our kingdom is the same place it always was. We just needed the keys to the right doors. And faith in eachother.” That's right, her key, he's fixed it. But what is there left to open? “That's why I'm giving up, you know. Why I want to bite the bullet. I'm completely giving in to you.”

They protest known reality, Betty knows this, it's in her blood, her...bones. It's what she loves about Simon. Silently, he watches her smoke, seemingly unfeeling of the open wound at his side smearing the topsheet correcting-pen red as if he's still listening, even though she recites these little failures of freeverse to herself without speaking. She's debated it with herself a thousand times - if not for the portal, they are probably going to do it back and forth until they are nothing more than their own selves looking inwards to open cavities, like how the wooden carvings of pharaohs deteriorate in those hurricane swirls, until they are nothing at all, two reverberating voices with their tongues in each other's wounds, shackled to the empty sky. If not for the portal. If not for the portal. If not for the portal.



The twins are both bleeding by the time they stand before the sphinx. Cold and bare but for their sheer cloaks of hand-spun mist, their stockings rough with frozen stardust, their bodies like comet trails, or the reflections of them - frostbitten arrows. A vampire turned them into kid-faced dogs, a fence built itself. Now, the liars that put them to death pick apart microwaved leftovers of nuclear fallout roadkill buffet. Poised like saints in church windows before the gate-altar, his eye swept in black and blue, half-blind, overslept, she an explosion in the sky. Tearing everything apart around her. Or they are brightly-painted pinocchio-kin on strings gone rogue, having emerged in hospital rooms cold-blooded and therefore unfit for the world they discovered in their flesh. The wind so cold his nose starts to bleed, Drip, drip, drip like his pride ebbs out, the vestigial twin of power and craftier than sleep.

With the windows thrown wide, the curtain rods ripped to the floor, the apartment is a flock of tape and ribbon-feathered birds. He should have been a set designer, kind of thought so, once, and now again, his own, improvisational approach to magic, constructing a frame from a processional, tall votives clustered against walls away from flammable sheets, amaranth, colored tulips liberated in handfuls from campus flowerbeds, even if they are bundled moreso like kindling than bouquets.

The mattress is a balcony, jellyfishing strands of VCR tape, with a dripping wet paint roller in hand he can walk backwards, all the way to the end, without falling, only by envisioning a balustrade of ice growing around the back of him. Before him, the altar in three doors. The center leads to a vision of Betty with a dazed stare that makes him crazy, her secondhand dress bathtub-dyed blood red, puffy princess sleeves and snow boots. A veil spiked, a crown of diamonds sharp as thorns, and every single ribbon he's cut in his life. Knotted hand-in-hand with two shadows, one for each of them.



"Wake up."

It must have been two, three hours since they came home, and her bones are heavy, down to the vertebrae, all the little ones in her hands. Working herself up from the bed in the red light of a dawn, stuck to her nightgown, a pull at her hips. He's tied them together at the waist, the king is explaining to her, so as not to lose each other in the woods, and now the weight of it against her propels her to action. Betty wonders if she may still be dreaming, dripping in cherry juice, a sweet and cold taste of someone's tongue, the sweat of cherubic star-children. Her chin crusted with blood. A blizzard so soft. A distant sense of danger. Lifting her hand is a mirage in blue glimmering in brocade, breathless. Oedipus with a brackish grin harnessed by bitten lip, bandaged eyes pointed away from her, hands all eyes. She has to kick the sheets back, wound up in them to her knees, swinging upright to a plastic bag over her head - no, it is a shroud of gauze enveloping the vanity, the big window that is still

open, the star kneeling between her thighs, pressing the teeth of a headband into the sides of her skull. Her half-numb fingers find it encircled in spikes tall as the ones once riveted across the shoulders of a jacket of hers she must have lost in the explosion.

Dizzily, she's led into pinkish drifts of stars damp and pliant beneath her boots, the sky above in rainbows. Sheaves of stardust uprooted with every kick as they run, the bright star whirls and takes her, steps back with her wrists as in a waltz, and drops into what could only be a rabbit hole.

It takes falling to realize what is battering her shoulders, wrapping around her mouth isn't spiderweb, but a veil, and how long has she been wearing this dress? The silk sticks to her back, envelops her torso as if she's slept in it for weeks. *Run*, and the sun is down, the shadows long, the forest so dense that each turn is a kind of its own, the hand in hers the only unhallowed thing.

Endlessly, she trusts him, fluttering around in front of her, his cape slipping through a doorway she wouldn't have even noticed; Betty can't see anything, trips over the threshold, the floor swaying under her as she catches herself, this a little death of its own.

Somewhere, a static tremble. Her eyes burn white, bright as the sun, then begin to melt, running waxily in black and white dashes, a battered television screen, sideways, with VCR tape fluttering from the stand. Betty raises her neck from around the corner of the mattress, feeling the crown-veil slip off, trapped beneath her when she fell, and stares directly into the back wall above their city bedroom. The three blood-edged blades. The blankets tangled, knocked to the ground. In the corners of the room, where the sunlight doesn't hit, there are little snowdrifts.

"Simon?"

Not even the constant drip of the kitchen sink. She's up, stumbling off the bed, at the door when a breath of fresh snow through the open windows carries a scent previously absent, opiate, rich, yet cut by something else, something alpine.

The mirror on the back of the door. His face snapping into view the second she looks inside, wide-eyed as if he sees her too, this Rorschach library girl, not who she was, never again who she was. Tinsel falling like a fountain of dead snakes behind him, the bare floor is clustered now with points of light flickering amongst glowing tails of tall opium sticks. Everything in his bruisey beautiful face a new question.

It starts to snow, in prickling, heavy teardrops from the bedroom ceiling - but when Betty spins around, away from the mirror, she is on the back of a white horse. And he's there, but right, oh, you've been sneaking looks behind the curtain. Silly. An arm extends, she disembarks side-saddle, a jellyfish, into a puff of snow two inches deep. The veil has made its way back around her head.

"I mistook you for an albatross!" Low-hanging branches stream red across the gate, a canopy of star-splattered bedsheet, tall as a drawbridge in sprays of red, white, purple tulips piercing the snow. Hardly keeping track of each step she takes, the coffin-silhouette arches before her she's treading water, still dreamy, the portal's glow on her skin. Conjured from nothing, an ivory wolf appears at her side, the handle of a basket etched in glimmering silver swags at its chest. Staring up at her with glass eyes red as the light around her. Closing her stiffening hand around its insides, Betty is surprised not to be met with the halo of a silver ring or the lips of a blooming rose or a knife, but the cold, bright handle of a candle lighter.

The reasons stand in indigo and blue clusters in candelabra, some raised high on iron spines, some wedged into the frosted grass she kneels on, every once in a while, a red, prodding reminder that glows pink and wet at the touch of the flame. The king at her feet as she spins to light each one. On one rotation, the flash of something held in his lap reminds her too much of a bread knife - but it's only the glaze of the veil. "Then again, maybe I haven't."

The wolf isn't a wolf anymore. Another thing bewitched, fallen on her lilac knees, lacy babydoll dress puffing out around her. Held above her excited grin and dark-lined eyes is a velvet cushion, crystal beads fringing the edge. Pooled inside, a single, dazzling star.

"Princess Marceline." He bows to her. It isn't one star but two, Betty realizes, stacked inside one another, his head is bare. Between them is a burning basin of pine needles, the scent

she caught when she had lost her way. It is burning a well into the snow, but the heat off the greenish flames does not reach her. She drops to the grass. She takes up the crown. They both do.

“Al-right.” The girl releases her basket, drops before them, tulle falling over tulle. Betty has the charming thought that Marceline is treating this like a tea party and so is Simon, the smile stuck on his face, his eyes as fixed as a charmed serpent risen from his basket. Marceline starts to speak in her sing-songy little voice. *I dreamed there would be Spring no more, That Nature's ancient power was lost; the streets were black with smoke and frost -*

Strangely frightened of him, she's hidden behind this gauze of a hood, as with his blindfold which is only a shadow now across the bridge of his nose, his eyes shining, fluorescent basins of burning trees. *I found an angel of the night; The voice was low, the look was bright; He looked upon my crown and smiled -* a thought intrudes on her: isn't it silly, really, darling? Without gravity to hold your skin on, you are going to disintegrate. What a freeing prospect, that there is no outcome in which you do not lose yourself to this - *to pangs of nature, sins of will, defects of doubt, and taints of blood-*

Betty notices something else, something she wouldn't have the night before, when they went skating, for he did not wear it: the two rubies flanking the center spire of his crown are missing. *And every winter change to spring-* Her fingertips, that she can hardly really feel now, slip into their sockets. Such perfect fits only describable as optic. *So runs my dream: but what am I?*

A hypnic numbness grips her for a flashing moment, something she's beginning to get used to. And how many are loved through narcolepsy? Marceline's dog-clawed little hand is smearing oil across her forehead. *An infant crying in the night; an infant crying for the light-*

Something pools into the princess' hands she didn't know were cupped against her corset, a chalice of cut crystal⁵, brimming with something she isn't sure of but smells and looks almost like absinthe. A Tiffany sort of blue, thin and smooth. *And with no language but a cry.*

⁵ Though it is certainly composed of ice you no longer feel the cold coming off of.

“Lovely, darling.” over the airwaves.

Without question, Betty starts to drink it, expecting the bite of ayahuasca, something brewed. The candy sweetness of it surprises her, but she would never break the spell and ask, the trust so deep in her now she can feel every annal of his memory, simply deformed by the improper lens. Having known her own spell by heart, she had unclipped the attachments from her butterfly-glasses that morning, desiring only the bluish clarity of the forewings. The swimming pool-green glaze swirling in the hollow of the chalice is like a lens of its own, her knees in the shadow of it dancing with faceted light as if underwater. The ribbons are showing up everywhere, now. The embers popping, they’re on her. Recitations melt from her tongue -*I am Horus, the dweller in his splendors. I have gained possession of his tiara. I have gained possession of his rays of light, I have traveled over the uttermost parts of heaven-*

There is enough of it for a congregation. Betty relinquishes the strange potion, then here it is in her hands again.

“As much as you can, remember?”

When the chalice is empty, a hand like a dove lifts it from her. A decanter held by its twin lover, still half-full, waterfalling in front of his chest. She watches him drink it. Smile at her when he notices she’s staring, head lowered, the hair in front of his face shining, curling into itself in the air. Behind him, once in a while, she thinks she sees a firefly.

This is where it starts, where things go fuzzy. She remembers his hands on either side of her hair, the crown which is pointed as a star and mounted in two rubies, one at the center spire, one low.

“Do you forgive me?” he is asking while she repeats the task. What does he mean? *For how sick I got at the end of it.* Right, right.

“I have already.”

A floating nothingness of feeling fractures at her hands, his grip has tightened, his face lights up, a frenzied sort of smile she hasn't seen since they found the crown in the first place.

"That's all I needed to know."

She hadn't noticed. It isn't a lighter anymore. The whole time, she had been holding her adze, which slides from her hands now as the king takes it up, provoking her eyes to shut without thinking. The surprise releases itself in a shiver when the soft blade grazes against her eyelid, then the other. When it touches her bottom lip, they fly back open.

A streak of blue and white ribbon, tied back in his hair, chases the breeze. Seven orange eyes across from her flutter and shut - so many fireflies now, the remaining light illuminating trails of their soul-smoke. The sun must be setting behind the mountain already, because everything seems to have gone red.

It occurs to Betty that, now she has solved the mystery of his missing rib, she can't think of anything she could ever ask of Simon in return. Not to have been more careful with the crown. Not for letting her blow off Australia for him. Not for anything he has ever taken from her or given to her in this or any universe.

And just as well, he's up, boots still planted firmly in the grass, crossed lengths tapering into a phantasmic streak. Swaying between them is the ribbon he tightens at his waist, over the others, because at this point they are both covered in them, red, blue, green, yellow. This one works up through furrows of lace and around his shoulders.

"You have to stay with me. Focus, or you might slip through at the wrong time." All fingers. What a strange initiation, raw data to decode, apply, evidence to the Petrikov Effect. "*Remember*, it isn't just one, it's four. It's *four*, alright? You must stay with me."

"Four."

His gaze firms, drawing tendrils of itself from her face, the front of her arms. Turning, he falls to his knees before them both, presses his mouth into Marceline's forehead until she

wrenches back, giggling without a sound. *I'm doing this because I love you.* At long last, Betty realizes what she is.



How would it feel to have been alive when the bomb hit, when gravity abandoned the world? A sort of bursting apart? How much of you would float, some of the viscera tumbling into comets, the rest to be fished out with a pool skimmer? *L'appel du vide!* he would call it, diagnose the terrible way Betty felt to lick across their open wounds and the same feeling that was stirred up by the processes of their incantation, and the feeling inside her now, as she is slithering by the arm as it connects to his in a broken, skinny length, down the tunnel to a cave where they won't be found, to a locked apartment or an alley in Prague or an office door, their Art Nouveau, Sayrachian palace. Eden because they are all that is left and fuck changing it, *fuck it, lets supernova! Let's clean up the mess! Princess, you're beginning to understand. Princess?*

His hand is empty. *No* - The king stops in the middle of the corridor, squints down at his open palm through the rising steam. The oily shreds of a peacock butterfly are plastered around his fingers. The ribbon has found a way to ride up his arm, out of his grasp, sticky with hemolymph. Laughing against the sudden onslaught of tickly insect wings, hordes of them throwing themselves into his chest, he starts to take it in hand-over-fist, the tether longer than he remembers.

Portals are not one- or even two-dimensional. They are systems, and coincidentally, through all their trials, all their little deaths, they've constructed one hell of a system, the heart of which is a sort of centrifuge. The heart of which the king hasn't yet been able to reach. He built a window of borrowed power from the crown. It did not work. He threw stones through the window. They'd always melt. He needed his princess. The air is so thick with the insect flurry that he's afraid to open his mouth, even just to call her from the void, and he is getting dizzy again, this body working itself up against him, pulling at his wrists, these pushy, desperate spells to foil Simon's plans that have plagued his blood ever since Betty woke up.

The tug turns from that of a hooked fish to a shark, and now his line, once a leash, is a chain that wrenches his shoulder behind him, that he can feel, not see, drawing him rough in a circle, and *god, princess, I'm too smart for my own good, aren't I?*

He is finally starting to awaken to such a concept when the back of his skull hits the ground, the crown displaced, its power distended, part of it now with her, neither here nor there, *both* here and there, inseparable - inseparable, he wills into the mind of his assailant who is on his chest now, a darkish blur with wet hands falling on his throat, avoiding his grasping talons in scripted battle, faking him out, then plunging its open hand at his face. He chokes the second he feels bitter fingers scrape the roof of his mouth. Four hands now, all identical, one hooking around his jaw, fingers extended. He's choking as he bucks against the slippery, frozen floor, sacrificing one arm to sweep behind him for the crown, his whole esophagus burning acid.

Without language, he is desperate. It speaks to him with his own face, his own tongue.

I-I bind up - I gather together your powers. I order the powers of the ways, o-of the ways of those who guard the horizon of the hematet of heaven. I have prepared their doors for Osiris, I have ordered the ways for him I have done the commands - He is shoving down all that he can remember from the Book of the Dead in between straining for air until he can wrench the fingers from his throat, gasping, dry, displacing his balance.

"Hold on, hold on, wait a second, truce, truce." He crosses his wrists across his chest, plays dumb the best he can. "Look, uh, Doctor? My king? Remind me if you're trying to, like, *kidnap* my princess, or -" This web is making it more difficult to raise his arms, but the king manages to wrench one hand through the weight of the drift and slam it like a yoke into the throat above him. He goes on, beyond remembrance and reason.

I have spoken to him concerning the things of his soul, this, the princess he love - a wound is in the heart of Set, I-I have made them to know the plans of the gods-

"You fucking idiot, I'm trying to save you from her!" Wait, that's not right, *wait, hold on-*

Right then, like the eclipse, like the firework losing itself from its shell, it occurs to Simon Petrikov that he has been exiled, once more, from his own body.



The will-o'-wisp. It's back, a red keyhole silhouette. When the mushroom cloud had settled, Betty had found herself entirely alone, freeze-framed but for that satin river that falls, endlessly across and behind her, and the hole in the ceiling through which snow has been falling with the same regularity since last she approached it. This time around, reminding herself that this is different, this is the portal, and before she might weigh her situation, she is taking the key in her hand as she mounts the steps to the chapel doors. Pushing, drunk, with her same Kamikaze conviction that led to his initial capture, a reckless trusting of her gut instinct. Now, he is locked away but he has left her with the key - her engagement ring on its chain gliding smooth and unresisting into the doorplate, whose mirrored face occults the dimming will-o'-wisp as if it was only an illusion, the double-doors skating across a bone-white floor. Funny, Betty doesn't seem to recall her fear from the first night.

There is no effigy upon the altar, only dry, ashen candles pooling in eternal drips down the walls, the emptiness of an unplugged crescent - a cave without a stone. Burning. Something burning. Chemicals dissolving together. Now, the will-o'-wisp is a red glow big as an apple behind the chapel window she moves towards, forgetting the rope around her waist, the weight it should carry at its end. Three windows casting three perfect, slanting reflections onto the stepped floor before the altar that is thin and smooth as a skating rink. Betty is looking out from these windows when she falls,

The mosaics inside are sharp, cubist, indecipherable, metallic parade confetti frozen in midair for ages outside them, not quite and yet so perfectly mirroring the red snow falling into her hair. And yet, something lies deeper, under the shattered surface, something...someone...is

it only her reflection, after all? She doesn't look down until she has already stepped into the hole in the floor. The hole that falls up. Up and back, back into...

This was last night. This was so many nights, backstreet, lost in a forest, shivering. No, no, this is dead, they blew up Seattle. Simon, *fuck!* The left red door, its keyhole is low, waist-height, she is twisting to reach it, figuring this better than wrenching the key over her veil and crown, desperate now to find her way back before they see her - the two that swing in front of the middle doorway. They haven't caught her scent. Simon is saying to her: *We can't stay here forever. In the castle. I think you know that.*

It is what he said to her the other night. The princess knew that back then just as well as she does now. It is coating her stomach, thick, diamond-heavy, as the shaft of the key breaks through.

Out the way she came in, spread across the floor, staring into the falling snow through the skylight. Stars. They are stars. Dogs and cats. Alpha Leonis. Hands around her waist, she feels the ribbon and knows that she will not fall apart. Her dress speckled with bloody drips from the trickling rain where she was caught in the alley. Outside the castle, she was outside the castle again. Light, uncoordinated, the princess is getting to her feet when the king catches up, hand raised to his collar, beckoned by her shadow. She is blinking down into the glare of the tile below, the reflection of her arms against the surface, a kaleidoscoping hallucination of butterfly wings, when *click, click, click* -

"Please don't."

The snowflakes quicken. Her body a curl of smoke blown from him, she is up to her feet before turning, lighter than breath. Then back up, up the shallow altar steps, the window, the window, the ribbon dancing across the floor between them.

A stain of ichor in a roadside specter the shape of her life is marching down the aisle now, not a step to be heard, the look on his face one of his best with hands pressed to a bread knife cut, serrated and dripping. But she only just saw him, behind the door. He did not look as he does now, starlike, sharp and hot.

"I told you to stay with him!" His voice strangely reverted, like an organ long since tuned.

"I fell."

"*Fell?*"

The king looks down into the ice, quick, as if it is a pit of eels, though she hasn't pointed to where. He is winding ribbon around one hand with the other, but he isn't truly angry, she can see it in his burning eyes. He keeps towards her.

"Simon--"

From the ceiling, a shooting star passes through space as a bar of pure firelight and disappears into the floor. The slack left from their tether skips after him into the light, on, and on, then falls to the steps between her and the point of the window he crossed into. Not taking her eyes off of it, the princess fumbles, beginning to reel in the ribbon swinging from her arm as he did, amounting it to a trick of the light, *it wouldn't make any sense*, until the amputated stem of it floats up into her hands.

She's still hovering in the light, herself. Is that how she lost him just now, and found herself back in Seattle? No, he cut it, and you know it. How could that be? *Stay with me*, he said. Rushing back to the edge of the chasm, gathering a bolt of her skirt, knotting it with the severed ribbon. Over the edge, backfirst, a trust fall into no arms but her own.

When she stumbles back down the stairs, into their alley, Betty can't be worried about them seeing her as she had been before - it's much too clear that they are fully absorbed in one another's sight. She takes off down the cold stretch, away from the recording and into the dark.

They used to wait around here all the time. There was a club, darkened windows that glimmered with stage lights deep inside. A handful of abandoned bars. A dry-cleaner's. None of these doors seem to exist. No cars, no people. Only brick walls, concrete streaked with soft

jelly-rain. A sort of labyrinth, and so, at the far curb still with no sight of the king, she halts. Breathes in deep as she can manage. Forces herself to turn. To crawl back to her shadow, because that is where he is heading, she knows this.

When she does turn, she hasn't run anywhere at all, freezing where she stands. There she is, right there, her lips bitten and pressed back, staring dumb like a child preparing to cry.

"Take your hand off the crown and say all of that again."

"You can't blame everything on that!"

"So, it isn't the crown. What's the alternative, then, huh? You think I want it to be inside *us*?" Now, he's angry.

"You know, Betty, sometimes I think we need to just give up all this fantasy and...and run. I can feel it coming. There is nothing inside you, or me, or anything." Somewhere along the way, she has lost familiarity with this little stitch in her trust of Simon. It just never really showed itself, these days. It's a very good thing he doesn't do this to her anymore - except, Betty doesn't know if this is really happening, or if it's already happened. She doesn't seem to remember it, if so. "One day, a comet is going to hit us, and we will die, and there won't be anything left. Don't you think we should get to die as ourselves? Our true - our *human s-*"

His hand flashing, slap, over his mouth. She goes dizzy from the force of it, a more startling sensation than ever she did feel in the shadow of his current relationship with the spell over him, so many curses, so many ghostings, even the vampire that fell apart in her arms. And it doesn't slip right out again. No, it's right there in front of her, whether or not she remembers it.

"You can't even do it, can you?!" When she turns to him, this real Betty, something gleams in her eye. It is going white. She doesn't seem to see either of the newcomers to the alley. She doesn't seem to notice that it wasn't Simon's hand, that it came from behind him, even though it looks exactly the same, only dead blue and sharp. "I watched your tape, Simon, you can't lie to me."

The king is stalking around his back, now - she's gone numb again at the mouth of the alleyway, forced to watch, and taking notice again of the ribbon tied around his eyes, how he steps around them barefoot and drawn up like a cobra, bright arm pointing out from the billowing sleeve. Circling to where Betty still stands, empyrean as he is, her arms crossed as if she isn't being held together by a single bow around her neck. Inexplicably, the king is staring at her at the mouth of the alley, even if she can't see his eyes, face a perfect mirror, lips impassable. Pointed fingertips lifting misplaced ribbon tail from over her shoulder, dragging it taut. *No.*

"What are we doing, princess? Why do you *always*, always, *always* come back? Why did you stop running?"

A train barrels through her. She watches it happen to the other Betty, but feels it below her own head, hands around her neck now, thrown by a blast of wind only she has seemed to feel. Her desperate snatch at air pulling in nothing, the back shadows around them fuzzy as deep space. Something isn't right. She's melting. She's known this despair before. Last night, this morning, every night before that, and every night before-

The ribbon twin seems to have noticed her at last, but her eyes are mistaken once again, have glanced over the feline haunches, the rubies that dance across her neck when she turns her head, silk oozing over the arms that slip around her, sliding back, away from the scene. Shesepankh.

He'd lied to her! A sphere of light bobs in the air like a hummingbird, a flickering realization. Simon did go back in time, he knew it, he found some way, what with the crown and the bone and who knows what else he had to sell just to come out with a *sphinx*-

In the breath it takes for her to recapture herself, the two have already taken off, the slush dashing into the air under their feet as they dive into the tunnel, a two-headed bird, each feathery, smooth head crowned in light that lingers even after their bodies have gone. They have to stay together. Isn't she ever glad that her whole being feels weightless again, magic, when they disappear, and she can take off too down these alleys, the open, empty streets,

looking for two beings of light, looking for the next gate, finding nothing, *it's the red door, princess, the red one.*

Betty knows these streets, knows when and where everything happens, but these alleyways only birth alleyways, a change in the brick, a back door, none red, and why would he...why would he leave her now? His blood rises in her throat - you idiot, it was probably poison. Do you not remember? But all of this falls away when she comes across the message.

She knows this tag, even in hieroglyphs, Betty knows what it says because she wrote it, the rushed, bleeding images of Horus, the single, dripping eye. Never meant for her, but she had taken it, made it hers. *He hath plucked his eye from himself, he hath given it unto thee to strengthen thee -*

Betty, you idiot. You had one job, didn't you?

It takes even longer now to work her way back, retracing a sparse labyrinth, following the cold, until she finds it is again, their invisible chamber, and, with back pressed to the next door, only a few feet down from the first, a curled thing with elbows on his knees and wrapped up over his head. A shivering thing that jumps and grabs for the crown when he sees Betty mount the steps, eyes bigger than she's ever seen, then falling shut, his skull bouncing back against the door.

"I was just about to come looking for you. You just disappeared."

Knowing the steps now, she turns her back to him, falls, hooks his chin on her shoulder, finds drunk hands skirting carefully around her and drags them, criss-crossed, to ribcage points, handles. As awkwardly slow as if he knows, is afraid of breaking some illusion - because this is all really something that happened last night, and nine hundred years ago at the same time. Because this is real, right? The future isn't yet. Her pulse hammers in her wrist.

Does Simon know what they've done? God, she's tired. There is a crack that runs up the three short steps at their feet. As she studies it, past them, more veins begin to stick out. Up walls. Up his arm, no longer blue.

“Let’s just start walking, huh?” His nod against her hair. Because, if they stay here, she’s afraid of falling asleep and like, dying of hypothermia or something. So he follows, so he takes the scarf, so he hooks the bag from around his neck and she takes it, knowing what’s inside.

“God, Simon, I knew you were going to come save me.”

“It’s too late. That’s what I was trying to tell you, princess. We can’t stay in the castle forever. And,” His big, glazed eyes on hers, voice low, strange now. “It seems you and I have missed the last bus.”



They’ve escaped the alley. Their arms linked, walking now into the greying sky, the empty street green, radioactive. At least the rain has started to solidify, ricocheting right off the sidewalk and parked cars they pass, all of them empty, light-less, some of them with shattered windows, duct-tape bandages.

“You built your castle on a fucking *sinkhole*?”

“*Fucking black hole, darling. Black hole to be.*” Simon jerks her to a stop, head up, so like she is used to, conversing with a bird, a beam of light. “Look, you can see it now.”

It is a semicolon above their heads. The Regulus portal can’t be seen when it opens, the sun being much too close at the end of August, but Betty has to suppose this is somehow on the other side of it from the castle, and that is why it appears right at the peak of the colorless sky. In fact, she can’t even see the other stars.

“Did you know that if its rotation was just, maybe t-ten-percent quicker, it would tear itself apart?”

Gray stairs, gray hallway, everything smelling of fire, far cries from the jeweled passageways that brought them here. At the entrance to the next twist in the tunnel, a table is laid with all of their instruments. Pens snapped at the waist. His concubine swords. A needle and a scalpel and a rib-cutter like a wishbone. An ice pick. The adze that Betty plucks while he is taking her key from her and unlocking the door, some survival instinct pulling it into her untrusting hand. More keys too worn down to perform the single function of their existence, piled in landslides down the molding.

The apartment too darkened by the storm, the switch Betty flips clicking back and forth into nothing, still comes as such a relief. As if she hasn't been here in a thousand years. Perhaps it took surrender to be led back, she is thinking as coat, bag, scarf are lifted from her, as she sways in darkness, adjusting to the nauseating spin, the sweetness still on her tongue. Watching him disappear in an arc through the bedroom door, crown in hand.

We were just here. Only that morning she had slipped through the mirror and glimpsed in a glitch this very scene, the three archways he had painted as a headboard forever ago, the television with its back torn off, the screen skewed to the right. He's probably killed it. Even now, its insides are bubbling, buzzing. But the room is empty. The window open to an eight-floor drop. Twisting, turning, checking behind the half-open door, the door upon which hangs - *gotcha!*

Enkratea, princess! She is going to tear the word out of his throat like she tears the crown off his head, her spiked headdress hopelessly tangled in her hair, hurriedly freeing herself, and to the fur across the side of the bed. All their little contraptions are tossed away, fountains of ribbon catching the cosmos in their string-theory matrices, their haunting curtains that whip together, tingling behind her, the crown still teetering on its rim until it hits the wall, spinning, floored. Breathless, their skulls crashing one moment, vicious the next. Face all rent open in terror, then bathed in light, prismatic light, shimmering wet red, blue, green, fairy lights. Tangled in his dark-rooted hair, running in jagged vines across the silk sheets. The incredible relief at making it home, whether or not Betty had been worried if they might.

Are they through it? The air feels new, a levity hovering about them. It reduces everything to the membrane, iridescent and milky scales slipping away without force. In the

back of her head, Betty repeats, four, four, four, the chapel, that accursed alley, now here. There will be another door, a way out for the way in. Again, she finds the absent rib, beginning once more to scab, and licks the dried blood away from it. He is like a vice around her, laughing, starting to cry, the steely depression from their run-in with that damn sphinx conquered, completely given way.

Somewhere, it stalks, Betty can feel its breath pushing out of her as she takes it in. They are inextricable, in some way. It's nearly impossible to make sense of, possessed now by something else, something that cups her face just as on that night that all of this started, when she wasn't allowed this near. Something whispering *"you hate it so, then you get it away from me. Put a spell on it. Anything."*

She's stumbling up without thinking, half-dressed, snatching at the two crowns, the adze from where it's fallen. Back to the doorway, tossing the adze, letting it clatter, metal-first, into the sink, both of these crowns like torcs in her fist, turning, glittering inside now, finding the orifice of the television in the dark, forcing them inside, no way to contain them - reaching down, closing the scattered tread of a salt circle Simon must have drawn without her noticing.

"Betty, just leave it. It doesn't have any power without a host. You'd do better to tie *me* up."

The mirror on the back of the door - it's one of few immediately noticeable differences between the castle and here. Still on the bed, he is holding his arms out, bent at the wrists. Ribbons.

"I can get rid of it-"

"*No!* Don't even try. It's stronger."

She looks at the television. She looks at the window. She doesn't dare look in the mirror. She can't feel it, can't see it, but knows her lip is bleeding.

"Fine."



Betty knew something wasn't right as they waited for the bus. Things were different than she remembered them. Something was brewing - the whole universe seemed to be in on it but her. But it wasn't this way last night, or...man, she can't even remember what day it is. This must all be some kind of joint psychosis, an effect of their poor rationing - there's some kind of food shortage going on, the grocery store all liminal, empty shelves. The gas prices frightening - this is why they haven't driven anywhere since, well, since around the time they found the crown.

"I'm going to break free of it, understand? Even if it kills me."

It has taken her a remarkably long time to realize their voices sound like they used to. Maybe Betty missed some of this. Maybe it was all the same anyways. Folded up at the window, halfway through a pile of reference books that lie open and fluttering at their most relevant chapters with every frigid breeze, she nods back at him without looking. Her attention is only split with her view of the skyline, what little lights dart across the bridged freeway, one, two...two...two...three...

"Simon, what if we're not through it?"

He's gone sort of meditative, sober, eyes closed, stretched out on his back and not moving.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe we need to keep finding doorways. You keep saying the crown-"

"The *crown* has its...demands. That's why I need you. To hold me to the plan, get us through the portal." Ironically, they can't even watch his tapes anymore on the busted T.V. for

reference. The tapes that Betty figures are partly to blame in the first place. “There isn’t anywhere to go.”

This has to be a test. Some fucked up riddle she has to answer to be rewarded with him. He’s still moving his hands around as if they aren’t bound at the wrist, somehow so fluidly prying away from one another, a clamshell. Four doors.

Fingertips skittering against one another. “I tried taking it apart. Splitting it - that only makes a rift.” talking to himself, again. “I guess this is it. I thought I was stronger than it, I’m not. There’s nothing here, Betty, not this universe. I had to go back, I can’t let it have me. If I don’t protect Marceline it-it-it gets *so much* worse, and I mess up real bad, I-.” Fingers matched, now. Face falling towards her. “You’ve seen it yourself, even if you can’t remember. Princess, listen, I’ve been back and forth through this one. It isn’t good, you leave, you...I can’t solve you.”

That’s right, the sphinx is still here. The sphinx *he* brought here, what, to gatekeep his fractured fucking kingdom? Suddenly, Betty is possessed by the atrocity of it all over again.

“Simon, you probably fucked it going back in time in the first place!” And what of their trust, now? She cannot locate it, the tether that once strung between her ribcage and his all tangled around his legs. “You *know* how this works, just like you *knew* how the crown worked!”

It feels wonderfully freeing to even suggest that he messed things up when he dedicated himself so fully to the crown, and now, the books surrounding her suddenly feel so...fantastically *theoretical*. The one resting over her crossed legs with ten pages crushed in either fist. Something she’s said has him dead quiet. She doesn’t want it, she wants him to say something. To give any indication that she’s wrong, that he did come save her, that he hasn’t done what she fears he’s done. Or that he is trying to do, and is going to succeed at doing.

Betty doesn’t get a chance to finish her thought before it gets him again. The lifted arms in front of her slam down, hard, across the bed, his whole body twisting into the mattress, all deafening white noise and she can’t breathe again, and even before she gets across the room she can see how his shirt is plastered across those remaining ribs. When she touches it, still with all her willpower to block out the whimpering little giggle of pain bitten into the pillow

under her, it's stuck. It's freezing cold. That night in the castle, that time in the library, she had thought it looked blue, his blood, discolored. The stain Betty has started to tear apart, the body under her strangely limp, atrophied, with one hand untucking his shirt, forcing up underneath, is so drained of hemoglobin it looks scabbed across with freezer burn. Keep it together, she threatens herself.

"I'll be right back."

Nothing will help. Nothing will help. The medicine cabinet, empty. If Simon dies, she dies. They were sort of inextricable, not just that, but he had built her, from the inside out, she was an effigy to herself, and all his, an emergency device with a one-use ripcord: a drawstring to a hidden compartment only he knows entry to. Was her heart kept inside, all locked up like Percy Shelley, or, nevermind that - was *his*? Was all this fantasy extraneous, or some epic metaphor? Nothing, nothing, Petrikov Effect has a 0% survival rate amongst the Betty species. She is so full of nothing she almost amounts the sphinx standing on the edge of the bed to a trick of the mirror.

Betty's vision goes dark for a horrible moment, throwing herself back inside the bathroom, the adze clattering against the side of the sink much louder than she should have allowed as she pulls it into her grip - *why is he so quiet?*

Stepping back into the bedroom, a new spell comes over her. In the dark, she hadn't thought to look above them, at those arches he had painted, as if possessed to open the gates of hell. Behind the sphinx, each stroke is welling with a gallon of dark, honey-thick ichor. The floor is wet, but the gate is bleeding out onto the mattress, soaking through it like the wine stains. It's melting snow that creeps along the floor. Melting snow like that which oozes from his open wound, that which coats her in a sheen of cold sweat.

Enkrateia, right? That is why, when the milky blue lion that has her face and three rubies orbiting her jaw swings her head smoothly around, almost owl-like, her hand, claws of curving piercing-needles, retracting from their poise against his throat, Simon doesn't even move. The same spell is over them both. The sphinx waits for her to look away from him, and when their eyes meet, her reflection splits at the mouth: feline, fangs rimmed with pink.

And Betty knows the smile. It is the blow-cigarette-smoke-in-your-face smile. The programmed smile that melts off the fat of how deeply she is tormented by their breaking kingdom. The alibi smile, the here's-your-warning. The sickle that should dangle from her other wrist is an empty plastic gallon of antifreeze, slushy-syrup turquoise.

Betty weighs the adze, blunt and misappropriated, in one hand, that heavy shackle at the end of her bloodless arm. The sphinx, the princess, stares at her, and she stares back, snarling when Betty sets her hand on the door. Oh, it doesn't like that. Oh, she's found it. *Simon*- she can't say anything, their frequency interfered. She doesn't want the sphinx to look back at him - *I should have killed you the moment you laid eyes on him*, she attempts, biting back the manic laughter of triumph.

The sphinx is still quivering over the edge of the mattress, a living dead thing unblinking with ribbons trembling in the night breeze. It (she?) seems unconcerned with her, only rolling its shoulders up when Betty takes a tentative step around the doorframe - and then it occurs to her that the portal will not stay open forever.

Simon's completely frozen, eyes loosely shut, mouth open, until the sphinx opens its jaws again towards her, Betty's ears filling with blood at the sound as she closes the bedroom door, steps back against the mirror, the sphinx dropping, straight out onto the floor, one step of a silent paw for every backwards stumble. Still fused at the limbs, he shoots up. He is all fuzzy, now, almost himself, his voice unplaceable, a terrifying angel-voice from somewhere beyond her "Betty, wait, you can't do th-" But she has already stepped through the mirror.

It works. In some messed-up way, it works, the sphinx follows her. It's all she really wanted. A shining artery of a tunnel is the scene of her next nightmare, running down these twists and turns with her weapon held out to one side of her, aimless. She glances over her shoulder once to see the coronary channel, all wet, all crackling, tightening behind her, the color draining from her vision, turning to crystal.

In that fateful moment, it catches up. Its talons find her shoulders - her hair snatched up through a billow of the veil Betty didn't know she still had on. She almost chokes on her own

tongue, thick in her mouth, her bitten lip tearing again from stress alone. It takes her down, a whirl into the gelatinous coating of the tunnel floor, coming up with tulle weighed down by sludge. Hands finding her throat, but never landing, clawing at a ribbon.

Somehow, all Betty can think about now is that fucked-up kid's story of a girl's head that was only ever fastened on with a green ribbon. That must be why she sacrifices this moment that she could be reaching for her fumbled weapon to find the back of her neck and start knotting the bunny ears, the scratches continuing, stinging, at fringes of skin. When her knee catches the sphinx between the ribs like the hole was made for it, and it shoots up and to the side, righting itself, she realizes it has a ribbon around its neck, too. The adze lies between them.

The living fucking image, Shesepankh, a creature of her own making, a terrifying parasite. Behind her, there is a blue light, a jewel, an orifice. Betty knows, if they were bound together, they would both come out the same. They aren't. They won't. They are both desperate, violent things, things to be caged. Her weapon, her escape. There are no other choices. There are no exits and still no answers to her questions. The ribbon is in her grasp.

How many times did they get married? Have they yet? Is this it, a psychotic break in soft bondage, a sharing of intoxicants and a snowy screen and Syoma or whoever else that entails, looking up at a sphinx like the barrel of a gun, *my god, we were never strong enough for this, we were never even strong enough for the idea of a child*. They are a chimerical visionary in a paper crown, skimming Tennyson prone against an idiot in a secondhand, puffy-sleeved wedding gown, the bathtub dyed ruby, the snow melted, the mirror smeared. Locked to the mattress, her arms orbited in spotty satin, she's dead three minutes in the alley, not quite four, still untrusting if her heart ever really stopped, or if he just couldn't feel it. That's the first part of the riddle. The next part is if it had to be that way.

"Fuck, princess." The king is still standing behind her when she falls back through the portal and into the chapel where she had left him. Liar. Worse than vampire. Trying to hide your little shrine. Your little admittance, your dirty little closet secret. She's laughing as she rises, slow, from the chapel floor. People who find dead bodies left where they fell, they have a knack for misidentifying them as mannequins. Count on Syoma to make it Vogue.

What was once chips of abalone, shining crimson, fuschia in the light of the triplet windows, she recognizes now for their truth. Butterfly wings. With her nose pressed to the surface of the ice, she meets each of their round, animal eyes painted on their distended bodies. One of the largest and most intact is plastered, spread-eagled, over her mouth with an undeniable deliberation.

It's her body.

Slowly, as if not to wake her suspended twin, the princess rises, moves, finding hands, the arch of her shoulders in their beribboned gown, but the shadow does not fall into her step. Where is the prison phone, the glovebox-glove? Where are her eyes?

Turning her cheek against the dampening surface, she remembers, at last, who she is here for. The look of horror on Simon's face, even half-covered with two hands, is all the shadow she could ask for, or maybe all the shadow she deserves.

Her arms go numb and below her, back where the sickle had fallen, back over her shoulder and up - and he has already spun himself, still bound, somehow, as if the king had been hiding inside him when Simon had asked her to tie these ties, across the bedlength between them and under her-

"Don't, please don't - please don't." But he is so easy to tear back, harnessed up like that, the edge of her blade, turned upside down between his wrists, startlingly quick enough that he follows it up to his knees like a baited fish. He is searching for the crown, all powerless. They are both upon the altar, and there is no way he can get up the steps. There is no way he is to escape her.

"You killed me."

"No-"

“You *killed* me? I-” No, no, no, he keeps battering her with. “I thought that you wanted to...” Her weapon has only grown heavier.

“I did! I-I do.” He’s still trying to get between them, arms raised, a hook around her. “You don’t know how hard I tried. You just went cold. Freezing. Aneurysm was-was-was the best idea I had. And everything was falling apart by then, and the war, and I-I-I *thought* it was the antifreeze.”

It’s her body. He’s been keeping her body. Pale, quadriparetic. Frozen. No contest, no conquest, no nothing. No anything. No one noticed. It doesn’t surprise her, nor does it upset her. She had built her life up like this, where no one mattered but him. “I’m the one who brought you here, not her!”

What antifreeze?

“You took my brain, didn’t you? His dead eyes staring up at her in confusion. How did she know that? “Is that all you took!?”

“I-I couldn’t get your heart. I wanted to, I just couldn’t. I had to improvise. But I-look it’s all still here. I made all of this just for you. It’s not *her* fault. I just messed up, I messed up.”

How fucking dumb is he. That isn’t an error and it sure isn’t any riddle. The depth of emotion once forgotten now takes her like an electric current, and he is so *defenseless* now, immobilized, the crown thrust away, pale and destabilized and barren.

“I *died*, Simon. I know how it feels, and I feel like it isn’t, I feel like it’s happened before, too-” She’s so close, she can taste it in her teeth, she’s losing hold. Remembering the ice that had made its way inside her, the half-formed crystal, her voice so high, so outside of her. “Why would you - why, *how did you think this would work?!*”

Hardly trying to hide it, the king is trying to get his fingers around the knotted ribbon across his boots, but can’t find the tension.

"It isn't a time loop, it's reality. I brought you *back*, princess, you saw it happen! You chose it, you perpetuated it! Or are you forgetting you poisoned us?"

"Then why do I feel like this is some mid-level dead world that only cares about me enough to punish me?" His thoughts wither in her shadow. "Why do I feel like that's why I can't remember dying last night, why I keep losing time and just as quickly gaining it back-that-that I just keep losing track and waking up over, and over, and over, and why are you *always* there when I wake back up if it isn't your fucking portal doing it? And why-" The adze falls and does not make a sound. One hand is taking the bow at the crux of the other and pulling it open, and the length of it falls in a coil. Her arms straight out. "*Why-*"

He doesn't have to look to know what the question is. She had hidden this well, hidden it in plain sight. Betty has already answered it herself, anyways. She has invented the question, she has named it after him, she has run the trials, and now, she is writing its end. *Bravo, morgue girl. Have I served my purpose to you, yet? No, Betty, please, I lo-*

The king is twisting, halfway-up from the ice, drawing away loose strands of hair with his shoulder, dead serious and still so...so teasing. So controlled. Open to her. Completely powerless at her feet. Defeated in his secretive efforts, now he lies, awkward but serene beside the corpse under the ice as if he has grown numb to the horror of its existence. His fainting spell hadn't worked.

"Princess, listen, has it crossed your mind what would happen to me - the *real* me- if you were right and this is your own personal little nightmare? Look at us!" And, of course, all her intravenous ribbons are still spooling around him like a cliched performance artist's. "Why do you think I cut it? Princess, listen to me." *Dummy, it was already inside us.* It still is.

His hands are melting, sweating out the poison, but his voice is honed to stab at her. "I'm right here beside you. Wherever that is in hell we landed ourselves, your big pound-puppy furnace of eternity - come on - this is *exactly* the kind of end you wanted for us, and you know it! You said it all the time! I've been watching you commit crimes of passion against yourself since-"

“That thing is here for you-”

“That *thing*, princess, is you, and honestly, I’ve kind of been trying to get her to hurry up and eat me for failing her and not keep trying to-to-to make me cut her heart out and all the rest of her little marriage-murder plans. It is you.” In a single frame, he falters, voice breaking. “*Betty, come on-*”

It has heard him. He doesn’t see it, but it has heard him. Yes, it sees him, but now is looking at *her*, not Simon, white eyes snapping open over the butterfly in her mouth. In the shifting, psilocybic light, all the wings seem to start beating, all the ribbons rippling, all her fingers flexing. Finding herself trapped, suspended in a single-frame grave. She slides herself backwards across the floor, away from it.

Don’t think. Don’t let her eat him. Don’t let it be this way. It is no more Betty than he is, no more than any of them are of one another, isn’t it? Except, this Betty has the key. This Betty found her way out. The king has fallen to pieces, sticky, bloody, tear-streaked. The adze is still next to her, rolling into her hand as she pulls herself up. The king does not reach it in time.

A throb racks her chest the moment her thorn pierces the crystalline surface of the ice. Bringing it down again, again now, a projectile sharp as a rock dashing the side of her arm. But the king is right here in front of her, and he would not hurt her, even if his hands were free. So what hurts?

The first swing pierces her right hand, the second manages to find the left. The king is under her again by that time, between her and herself, the shrapnel flying, melting on impact across them both. Everything a hail of bullets, a nuclear attack finally hitting Seattle, a meteor shower. A blade going square between the ice-mummy’s eyes, not deep enough, its sister shot finding the side of her throat. The flesh stale, firm, the blood gone.

A flash in her right hand. Betty was still holding the key to their apartment.



Answer the sphinx this: what else could he have done? Swear it wasn't him? Teach a lame dog new tricks - since that is precisely what he is? A lame dog, light years off course in his head while she's choking, trying to claw her way from a gash that has opened in the ground between them?

Hey princess, happy portal day. I guess I'm still expecting you to back out. I know you're upset with me. I really hope you come home and do this like we planned. If this doesn't fix things, maybe at least we'll both be back to how we were before the crown messed it all up. And if it doesn't work at all, maybe we won't remember in the morning if we can just make it home. If you stay with me. You have to stay with me. I have to get you out of the past.

MORON. FUCKING IDIOT.

The T.V. screen goes snowy. Cracked open from the force of the remote against the swollen center.

Deep breath, fall into step again, one-two-three, *aw, princess, please don't cry, here, open your hand.* Fixed on the empty sidewalk tattered by the sleet where the kid was, the sphinx - *you fucking dummy, how'd it take you so long to realize his eyes were bright white this whole time? Did you know this before, or did you forget just like you seem to have forgotten everything you've done, because I had to come take it away.* But he isn't trapped in the screen, anymore. Betty has tied them up together while they were in eclipse, their voices the only things left apart.

You're so lucky you get to forget it all now, Petrikov, you're so lucky you don't remember putting your hands all over her trying to unfreeze the blood in her veins. You ever thought about that? Knowing her eyes wouldn't be open now if there was any hope that you could, and trying anyways? The world

exploding around you, all fighting ice with ice and you taking a page from its book, haunting the place where you hid the body like it was a caged animal, knowing it didn't have anywhere to go until you got your head on straight. And then when you got your head on straight, even then you don't remember digging her back out of the ground, do you? Do you remember migrant swarms of butterflies you massacred like you were so hot, biting your lip, tossing their crushed bodies over her tomb like rice, stuffing those leafy shreds of their wings into her mouth after you pulled the last of her brain through it like it was some ectopic parasite growing inside her and not just as sacred as what you botched later? No, don't think so, but you were about to, so I had to take control, I did, and get us back to the castle, and that's why she's mine.

"And what about *him*, huh, what did you take from *him*?"

Somehow, this whole situation manages to be so amusing, the king lying here on the altar steps, feet away from the source of the only power he's ever known, giving a confession to a beast that could unhinge her jaw right now and crush his skull between her fangs and be done. He lets it linger, smiling with a mouth that does not belong to him. Yes, this will be his downfall. Without the crown, he's screwed.

"Pain."

"Well, *give it back*."

He is the one propelling the sled. He is the element itself. *She's done it! My girl, I knew she could.*⁶ His body is made of crystal, and, as to a bathroom mirror mistook for a portal, the king throws himself against the gouged surface of the black lake at the center of the chapel and loses consciousness at once. If the sequence was studied, one may witness it lost before his skull made contact with the ground.

⁶ Stupid girl. Stupid.



The Star

When Simon wakes up again, his head is pounding and he's lost the feeling in both of his hands. He can see them, thrown out across the mattress. It doesn't seem to be frostbite, but the skin is jet black at the fingers, melting in speckles into the familiar, discolored blue. The room roars around them, as if Betty and him huddle inside the body of some furious god.

Why did he ever grow his nails out like this in the first place? It does create an interesting illusion. The arm extending out before him, the one tied at the left side of the bed, loses sensation at the elbow, but he conjures a will and then watches his hand unfurl, his fingers stretching out in all directions. One shining, ebony claw has been tipped. Its pixels are all at war - everything's are. He can feel them eating each other up inside him.

The pain is back. He must not hide it well. The rushing of the air outside slides itself from under his ear and his head falls to the mattress to the sight of her shadow rounding the end of the bed - her body in front of the snowy television screen the eye of the storm that he will never re-enter. Betty comes back with more painkillers cupped over his mouth until he opens it. While she unscrews the cap of her flask, he gets it out.

"What happened?"

"Bad dream?" Her voice is as clear as the sky. He can just see it, a strange, trapezoidal hole like a mail slot, put another tape in, Simon. Let's cap this off. Hey, screw a documentary, those Blair Witch bitches cried all the wolves for you. They'll be slipping your own snuff film onto the library shelves. She doesn't wait for an answer. "You're right. We have to stay together. You know, I think you made the right choice at the end of the day, Syoma. 'Til death do us part, huh?"

She starts laughing, a drunkish giggle he has lost the ability to find cute, only finding it within himself to laugh back. They've made it halfway. The edge of her veil spins in the breeze, tickles his forehead. She takes a deep breath, her next words fast and leveled.

"I just don't think I can do it to you. It doesn't keep you safe. I want to keep you safe."

The static silence. Her face has fallen. She is biting her nails again, each one a color he's never seen before.

"Betty, I-I think I have amnesia back to...at least...I don't-" Simon is trying his best to turn away from the T.V. screen. "Sorry, can you untie-" A clap of pain only comparable to a handful of razorblades piercing him from the inside, all in a row down his chest. His phantom rib is the only bone that doesn't hurt. It feels safe and warm in her grasp.

"Shh." Betty's hand is on his head. It smells so sweet. He takes a deep breath, waits until the white-haired, avian thing who is certainly not a little Icelandic boy anymore, that has been perched over the T.V. with its heels hooked around the edge of the coffee table, goes back to playing with the static. He tries his best to speak only loud enough for Betty to hear.

"Please don't listen if I start talking like that again, alright?"

"I won't." Her voice is distant, slurring, her face too far up over him, the motion of her arm jostling him. Something streaks across his forehead. She is untying, tying something, taking her damp hand off his head to work at it. It is on his other side. He has not looked its way. *I deserve whatever you could do, so just do it. Eat me, I can't solve you.*

You piece of shit, you think you deserve to die? Even if the crown would let you? Here's your precious goddamn light at the end of the tunnel, and you will trip and fall back into its embrace every time you try running away.

No, no, no, please, what about Betty? Betty can still save him, Betty, please, I can't solve you. You have to do it, I want you to. While there's still something left, there has to be something left between him and me worth saving. Just stay with me.

Well, there's obviously nothing left, and, nevertheless, Betty's smarter than you are. You didn't account for that.

On his left side, she is still stroking his head, it might as well be her tongue against him. She's an albatross, a noose, a right hand cupping a perfect, reflective pool of blackberry juice, a hole - the holes of his palms on the bus that night that Simon knew she mistook for bizarre needle marks, right there, the same disappearing, violet lines in skin tensile as petals days after amputation. She is everything. She has dethroned him. Renounced him. Fallen from orbit.

"Hey...hey...you see it?" It is one of her last riddles. Her finger thrust out over the tangle of them, to the end of the red stain. "It's the end of the portal." And maybe it is.

Simon's tongue has fallen numb, weighed down by the same poison welling up in her mouth, caught on the skin slung in the well of his collarbones, a tidepool, whirling. So like it was before, the easing grip, the timeline twisting. She tried to tell him. It gets tighter every time, the lines between death and life, reality and fantasy now frayed and knotted.



When he reawakes, she is gone, like the blink of an eye she is gone, and everything is wrong again. Compelled, suddenly, to survival, he tries to get his legs under him, all he feels are ribbons. It comes out in a buck, nothing more, the mattress weighed down beside him, as if there were another body there.

"Princess?"

The mouth of the tunnel lies open at his back, bleeding, the last exit from his red room quickly sewing itself shut, the pain so airtight, such a pressure on his mind that it draws out more laughter. Betty's silhouette in the hallway, which has once again gone lavender and cold. One arm cut off behind the bathroom door, swinging back with the crescent moon dangling at her ankles.

The needle-claws of stars and suns at his back harness him like a dog. He lurches against it, and it swings him backwards again - and they are too far apart. Betty's paper doll silhouette, white star, in the doorway, at the wall. She is still in her books, looking for a spell to cure him. To Simon's horror, she seems to have settled on one, letting it fall at her side as she starts to cross the room. Rolling out from the pages, bouncing on the threshold is his correcting pen.

"I have led away the darkness by my might. I have bound up the eye...I have carried off the crown. I have come to lighten the darkness, I have overthrown the destroyers."

Coming forth with the crown now from behind the T.V. screen, his body on fire. By the time he finds his voice again, she has already stepped up onto the edge of the mattress. "I have hidden myself with you, oh never-setting stars. I have adored those who are in the darkness. I have made to stand those who hid their faces."

"Princess, please, you have to hurry, it's starting to close-"

She is twirling it, her blade, her bottle of antifreeze, her bloody knife, the adze, the ruby in its head glinting in the same second the one between her eyes does, the one at her hip. "It's going to close on us. I-I knew you could do it, but now we have to get out- " But it isn't really her, anymore. Her eyes have been fully opened. The other hand, the crown. Looking down at it, softly, twisting it to catch the light off the snow. Falling to her knees, drawing closer, she's going to pluck out his eyes, she's going to tear out his brain like he did to Betty or she's -

Tossing the adze, his key, his desperate *deus ex machina*, in a flick of the wrist across his paralyzed legs.

"You have to close it, don't let him back through! Either of us! I-I can't do it again!"

That isn't how this works. The princess knows this as well as he does, and when the words leave his mouth, hers tears open, slow, but below the depths of her thawing eyes, it's more a smile of love and relief than it is bloodthirst. Maybe she didn't know, but she does, now.

“I’m sorry. I tried. This is the safest I can keep you.”

The princess is lowering her hands over his head, the one intact ruby, and he is petrified, staring into her eyes, which are brighter than stars now, brighter than the sun. Her skin flickering, pale, in the static glow. Her breath cinnamon.

“One day, it will have to set you loose. On that day, you run until you find me. Whatever I am, if I am anything and if you have legs to run.” She twists, the portal darkening, crawling, her hair slicing the room as she whirls around. *“I have to hurry.”*

She is arching across him and taking it up the adze. Dragging herself closer, smiling, kisses him on the mouth, sealing it shut, then raises the blade to his eyes. She presents her thesis’ conclusion to him only, in one perfect, plagiarized sentence. The blade swinging back, the king shuts his eyes against the white haze, knowing what comes next without sight, already tasting the night air, the chill that comes when he wakes in the rain on a top step, right where everything stays.

And yet, here he wakes, right where he had fallen asleep, still tied in place. It was written across the bedroom mirror.

I see the gods, the eye of Horus hath consumed me!