



 **rabbit, rabbit, rabbit**  @therabbitdies

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The Rabbit Died - PART SEVEN

Warning: This is a horror/fantasy story full of abuse of all stripes, body horror, cannibalism, death, gore, and pregnancy. And really bad jokes. I'm sorry.

Inlé on the open road, Hazel in the living cabin, we can follow one or the other for now. Who do you pick?

INLÉ

The black rabbit speeds down the road, weaving between cars and trucks, careless and free. The dead have no fear, and neither do you. You are Inlé and you promised to help two girls you scarcely know, Quintana and Hazel Rey.

Hazel Rey, you almost didn't hear Lucy say that name. The phone line crackled as she spoke, her voice a church whisper. "Her name is Hazel and she looks so much like your mother, Inlé. Right down to the moles. Adams found her on the street, I don't know how, but he did."

You didn't want to believe it, you don't want to believe it. According to your father, your mother had no family. Your mother died. According to him, you killed her.

You were alone and you deserved to be alone.

Your father, as always, was wrong.

The black rabbit changes direction, taking a hard left and you grunt as you jerk the handle bars. You can't afford to get lost in thought, you're on the road. And, as Lucy once said it as she slipped on a pair of cheap black shades, you're on a mission from God.

You keep on the rabbit's trail as he bolts through an exit, down the road, and past a sign. Cowslip, population 3,680. A town? Is this a short cut?

The rabbit trips on his front feet and crashes, flipping, tumbling into the front of an old Buick. You hit the breaks, your bike screeching as you skid to a stop. The black rabbit lays flat on his side, motionless.

You dismount, take off your helmet and hang it on the bars. The rabbit is a dead man's soul, he should be fine. You bend down to gather the tiny beast. He curls up against your chest, his eyes round, blank.

"Caught in tharn," you say. "Why?"

Pressing the rabbit closer, you return to your bike. It's strange, you parked in the middle of the street and not a soul has come to complain. There isn't a soul around to complain - the streets and sidewalks dead.

Expired parking meters stand watch over unclaimed cars. Open signs hang in the doors of empty shops. The crosswalk switches from orange to green, even though there is no one to cross or stop.

"This does not look good," you mutter.

You turn to the closest shop, a small pet store advertising exotics. You can't spot any customers as you peer into the front window. Perhaps the clerk is out back, taking a break?

You enter the building, the rabbit tucked to your side like a football. He is still in shock, his round, furry body stiff against yours. The animals inside are fairsing no better - they squawk, chitter, and screech as you pass them. They're terrified, but of what? You?

You carry on, going deeper into the store. You walk by reptile enclosures, their residents silent, watchful, and turn the corner towards the fish tanks. And there, you find someone.

A woman lays on the floor, face down. Her blood and hair are a halo around her dented head, and her blouse has been torn asunder. The rabbit kicks in your arms as you draw a quick breath.

There is a boy sitting beside her, knees bent, bottom on the floor. He gnaws on her hand, chewing and sucking the meat off her fingers, a deep puppy growl emanating from his small mouth.

The black rabbit kicks at you. Urgent, urgent, he demands to run. The soul trapped inside trashes. You pat his rump, urging him to understand he need not be afraid. "He's only a boy."

One lonely, Starving boy. He tears a strip of skin from the woman's arm, from the heel of her palm to the inside of her elbow. The flesh slaps his face as he jerks his head back. He slurps it down and wipes his mouth off on his sleeve.

The rabbit shrieks.

The boy looks up. He sees you.

You let the rabbit spill from your arms. He scurries off into the pet shop, to hide or to escape, doesn't matter. The tether between you won't allow him go far.

"Your bunny got away," the boy says.

"I know," you reply.

He drops the woman's mauled hand. She moans - God save you, she lives.

"What happened to your throat?" He draws a line across his bloodied throat, cutting a clean path through the red. Peachy skin, freckled nose, big ears, he is so young. This shouldn't have happened to him.

"You want to know about my scar." You hold your throat, and listen to the woman. Her pulse is a weak ba-bump, ba-bump struggling to be heard through the din. "I inherited it from my predecessor."

"Predecessor?" A crease forms between his brows. "I... I think I know that one. That means someone who came before you, right?"

Slowly, you take a step forward. "That's right, it does."

Smiling, he wiggles his shoulders in an odd little dance. His braces are gummed up with chewed skin and gristle. Bits of bone. You see no bone missing from the woman.

"She's still alive," you say.

"What?" the boy stops his celebrating to ask. "What'd you say?"

"That woman is still alive."

A shiver takes him, and he looks down, his nose wrinkled, "So?"

You clench your fists. Hold your temper, he is a child. He is sick, he is Starving. He doesn't understand what has been done to him.

"You're hurting her," you say.

"But, but I'm hungry."

"I know and I'm sorry, but you have to stop."

"I'm hungry!" He falls forward onto his hands, blocking the body of the woman with his. Snarling, spitting, he claws at the floor with dirty nails. "I'm hungry! I want to eat! And you can't stop me, you ugly twat bitch!"

A hard kick to the face would stop him. Lift your boot, bring it down, and crush those fragile teeth held together by filthy wires and blue rubber hands. Issue sorted.

If only he wasn't a child.

He yowls, back arched, jaw hanging wide. The fine hairs on the back of his neck and his arms raise. Wild fear, wild hunger blazes in his young eyes. This is his kill and he will protect it from you.

Under him, the woman lets out a long, pained moan. Her failing heart chugs hard. Conscious enough to know what's happening, conscious enough to know she's trapped. Her blood beats in your ears, louder now than the animals and the boy.

"I know you're hungry," you speak in a measured whisper. This is a child, he is innocent, but innocence rarely is ever the same as safe. "But that woman is dying and I refuse to let that happen. I can help her, and I can help you.

"You simply need to let me near."

"No!" He swipes at your leg, misses. You hear snaps, crackling, his bones are rearranging. His spine becomes a perfect lower cased 'n.'

He is becoming one of the Thousand.

"No, I'm hungry!" he cries. "I'll die if I don't eat! The Milkman said I'll die! He said we'll all die!"

"Milkman."

You smell it now, over the animals, the blood, and the waste, milk and green grass. Woundwort. Your father. You breathe through your mouth to keep from retching. Woundwort has been here. He infected this little boy.

"The Milkman lied," you say. "You don't need to eat. You won't die, either. You only need to let me fix you, and her." You gesture to the woman. "I can fix both of you."

"I don't want to be fixed!" The boy hops up on his feet, back twisted. Claws pop from the tips of his fingers. He falters, face clenched in pain, and takes a drunken sidestep. One foot trips over the other and he crashes, shoulder first, against the fish tanks.

He clutches at his head, crying, "It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!" His words blur into a caterwaul, and he slams into the tanks again, cracking the glass. Water sprays. Fish scatter.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurtsss!"

You reach for him. Hissing, he swings, lashes out, and claws open the sleeve of your jacket. Cleaves the thick leather like paper.

"This isn't your fault," you say this to him and to yourself. "Woundwort - the Milkman - he did this to you."

You spot the woman's eye staring up at you as you step over her. She doesn't have time for this boy's pain and, sadly, neither do you. You move closer to him, now caught in a spasm of maddening pain. He foams at the mouth, he gnashes, he spits.

Taking him by the throat, you sigh, roll your shoulders. "And what I'm about to do, that's his fault to."

You slam your fist into his small face, hard, fast. His nose, his teeth, they crumple into his skull. He squeaks from the impact, like a kitten, a fragile baby kitten.

He goes limp.

After you find Hazel and Quintana, you're hunting down Woundwort. And you're going to kill him.

You need to hurry, the woman on the floor doesn't have much time. Dropping the boy, you go to her side. She breathes, her pulse drums, weak, but steady. Her hand, the whole one, flexes.

"How are you alive?" you ask her. Fractured skull, half-eaten arm, this won't be easy.

The boy gurgles - healing him won't be easy, either. He can wait. The forced calm of unconsciousness has halted his transformation.

You punched a child.

"Not now," you say, "Priorities."

Flesh. You need flesh to replace what the boy's eaten. You look around at the pets in their cages. Birds, fish, lizards, rodents, snakes, you're surrounded by a bounty of fresh meat.

Horrible as it feels to consider, the boy is also a viable option. He's young. He ate from her. He may have eaten from others.

And then, there is you. You have already given flesh to make the black rabbit. The risk would be high, may cost you your own arm for days, weeks. All depends upon what happens between now and finding the girls.

Options, you have them. And, God, you hate them.

You look at your hand, and at the torn stump that remains of your little finger. Then, quickly, you glance at the boy. These choices won't do, the former carries great risk and the later, no. Just no.

Animal it is.

The fish in the cracked tank. Oranda goldfish - those would work. Their environment has been compromised. They won't survive other wise. You strip your jacket, toss it down, and, on tiptoe, reach into the water.

Footsteps, the creak of a door. A bell jingles. You halt, hands full of slippery, bulbous headed beasts, and listen. Someone else is coming?

The woman's heart stops.

Time for action. If this new thing is a threat, you'll cross the bridge when you come to it. (Possibly even burn it.)

Cursing, you rejoin the woman's side. Zero pulse. Breathing ceased. She clung on for so long, you have to save her.

You concentrate on the needle thin threads that weave together the fish's systems. Veins, nerves, strands of muscle, you count them down and rip them apart. They pop.

They melt. They ooze runnels down your wrists.

As they change, you hear their basic, frantic thoughts. Oh, what strange new waters! What cold, burning air! What have I become? What have I become?

You drive your hands, coated in fist slurry, into the woman. Left into the back of her head, the right into her neck, and connect into her dying body. Her mind screams at the invasion, she wants help, but she wants to be left alone. Let me die! Let me live!

Your eyes drift shut, you inhale, and when you open them again, you're in a living room. You are the secret room, her Dream Room. Laid out on the coffee table is a game of Operation, in your hand are the tweezers, and across from you, covered in a chair, is the woman.

Speaking to her would be a waste.

You pick a plastic heart from the scattered pieces. Blood drips from its white, throbbing chambers as you carry it over to the board. Keeping the tweezers steady, you lower it into the broken heart slot. You release it and she gasps - success!

Her brain comes next. Then you will take care of her stripped arm. You repeat these instructions, over and over, as you hunt through the pieces for her brain. Did Operation even have a brain? You never saw one when Woundwort made you play.

A gold fish floats by, belly up, flesh wiggling like jelly. Suspended in its orange body is a small plastic brain. You snatch it from the air and squeeze. It pops in a burst of marmalade.

You have the brain.

There is no spot for it on the board.

You stab the tweezers into the cartoon figure's forehead, hacking away at the metal and cardboard until you have a raw-edged hole. The light bulb nose flashes. Crimson runs from the woman's hairline, and screams pour out with it.

"You'll be fine," you say. "The pain will stop once I'm done."

You drop the sticky brain down the hole. She goes boneless in her seat, panting. With her good hand, she rubs at her messy head. She smiles.

Heart done. Brain done. Onto the arm?

"Head still hurt?" you ask.

She gives you a shaky thumbs up with her gored arm. The thumb knuckles straighten with a sharp crick. You should, ah, take care of that. The space for her hand is labeled writer's cramp; you need the pencil.

You examine the pieces and again, what you need is missing.

You lift the board with great care to look for the pencil. This is her body. Everything

you do, for better or for worse, affects her. Raise the game, you raise her. She hangs, suspended, above her seat, kicking.

"Put me down!" she screams.

You find nothing under the board.

The floor, the pencil must be on the floor. You lost many a game piece as a child that way. You put the board, and the woman, down, and drop to the floor. The space under the coffee table is clean.

"Nothing!" You sit up. "Do you know where it is--?"

Mauled hand to trembling mouth, the woman stares off to the side. You follow her line of sight over to an CRT set nestled in a busted, old entertainment center. The screen blinks on. You see polished leather shoes, you see legs, you see the black rabbit.

You're seeing through the woman's eyes. The footsteps you heard earlier, someone is in the shop with you. And they're right in front of you.

"We need to wake up," you tell the woman as you scramble.

"But what about my hand?" she holds up her skeletal fist, shakes it at you. "You haven't finished healing me. I can't live without my hand! I'm a writer, I can't--"

You drag her off her seat by the collar and pull her along with you. Her vitals are healed. You did what you could. "Learn to type one-handed."

"But--"

You don't care to listen. You kick open the door to her Room and march into the waking world.

Waking from another's dream always leaves you queasy. You wobble on your knees, your vision spotted black. The noise and stink of the pet shop rushes you, and you retch. Gag. Swallow back bile and sour, fishy blood.

"You look like you've been through the wringer."

There is a man standing in front of you, hands on his thin hips. His hands don't match his build. They're large, strong, while his wrists are fine boned and his arms slender. He's a dog that never grew into his paws.

He smiles down at you and speaks in a voice as slick as the grease in his blond hair. "I mean, you look better than most women I know, your kind always does, but you get what I mean? Don't you?"

There is a gun, a compact 9mm, tucked into the waistband of his trousers. In the front. Pull the trigger and you could damage him in a most personal way.

He offers you a handkerchief from his shirt pocket. He has a bite mark on his wrist.

"Call me Richard," he says, "or Rich, if you're feeling informal. Dick if you're feeling saucy. Or, if we're doing the code name nonsense, Blackavar."

"Dick," you say without thinking. His smile grows wider and you backpedal, ears hot, "Blackavar."

"What a fortuitous day, not only do I get to see the Black Rabbit in action, but I get the pleasure of making her blush. Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

Your eye twitches, and you make to spit at him when the boy stirs, mewling. The woman pushes up on one hand.

"Keep an eye on her!" You don't wait for Blackavar's reply before tearing away from the woman's side. You dive on the boy, grabbing him by the face and pinning him to the tanks. He reeks of cat now, reeks of spoiled milk and festering wounds.

"Rabbit Starvation?" asks Blackavar.

"Yes."

"Oh dear," he tuts, and grunts, and lifts the woman to her feet by her good arm. "His case appears more acute than the others here. And, oh, that is foul - he's a damn cat! Are you going to put him down?"

"Others? What do you mean others? How--" You dodge the boy's swinging hand. "How many?"

"Every masculine leaning prepubescent in town," Blackavar says, flourishing his hand, fingers wagging. "Dozens of elementary school children, ripping and tearing apart any adults they find in their path."

"My boys ate my husband." The woman's voice is a thin whisper. Her face is turned from you, but her hand, her good hand, curls in tight. "Ben and Peter, they are him. And that little bastard, he was going to--going to--"

You can't listen to her, or watch her as she breaks down, keening all her terror and grief into Blackavar's shoulder. All the children in the town have been afflicted. Possibly hundreds of new Thousand unable to control their hunger due to their age.

"I--" You never have dealt with more than a handful of Thousand at a time. Mostly adults. And you have other responsibilities. Quintana, Hazel, you promised you would try to help.

"I don't know what to do."

"You can heal him, can't you?" Blackavar asks. "The boy?"

"I can," you say.

"Then heal him and move on, I say. Save who you can."

"Heal him?" the woman spits, "You should kill him. He's not a human anymore. This

guy had it right earlier, you should put him down!"

"I did say that," he agrees.

"I'm not killing a child," you say.

She shoves her ruined fist between you and the boy, screaming, "He ate my hand! He ate my fucking hand! Fucking kill him! Kill him!"

The boy catches the scent of her exposed meat, whines, and snaps at the air. His whine grows louder as his busted teeth clang together. He clutches your shoulder, claws puncturing your skin. It hurts, oh god does it ever hurt, but you keep hold of his head. Keep him pinned.

"Kill him!"

You narrow your eyes at the woman. "Don't make me regret saving you."

"What did you say? What did you just fucking say?!"

"Blackavar, restrain her."

And restrain her he does. He ushers the woman away from you with a gleeful, "I have a gun, ma'am, don't make me shoot you." And she protests, hurling slurs and nonsensical insults at you. Bitch, cunt, whore, what even are you? What even are you?!

"I'm the one who saved you," you say, knowing that she won't hear. Grief has her. Lost husband, lost sons, and a lost hand, she has a right to her anger.

What she doesn't have is the right to sentence this boy to death.

His infection runs deep, and his teeth, they need to be fixed. Your usual method of dealing with the Starving is to make them cry. They shed the disease through their tears. This boy needs more than that. He needs you to do for him what you did for the woman.

Two dives in one day.

"I have to do this," you say. Then, to the boy, you whisper, gentle, "We're going to sleep for a moment, and when we wake, you will be better."

He socks you across the jaw.

This has been a long fucking day.

"Don't let her interrupt!" you shout to Blackavar. He grunts an acknowledgement, and you wonder if you will be safe with that oily man watching over you. He knows you, but he didn't attack upon seeing you. You'll ask him why later, you don't have the time.

You want this day done and over with.

Inhale, close your eyes, count down backwards from three, exhale, open your eyes.
There, you are in the boy's Dream.

It's on fire.

You pivot on your heel, taking in the boy's private inferno. Most Starving dream of food, on gorging themselves on an endless banquet of offal and rabbit flesh. This is different, here fire consumes, the tables, the chairs, the antique serving carts.

"Little boy!" you call out. "Where are you? I'm here to help you!"

"I don't deserve it."

He appears beside you, matches in one hand, lighter fluid in the other. "I heard the lady," he says. "She's right - I don't deserve help."

Children have sponges for hearts. They drink in everything said, everything done to them. Even starved and mad, the boy heard that woman. Her words dunked this boy's heart in gasoline. And his guilt lit the match.

You are beginning to regret saving that woman.

"I know what she said," you brush the bangs away from the boy's face with a stroke of your thumb, "and I want you to listen to me, it's not your fault. It's the Milkman's."

"You already said that," he says.

"I will keep saying it until I die." You take him by the shoulders. "But now, we don't have time for this. I need to fix you."

"How?"

"The Milkman, he gave you milk, right?" You smile when the boy nods. Encouraged, you ask, "Bottle or glass?"

"It was a glass bottle, like in Looney Tunes. He gave me strawberry milk in a glass bottle. Coz that's my last name, Strawberry - like Darryl Strawberry!"

You shush him. "The bottle of milk, it's here. Tell me where."

His face crumples, confused, and then, a bright burst of realization lights him up. He rises up on tiptoe, pointing to where the bottle stands. The children's table, which, like everything else here, is surrounded by flames.

"Put out the fire," you say.

Without a word, he points at the ceiling. Sprinkler heads spring from the blackening wood, click, spray. Flames hiss, gutter, die. You break into a dash towards the table, careful not to slip on the forming puddles.

You dive for the bottle of milk, your fingers wrapping around the glass neck, tight as

you can go without snapping it. A hand grabs yours. A man's hand, clad in a white glove - you know that hand.

"Wicked shame," says Woundwort.

Crisp milkman uniform, black bowtie, plush bunny head with a funny little hat tucked between the ears, he is a giant of a man. Larger than you remember, larger than you think possible.

"Little Rabbit," he starts, shaking his head. "What are you doing?"

You swing without thinking. Pure, blind instinct propels you, and you roar as your fist hits his ribs. The seam of his white uniform shirt rips open, revealing a mouth full of cluttered teeth. It licks at your hand with a wide, flat tongue.

"Little Rabbit!" slobbers the mouth, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Saving this boy!"

You cram your fist into that mouth, grab the tongue by the root, and tear it out. Woundwort hollers with laughter, and lets go of your hand. He lifts his arm to examine the spouting wound. "That what you're doing? Looks like you're making a wicked mess to me."

"Shut up!" You step back, the bottle of milk sloshing in your hand. You have it. You need to destroy it.

"I saw the news, little Rabbit," he knocks aside the table, "You made the whole town cry! They're right out straight bawling their eyes out like lost babes."

"And you infected this town. Why? Why change all those children, what's the point?"

Woundwort zips his mouth shut, teeth interlocking, staunching the rushing flow. He pats his side. "A general needs his army - I've got a warren to invade."

A warren to invade? No, no, he's stalling for time while he traces the Dream. He must be somewhere in the town, following the line, stalking you and the boy. Don't take his bait and smash the bottle. Smash it to pieces.

Woundwort shouts when you raise the bottle, throws his hands out. He speaks with the half-crazed ecstasy of a televangelist as you hurl it at the floor. "I found her, Hrairoo! I found my Hazel-rah! I found her! I found her!"

He shatters along with the glass, milk and blood and entrails and teeth spilling across the floor. His mask floats in the muck, its face stuck in a grimace. You stomp it flat.

"Excuse me, lady?" The boy is beside you. "Are you--? Are you okay?"

"Are you okay?" You hate to deflect but what good would it do worrying the boy? He has been through enough already.

He takes your hand. "I--I want to wake up now."

"Then, let's wake up."

It doesn't make you nauseous this time, waking up. It hurts, though, and you don't know why you're surprised. The boy did land a few hits before you took the plunge. You press your palm to your shoulder, now sticky with congealed blood, and groan.

"Up already?" asks Blackavar.

He sits a foot away from you, shoulder resting on a tank, and your black rabbit snuggled on his lap. The woman is nowhere in sight.

"Two dives in succession - you are remarkable! I doubt any of your sisters could manage such a feat."

"Where's the woman?" you ask.

Blackavar strokes the rabbit's ears, his free hand gesticulating in the air. "She grabbed my gun, the hag. And when she couldn't figure out how to disable the safety, she chucked it at me and fled the store. What? Was she important?"

"She left--?" Those precious moments you could have spent searching for Quintana and Hazel. Your energy, those goldfish lives, all for nothing? "You're not lying to me, are you?"

"Please," he rolls his eyes, "don't insult me! That story is too boring to be one of my lies. My lies are extravagant. My lies thrill and charm."

You get the feeling that if you respond, Blackavar may never stop talking. Maybe check on the boy instead? Before you can look away from Blackavar, as if summoned, the boy flops against you. You steady him, and he smiles up at you, teeth clean of gore.

"Hi," he says.

"Hello," you say, "Strawberry, right?"

"That's my last name, my first name is Em--" He cuts off, wiping at his eyes. There are the tears, that is to be expected. He has been through a lot, but there seems to be more to his silence.

His eyes drift off to the left, and he hems and haws, fussing with an invisible string between his fingers. "It's, ah--"

"What is it?" you ask.

"A guessing game?" Blackavar chimes in, "I'm good with those! You said your first name begins with Em? So, Emmanuel? Perhaps Emile?"

"Emile!" the boy says. "My name is Emile, that's a good name, right?"

He waits for your answer, hungry for your approval. Bemused, you search Blackavar's

expression for a clue. He motions for you to go on, speak. Why does the boy need you to like his name?

"It's a great name," you say.

He throws his arms around you in a tight hug. "Thanks!" Cheek against your good shoulder, in a serious whisper, he asks, "What you said about it not being my fault - you weren't lying, right? Just to make me feel better?"

"I can't lie."

"Not without great and painful consequence," Blackavar says. "It's part of her particular rule set. No lying, a ribbon around the wrist binds her, cold iron--"

"Who the hell are you?" you feel Emile flinch at the bite in your voice, and the regret is instant. You try again, this time calmer, "Who are you?"

"I already told you, I'm Blackavar."

"I don't want your name, I want to know who you are. Who are you? How do you know about any of this?" You thump your fist against your chest. "How do you know about me?"

Blackavar moves so his back can rest against the tanks. Knees bent, he cradles your rabbit to his shoulder like a baby. "Suppose I do have you at a disadvantage. It would only be fair to tell you a bit more about myself. Got to keep things even-steven, after all."

You stand, raising Emile along with you. If you sit while listening, you may fall asleep. And the floor is filthy, blood, fish slurry, water, you don't know how Blackavar could remain seated on such a mess.

"Go on," you say, "Keep talking."

"A score ago, I used to be a professional medium. I even had a television show, Walking the Nightside with Richard Stoat." He lets out a dry, paper laugh, and rubs at his temple. "It went on for seven seasons. It was pretty popular."

"All absolute bullshit - nothing about what I said was real. Lies, lies, and more lies. A better name would have been the Barnum Effect with Richard Stoat."

"You sound remorseful."

"Ha, no, no. Much like you, I'm incapable of remorse. Yet regret, that I know that feeling well."

Your shoulders tense up. "I feel remorse, Dick."

"Is that so? I'll remember that."

"Go back to your story."

"Your wish is my command." Blackavar points left, "So, I was a medium," he points right, "and I had a successful show."

"Built on lies," says Emile.

"Built on lies - excellent memory, Mr. Strawberry. My career was built on lies." The rabbit kicks and he calms it with a tender hum. "But, nothing stays hidden forever. What's done in the dark will be brought to the light.

"After wrapping up the seventh season, my agent connected me to a possible client - young man, scar on his face." He flicks his finger along his cheek. "Eyes like a shark, that one. I was terrified of him the moment we met.

"He was searching for his missing sister. My show had a segment on finding missing people, so it was only natural that he came to me."

The black rabbit slides off of him and settles on the floor. Blackavar scowls, a divot forming between his thin brows, and looks off.

"At least, that's what I said to him. It's only natural that you came to me, my lad! I, the great Richard Stoat, can find all missing persons, dead or alive.

"He shot me when he discovered I was a fraud. Gutshot - he wanted me to die slow."

"Holy shit," Emile says.

"Holy shit indeed. My agent found me bleeding out in my apartment and called 911 immediately. I almost expired three times on the operating table."

You hold up your hand, and then ask, "About the young man with the scar..."

"...what was his name?"

"Cody, Cody Driscoll."

The black rabbit screams, flipping and flopping on the floor, kicking at nothing. Every hair on your body stands on end from the sound. Blackavar clutches at his head.

"Cocking hell, he killed this one, too?"

You snatch up the rabbit, rocking him in your arms, whispering, cooing. Fear nothing, for you are dead. Cody can't harm you anymore. You're safe, you're safe. The rabbit burrows against your breast, his trashings calming into quiverings.

"Is the bunny okay?" Emile asks.

"He's dead," Blackavar says, "This is will be as okay as he can get."

"Wait, what? But he's alive! He's right there and - is he really dead?"

"How do you know that?" You ask Blackavar.

He stands and tugs at the back of his pants. "Ugh, wet floor. Oh, yes, how do I know that? The answer to simple, I can speak to the dead."

"You said you couldn't." You get in his face, standing on the balls of your feet to get nose to nose with him. "Explain yourself, now."

"Patience, please, I implore you. I was getting to that. If you would only let me continue my story--"

You stomp, "Tell me!"

"Gracious, you're a rude, impatient creature!" His insult comes served with a smile. "The Cliff Notes, then. I survived my close encounter with death and came back changed. I could hear the dead, I could see them. For real this time."

"Cliff notes?"

"Cliff Notes, CliffsNotes. Duck tape, duct tape, whatever, it's all the same! Unless--" He studies your face, so close to his, and exclaims, "Oh! You don't know what those are, do you?"

"You're digressing again."

"You keep interrupting." His smile reaches his eyes as he places a firm hand on your shoulder and nudges you back. "Your impatience tells me you have something important on your mind, and perhaps, you should go. You're clearly a doe on a mission."

You shrug off his touch. "Tell me why you're here! Tell me why you know me!"

"I'm here because like you, I'm subject to fate's cruel pen." He shows you the bite mark on his arm. Large incisors, large canines, if you took his wrist into your mouth, bit down, it would be a perfect match.

"You recognize this mark?" he asks.

"It's a bite," you say. "One of my sisters bit you? I don't--" You don't understand. What did a bite have to do with any of this?

"It's a curse."

Woundwort, you falter as the memories hit you. Him pulling your teeth out, you gurgling blood and pleas. On the wrist of the hand holding the plyers, there was a scar - same as Blackavars. You were eight. You bit him in frustration over losing at Uncle Wiggly.

It was only a quick nip at his finger, no blood drawn. He beat you until you couldn't walk. He took your teeth, he took your antlers, he hollered insane things about curses, about you. You were trying to hurt him like Rabbit did! You were trying to take away his ending!

-I found her, Hrairoo! I found my Hazel-rah! I found her! I found her!-

"I need to go," you say.

"Are you alright?"

"I've wasted too much time on you! I need to go! Woundwort, he - I need to go!"

"Are you okay?" Emile reaches for you. "You're crying!"

You wipe milk tears off your cheeks. You're quaking down to the atoms, you're going to break apart. Woundwort is in this town! You need to find Hazel and Quintana! You need to finish your mission!

What is happening to you?

Why are you so afraid?

You need to calm down, you need to think, you need to, you need to--

Breathe!

Inhale and hold it, breathe as Lucy taught you. Imagine a square, count the points clockwise, and exhale when you reach four. Repeat until your pulse steadies and your vision stabilizes. Repeat until your thoughts slow to a reasonable pace.

"Are you okay?" Emile asks.

"Let her be, boy," Blackavar says, "And take that hand away! Never touch someone when they're having a panic attack."

Panic attack? You always called it going tharn. You rub your tears off on your forearm. You freeze. You're being watched. Speak.

"I need to go." You make for the entrance, your effects don't matter. The jacket can be replaced.

The rabbit, you need him. You whistle for him to follow. He sticks by Blackavar's feet, licking his hind foot in a fussy way. You snap your fingers. "Come along!"

He keeps washing.

"What is wrong with you? Come here!"

"I don't think your bunny wants to go," Emile says.

"He has a mission has to fulfill," you say. "Staying here isn't it, now come!"

Blackavar approaches, and the rabbit, ears perked, follows him. "What, pray tell, is that mission?"

"He is to lead me to the man who killed him." Telling him might be a mistake. This man is cursed and an admitted liar. You know only a meager portion of his life, and

what he has shared is suspect.

"Mr. Driscoll."

"Yes."

"If that's the case, then that might explain why our furry friend so partial to me."

You don't need to be caught in another of his meandering stories. You hazard, quick, "You know Cody's location?"

"That I do." He bows his head, hands moving, presenting. "Your man has sequestered himself deep within a warren. The back entrance to which lies here, in this town."

"Didn't the Milkman say he was going to invade a warren?" Emile has your jacket, leather soiled, sleeve torn. He offers it to you with both hands. "With his army. Think he's after this Cody guy, too?"

Woundwort isn't after Cody, he's after the woman Cody is holding captive. You pull on your jacket, disgusting as it is, and count the corners of a square. Cody will be easy pickings if Woundwort reaches him first. You need to get there. Now.

"Take me to him," you say.

"Who? Me?" Emile points at himself. "I don't know where that guy is!"

"Not you, Blackavar. Blackavar, take me to Cody."

He opens his mouth to speak. "I--"

You grab him by the shoulders, crumpling his shirt in your fists. "Take me to him, please. He's holding two girls captive - I need to save those girls! I promised I would try to help them!"

"If Woundwort gets to them before I do, I don't know what will happen. So, please."

"Young lady, you're confusing me for an altruist."

"Then let's strike a deal."

This is a risk, a giant, stupid risk. He might ask for something impossible, he might hurt you. You see your fears reflected in Emile's round, startled face. You cut him off, cut off both him and Blackavar.

"You take me to the warren, and I--" You will find a way to help Quintana, you will find Hazel Rey, you will do whatever it takes to fulfill your mission.

"My name is the Black Rabbit of Inlé and I offer you, Richard Stoa, Blackavar, a deal. In exchange of your help, I offer you mine. Whatever you want, say it, and I'll grant it."

You extend your hand out to him.

He lets you hang for a minute, hands held before his chest, palms flat against each other, fingers interlocked. A prayer? A mockery? You can't tell by his impassive expression. Your arm wavers and you go to pull away when he catches your hand up in his.

"Well now," he purrs as he shakes your captured hand. "With an offer like that, how could I ever say no?"

END PART SEVEN.

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