



 rabbit, rabbit, rabbit  @therabbitdies

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## The Rabbit Died - PART EIGHT

Warning: This is a horror/fantasy story full depictions and mentions of abuse of all stripes, body horror, cannibalism, death, gore, incest, pregnancy, sexual assault, and vomit. This warning list keeps growing, oh god.

"He's going to perform a test on you two, and you better not fail it."

Cody sits across from you, sober as the cop that delivered the news about your mother. About your mom, kid, there's been an incident. About your fears, Hazel, they're about to come true.

"And if we fail it?" you ask.

Quintana holds your wrist, your hand occupied with keeping your lunch from sliding off your lap. She is making that teapot wheeze of hers, and you know she knows about he's about to say.

"You die."

"Fucking called it. I fucking called it!"

Cody's somber expression curdles and sours into an ugly knot of anger. In spite of your situation, in spite of the threat of violence and death, you laugh. You point and crow, "Oh my fuck, you \_are\_ a psycho! I called it!"

"Maybe I should skip the test and kill you now," he says.

Clover pulls a noodle from one of the plates - Cody's, you notice. Her big doe eyes stick to him as she sucks it clean of sauce.

"Hazel, please, don't--" Quintana hiccups. "He's not-- He won't-- You can't, Cody!"

"Hold this," you say, passing your dish to Quintana. "Give me my book."

"It's next to you," she says.

And it is. Get distracted for a second and you'd forget your head. You grab the book.

"So before we have to take your bullshit test, can you guys answer a question?" You

don't give the benefit of waiting, you power on, presenting the book with a Vanna White smile. "What's this?"

Clover speaks up, quick as a bunny, "That's Watership Down, Rabbit's favorite--"

Cody snaps his fingers, barking out a harsh, "stop," and she shrinks back. Shrinks back and bites down on her wrist.

"It's a fucking book," he says.

Rabbit, the girl from your dream, the other version of your baby, the brat that smiled sweet venom at you as she said, "You ate me." Woundwort called you little rabbit. Did he mean little Rabbit?

"Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit," you say, sing-song, "Whomst the fuck is Rabbit?"

Clover gnaws at her wrist, focusing on a strip of skin that glows a bright green. You glance down at your wristband. That strip, your band, they're the same color. Curious.

"She's a plague," says Cody.

"She okay?" you motion to Clover. "Hey, are you okay--?"

"Cut it the fuck out, Clover." He slashes a finger across his wrist, and Clover, she drops her arm. Chewed open. Raw. You spot glimpses of green fabric, clean despite being knit into the fibers of her muscles.

"Holy crap, you need a towel or something?" At first, you don't get why you're offering help. This girl gutted you only a few hours ago.

Then Cody yells, "She's fucking fine! Forget her."

And you get why. You want to help because it's the opposite of what he wants.

"No."

"What you say?"

Quintana buries her face in the hollow of your shoulder, pleads with you, please, Hazel, don't upset him. He might hurt us, please, please. You wish you could grant that request. You wish you could stifle the urge to defy this asshole.

"I said," you lean forward, sneering, "no."

Cody blinks at you, blinks and blinks, as if he is staring at the sun. He dismisses the beginnings of a frown, waves it right away, and snorts. He copies you, bending forward, elbows propped on his knees, his chin propped on folded hands.

He stares at you like this is the first time he's laid eyes on you.

"You're not scared of me," he says.

"I'm too done with your shit to be scared," you say. "What's the worst you can do to me? Kill me? That test gives me a fifty-fifty chance of dying. I almost died last night thanks to Wonderwall. I'm, well, I'm not scared of death anymore, and I'm sure as fuck not scared of you."

You wait for the cramps to kick in - your kid, whatever she is, must be winding up for the punch. Your confidence as you spoke was too good to be real. And, to your shock, nothing.

"Holy shit," both you and Clover whisper.

Quintana pulls her head up, saucer-eyed. "Oh my gosh."

"That was the truth," all three of you say in unison.

"Fuck no." Cody rocks back in his chair, hands useless in his lap. You grin. Now he's the one on the receiving end. You're the cop, and he's you, lost and waiting for the bad news.

You laugh from deep within your pregnant belly. You point and you laugh, and Clover joins you. She holds her stomach, shoulders trembling, cheeks rosy. Quintana lets out a tiny giggle and ducks her head. Her giggling swells and breaks and all three of you laugh at Cody.

Your vision swims from the breathless, tear-inducing joy of knocking this bastard down. You might die right now, you're laughing that hard. You're cackling. You're roaring.

You have a revolver pointed in your face.

Cody stands in front of you, gun leveled. How he went from his chair to here, you can't fathom. You blinked and there he is, eyes dead, mouth hitched in a grimace. Blood runs from his nose.

"Shut. Up."

He wants to call you out? Wave his gun around in a tantrum? Alright, okay, fine, let him. You refuse to be afraid of him anymore.

You rise up and press your puckered lips to the barrel. Powder burns your mouth, gun oil, metal, and blood. His blood, how you can tell, you're not sure. The knowledge simply floods you as you follow your first kiss with a second.

Cody's posture shifts and the barrel bobs away from your lips. Swearing, he draws back, retreats. His ears and cheeks are flushed.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry, Cody, are you uncomfortable?" you ask. "You had no trouble feeling me up with that gun earlier."

"I'll fuck you with this gun if you keep this shit up." As he speaks, he jabs you between the eyes with the barrel. Your head jerks back, and you hear Quintana whine.

You smile at him. If you managed to make it as half as cruel as Rabbit's, you'll be satisfied. You'll be proud. "Sounds fun."

"You fucking cunt--"

Cody jams the muzzle into your mouth, chipping your incisor. Sharp pain jolts you silent. You choke, your teeth rattling against the barrel. The front sight scratches your hard palate.

"Cody stop!" Quintana grabs his arm. "Please! Stop it! Please!"

"Aw, but Quinita, baby," he yanks your head back by your hair. You gag as the barrel presses deeper. "But we're having fun! See, she likes it!"

"Cody!"

You are going to vomit. The gun is jabbing the back of your throat, and you're going to puke. You slap and scratch at his arm. His skin doesn't yield - it's like scrabbling at marble.

"Don't Cody me, she asked for this!"

"Cody, this is going too far," Clover says.

"You shut up, too, I'm fucking done. She wants to play tough, she can deal with the consequences."

Black eats away at the edges of your blurring vision. You need air, you're suffocating. If you do puke, you are sure you will drown on your own sick. As usual, you pushed too hard, too fast. You think you would have learned not to by now.

Quintana and Clover continue to shout Cody's name. He holds his ground, holds his gun, and falls into a stony silence. There is no mercy in his blue, blue eyes. They are as hard as his skin.

A knock. A single, clear knock. You almost don't hear it over Quintana's cries and Clover's pleas to Cody's sanity.

Knock, knock.

Knock, knock.

As Cody looks to the door, he pulls out the gun. You imbibe air with a greedy hunger, sucking it down, eyes shuttering. Quintana throws her arms around you, and you hide against her, rasping.

"Clover, get the door," Cody says. Then, to you, he orders, "Don't talk unless I tell you to. Capisci?"

Your whole mouth throbs thanks to your tooth. The agony goes deep, up into your cheekbones. A nasty, pulsing balloon of pain. You clench and relax your fists, clench, relax.

Don't talk unless asked?

"Fuck you," you spit the words in his face. "Fuck you, Cody."

With a push of his thumb, he lifts your upper lip and examines your teeth. He whistles. Pats your cheek.

"Heh, figured you'd say that," he says.

"Blackavar's here!" Clover calls out from by the door. She yanks it open, hair bouncing. She doesn't give your new visitor a chance to greet the room before pouncing him with a hug.

"Jesus Christ, Clover, will you chill out?"

Cody leaves you and Quintana alone on the sofa.

"Hey," Quintana whispers. "Hey, Hazel."

"Yeah?"

"What are we going to do? Do you really think Cody is going to kill us? I mean, really, really?"

"I--"

You thought he was but now, after being asked, doubts arise. The cashier, he shot that man without compunction. Put the gun against his head, pulled the trigger, and now he's dead.

He could have shot you instead of throat-fucking you with his revolver.

"I'm not sure."

"Hazel," Quintana moves in closer, whispering lower, "I think, and maybe I'm being dumb, I'm probably being dumb, but I think he's--um."

"You're not dumb," you interrupt.

"Huh?"

"You're not dumb. You're twitchy and weird but not dumb."

"That's nice of you to say, Hazel." You hear the smile in her voice, feel the happy scrunch of her nose and eyes against your ear. "I don't think you're dumb either. You're just mean- and loud."

She better cramp up for calling you mean. You're many things but you're not - fuck!

You get a stitch in your side. You cough and shoots of fresh pain branch through your face.

"What about Cody?" you ask.

"I think he's scared of us."

You glance over to her, brows high. "Excuse me, what? What makes you say that?"

"Yesterday, when I was outside." Quintana cups her hands, holds them up to you. You're back in Kindergarten when the teacher had you play Telephone. "Cody caught me with the phone."

"And?"

"He looked frightened, Hazel. He looked like that just now, when we laughed at him."

He didn't look scared when he shoved his gun in your mouth. He looked dead - a corpse with a bloody nose. You toy with your chipped tooth with your tongue.

"So? What if he's scared of us? He's still a dick."

"People do terrible things when they're scared," she says.

"That's no excuse."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"You getting Stockholm? What is wrong with you?"

Quintana pulls back and worries at the front of her shirt, bunching and wringing it up with one hand. She dodges your eyes. The shirt - you realize - is new.

"Quintana?" Understanding her has always been a struggle, this is, though, is a fight. "Cody hurt me. I don't care if he's scared, I don't care if he's pissing the floor like a chihuahua. He hurt me!"

"Yeah, he did," she deflates, her hair dropping over her face. "Sorry."

Maybe she is dumb.

"Fucking hell," you say.

What else is there to say to her? You drop Quintana, leaving her to stew alone with two plates of Drunken Noodle and her own thoughts.

She sniffs.

You keep walking.

You tune into the conversation happening by the door. Cody grouses at the new arrival, a short man with slick blond hair. Politician hair, and a politician's grin to match. He hangs onto a cat carrier with two big hands. Something trashes about

inside.

"You Blackavar?" you ask.

"Thought I told you not to talk?" Cody says.

You ignore him and repeat, "Are you Blackavar?"

"That would be me," the man says. "You must be Hazel."

How did he know that? You give Blackavar another once over. Cody gives him a look, too, you notice. His hard squint creasing his angular face.

"Yeah," you say, "that's me. Ah, so, you're going to give me a test?"

"I am," he bows, keeping the carrier steady the best he can.

"What is it?"

"It's a variant on the Rabbit Test - you do know what the Rabbit Test is, correct?"

The Rabbit Test - that name does not come as a surprise. All roads lead to Rabbit. You hook and flick your wristband, mumbling, "No."

"A cold audience." Blackavar switches the carrier from one hand to the other. "My favorite kind.

"Pregnant people produce a hormone called human chorionic gonadotropin. For the sake of brevity, we'll refer to this hormone as hCG from this point forward."

"Ah. Okay?"

"HCG can be found in the blood and urine. That's why Planned Parenthood has you pee in a cup to see if you've ruined your life for the next eighteen years or not." He drums a quick ba dum tss on the plastic body of the carrier. "Ha ha, well--"

Cody shoves Blackavar aside with his gun hand. "Doctors used to use rabbits for pregnancy tests," he says, curt. "You inject a female rabbit with a pregnant woman's piss and it does a thing to their ovaries. Makes them grow bigger."

"I was getting to that!" Blackavar says.

"Are you going to shoot a bunny up with my pee? You know I'm pregnant." You start a slow retreat from the two men. In the carrier must be the intended victim, fighting for her tiny life. "You don't need to do that!"

"It's more than that," Cody says. "It's not just you're pregnant."

"It's what you're pregnant with," Blackavar finishes for him. "It's the nature of the parasite, and how it affects the human body."

As they speak, you see Clover over by the door. She shuffles her feet, head hanging,

arms folded behind her back. She called your child her sister, now these men are calling her a parasite.

"She's not a parasite!" you shout.

Clover lifts her gaze from the floor, her lips parted in a silent, "oh!" She smiles and, for once, it's pleasant.

"Yeah," Quintana joins the conversation, fading in at your side like a ghost. "Our babies aren't parasites."

Blackavar and Cody have a silent exchange. Blackavar cuts exasperated shapes in the air with his free hand. Cody, sucking on his scarred cheek, shakes his head. Sighs. He plays a one man game of catch with the gun.

"This is going nowhere," he says.

"Maybe if you tried educating them on their predicament instead of brandishing your phallic symbol, they might be more receptive? Hm?" Blackavar tuts.

"My baby isn't a parasite!" You poke Blackavar in his sharp shoulder. "Gun or not, I'm not going to listen to Cody, or you. You fucking slimy asshole."

He brushes your finger away and dusts off the spot you touched. "I see. Then what is it?"

"What?"

"Your baby, what is it?"

"It--she is Clover's sister."

Tutting again, louder than before, Blackavar puts down the carrier. He props his foot upon the top to keep the rabbit's violent struggle from scooting it against the floor.

"Do you know what Clover is?"

She's like Rabbit. Do you know what Rabbit is? Other than what you ate for dinner.

(can that really be true?)

You break from the conversation. You back off. Surrender. Blackavar does not relinquish his gaze, he keeps it steady, keeps it locked. He sways when you sway, and you shudder at his calm, even expression. Under the surface lies sharp teeth, quick claws.

"Curious," he says.

He must be trying something. Maybe this is part of the test? Don't speak, for once, for this one time, don't fucking talk. Leave the bait on the hook.

"What about you?" Blackavar switches to Quintana. He scratches at his arm. There is a bite mark, same as Cody's, on his wrist.



"Wha-What?" She hides against your shoulder. "Me?"

"Yes, dearest, you. Do you know what Clover is?"

"Let's take the test!" You shuffle around, cutting in front of Quintana. The interruption disarms Blackavar. Rustles the serene facade. "Let's stop fucking around and take your test."

"About time," Cody says.

Blackavar hefts the carrier up. "Yes, let's. Cody, will you fill these girls in on the rest of the details while I go fetch the other rabbit? I left it in the car."

"Why didn't you put them in together?"

The rabbit lets out a screaming meep.

"Does it sound like she wants company?" Blackavar hands the rabbit, meep-meep-meeping shrilly, over to you. "Clover, the other one's just as lively. I'll require your assistance."

"Sure!" Clover glows, she beams, at his acknowledgment. And you feel sick to your stomach.

Together, they exit the cabin, and you and Quintana are left alone with Cody and an angry bunny. When you think to speak, Blackavar pops back in.

"Make sure the bunny doesn't get loose," he says. "Took me forever to catch it."

And like that, he winks, a big, bright, sparkling wink, and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

Cody extends his middle finger towards the door.

"He's nicer on his Youtube channel," Quintana says.

Youtube channel.

Let's address that later when you're not in mortal danger. It can be something you and Quintana laugh at later. Hey, remember when a lunatic and youtuber tried to inject bunnies with your urine? Wasn't that hilarious?

You shove the carrier into Quintana's hands. Fumbling, she takes hold of it by the sides. You peek through the metal grate door. A black rabbit with a leaky eye peers out at you, ears back.

"This isn't just a test to see if you're pregnant," Cody says.

"Then what is it?"

"It's to see if you're still human."

"I'm human!" And you stagger under a flash of vomit-inducing pain. That has to be from your tooth. That can't be a lie. That can't be a lie!

"Fuck," Cody turns his head away. "Hazel, do you know how many days it's been since you left the clinic?"

"Fuck you, that's how many."

"A week," Quintana says. "It feels like it's been over a week."

Cody sighs, "It's only been three days."

"What."

"It's been three days. You were driving by yourselves for about a day and a half of it." He spins the cylinder and the gun crumbles to dust. Fresh blood runs down from his left nostril. "You remember stopping for gas? Having anything to eat before you met me?"

"You got it wrong." You poke a finger through the carrier door. Cody won't look at you, and you refuse to look at him. Not while you're aching.

"You didn't do either of those things. Quintana told me last night." He clears his throat. "How about lying? Does it hurt to lie?"

"How does your test prove I'm human?" you ask.

The rabbit sniffs at your finger, tickling you with her wiggly nose. You scratch her.

"We inject your blood into the rabbit," Cody takes the subject change in stride. His tone is one big nonchalant shrug. "If the rabbit doesn't react, you pass. If it changes, you fail."

"Changes? What kind?"

"They mutate. Grow extra limbs, extra organs, antlers are pretty common."

The rabbit rocks the carrier with a hard thump of her paws. You and Quintana grab it, her by the handle, you by the bottom. Her lip wiggles. Yours pinch tight.

"Some puke their guts out."

"How many times?" you ask.

"How many times what? Have I done this?"

"Yeah."

"I've never done it."

You pull away from the carrier, yelling, "You're fucking me! You've never done it!?"

How do you know if this test of yours even works?"

"Lucy's always been the one to run it," Cody says. "Her and Blackavar. All I do is find the infected and bring them in."

"Lucy? Who the fuck is Lucy? And where is she? Is she going to join this shit show?"

Quintana calls your attention with a cough. You cross your arms at her, wait. And when she stays quiet, you go, "What?"

"I think he means Nurse Lucy - from the Clinic."

"That Lucy? She worked with Adams, she helped knock us up. Why would she--?"  
You look to Cody for an answer. You want an answer, all you want is a single answer that makes sense.

"Lucy would try to sabotage mills when she could," he says. "She was usually successful."

"Now she's dead. And we're pregnant. I'll call that a great fucking success."

Cody goes rigid, expression closed. "Yeah. She's dead."

"Who was she to you?"

Quintana tries to hush you with a finger to her lips. You cock your head. What, are you broaching a touchy subject? You don't understand.

"She's my aunt," he says.

"Oh."

"Don't pretend to feel bad, Hazel. I know you don't care."

"I'm not heartless. I knew her, too, Cody." Didn't exactly enjoy Lucy's company. She was the kind of doting, honey-voiced woman that mothered everyone around her. Her attempts insulted you. You have one mother and no nurse will ever replace her.

"You have my condolences."

"And mine!" Quintana says. "I said that already last night, but--"

He doesn't stick around, he heads the door. His whole body taut, his ropey arms poised to strike, his steps stiff. If he pulls that bowstring any tighter, it will snap. "What's taking them so fucking long?"

"I'll go check," you offer. Anything to catch a break from this situation. Anything.

Cody sneers, "Be my guest. Not like you can get away."

"Second thought, if you're going to be like that, I change my mind. You go check."

"Don't talk to me like you're in charge." He opens the door with a hard kick of his boot heel. You breathe a sigh of relief at his exit. How much longer could you have survived his company?

"What a dick," you say to the rabbit. She nibbles at your nails. "I'm not letting you get experimented on. No one's shooting you up with piss."

"He said they used blood, Hazel," Quintana says.

"Bloody piss."

She giggles. "Hazel!"

You hear a crack, a snap, and then a second. Heavy thunks come after. Boots stumbling on the hardwood. You whip around to face the door, and Quintana drops the carrier.

"Oh! Oh no!" she gasps through shaking hands.

Cody hits the floor, clutching his gushing throat. Blood squirts between his fingers. More of it soaks the front of his tank top. He gurgles, he flounders, he fights to sit up and aim an empty hand outside. To pull the trigger of a gun that doesn't exist.

"Blackavar!" comes a shout from outside. Sounds like Clover - the sulky, lounge singer version. "Blackavar, you fool! What if that had been one of the girls!?"

"You could've healed it," Blackavar says.

"You violent idiot!"

"He gets shot every other day, no need to cry over it. Lucy used to blow his brains out at least a week."

Quintana slides beside Cody. She goes to touch him and then pulls her hands away. All the blood. You gag looking at it. "Hazel!? What do we do, Hazel? What do we do!"

This guy kidnapped you, he assaulted you, he hurt you. You should let him bleed out. You should let him die. You let Adams die.

Quintana presses her palm to his bloody chest. "Hazel!"

Fuck.

You run to the kitchen, cursing, and fetch the first scrap of cloth you see. A roll of paper towels! Might as well put a bandaid on it but what else can you do? You hurry back, unraveling length after length.

"Here!" You shove the wadded paper into Quintana's hands.

"It's pointless," says Blackavar. He looms in the frame, pistol in hand. "That boy is dead."

Quintana presses the paper towels to Cody's throat. Red stained hands. Tear stained cheeks. Her gentle heart must be tearing itself apart.

Your heart is a blank. Your mind, though, it overflows. Clover can fix this. Clover fixed you. "Clover! Clover get in here!"

You almost jump as iron fingers snap shut over your wrist. Cody pulls you in and, sputtering, coughing, grabs your wristband. With a hard tug, the plastic button pops and the strip tears. He reaches for Quintana's.

Then Blackavar shoots him, right through the left eye.

The back of Cody's skull bursts in a confetti of brains and bone fragments. He slumps and slips from Quintana's grasp, flopping back against the floor. She sits frozen with her bloody wad of paper towels.

You rub your naked wrist. Why did Cody remove it? Of all the things to do during your last moments, why that?

Quintana breaks. She buries her face in her towels and breaks. You see her wristband. Gingerly, you take her arm, you pull her over the corpse of Cody, and cradle her.

"Hold still, I'm taking this off," you say to her as you fumble with the band. She says nothing.

"It's easier to do with a knife," Blackavar says.

The wristband won't cooperate with your fingers. They're wet, too wet, to grip the plastic. Cody opened it so easily, why can't you?

You give up for now, deciding to ask, "Why did you do it? Why did kill him?"

Blackavar picks his way past you, past Cody, past Quintana. You crane your neck to keep him within your line of sight. He secures his gun in the waistband of his trousers and helps himself to one of the plates on the coffee table.

"I sensing you're upset," he says.

"I am!"

He stuffs noodles into his mouth. Chews. "That is interesting," he says, food wadded in his cheek. "And unexpected."

"Cut the shit, old man! Answer me!"

He swallows. "You're not one for repartee, I'm not sure I like that. If you're going to be impudent, I might as well cut to the chase. I did it to help you.

"You're being rescued, Hazel Rey. Be happy."

If you met Blackavar before Cody, before Adams, you might have smiled. You might have nodded and gone along. You might have accepted him.

"I don't know you, and I sure as fuck don't trust you," you say. "Why would you help me?"

"Goodness, you are like your mother."

"My--My mom?"

"Tsukiko never told you about me? Not surprised." He uses his fingers to shovel down more noodles. "She and I never got along. She didn't like my table manners."

He grins at you, a fleck of carrot stuck between his teeth.

As you turn away to keep from puking at the sight, Clover enters. A woman in black follows a few steps behind her. She wears a motorcycle helmet.

"Clover," you say.

"Shut up," she says, "Just shut up." She crawls atop Cody's body, rests her antlered head over his heart, and curls up. Curls up in a tight ball, knees drawn to her chest. She shuts her eyes. "Just shut up."

They didn't seem to like each other, Cody and Clover. You didn't like him, either. But people are strange. You never know how someone feels for another until they've lost them.

Unsure of what to say to Clover, you look to the woman. "So who are you?"

"That," Blackavar interrupts, "is the Black Rabbit of Inlé. The most fearsome of beasties, the terror of terrors, Death on swift--"

"Enough," she says, "Inlé is fine."

The woman removes her helmet and shakes out short, curly hair. Blonde with black roots. Dyed?

She looks like Clover. Like Rabbit. Brown skin, freckles, scarred throat, but no antlers. She worries at her bottom lip with her funny, bunny teeth.

"You're Inlé?" You didn't expect her to show. Honestly, you didn't even think she was real. You acted like an asshole to Quintana over nothing. Your heart sinks from the shame.

"Inlé?" Quintana wakes from her trance. "You--you came?"

Inlé kneels. "Kept you waiting, huh?"

Quintana shoves away from you and tackles Inlé in a hug. She wraps her right up in her thin arms. "I knew you'd come," she says. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew it."

"I keep my promises," she says.

Shame sours into acidic envy. Quintana's cry for help has been answered, while yours? Your pleas attract monsters and sadistic men.

"Hate to interrupt," you really don't, and you eat the pain, "but we've got a problem. Woundwort is coming."

"I know." Inlé strokes Quintana's hair. Her hand is missing the little finger.

"Okay. How? Fucking how?" Everyone knows shit while you bumble about in the dark. Seriously, fuck people who know things.

"We encountered him on the way here." Inlé helps Quintana to her feet and then extends a hand to you. "He seeks you, he and his army."

You take her hand. "He has a fucking army?"

She pulls you to your feet with little effort. Her grip is velvet and iron, strength beyond strength. She could crush you if she wanted, and yet, she holds you like crystal.

"He does," she says. "Children. Over a hundred."

"Kids? Fucking kids?"

Blackavar polishes off his plate with a swipe of his finger. "That's what she said. Do you have trouble parsing information? Hearing issues, mayhaps?"

Fuck that guy. You need to - "Scram. We need to scram."

"And go where?" Quintana asks.

"We're going to Maine." You grab Rabbit's book from off the sofa. Shove it into Quintana's hands. "We're going to Maine and we're getting some fucking answers."

"What? Maine?" Blackavar almost drops his plate. "Oh no, I'm not going there!"

"Can you take us there?" You ask Inlé.

"Hazel Rey, I don't think that would be wise. That's Woundwort's territory and--"

"And he's not there currently." Wearing a grin, you tuck the book under your arm.

"He's on his way to kick my ass here. Right?"

She hesitates. "Yes."

"Then let's go."

You head for the door.

"Hazel?" Quintana catches your wrist. "What about Clover? Are we just going to leave her here with, you know?"

You consider Clover laying across Cody's body. She attacked you, mocked you, and then healed you. Could you deal with her capricious nature if you brought her along? Could you live with yourself if you left her behind?

"She's coming with us," you say.

Clover sits up, her pale eyes bloodshot and wild under her white bangs. She wipes tears from her blood smeared cheek. "I won't wake up for you. Not when Cody still needs me."

"What are you even talking about? You're already--" Your baby doesn't let you complete the sentence. She strikes you without mercy.

"Hazel!" Quintana braces you as you clutch your belly. "Are you okay?"

"How the hell is that a lie?"

"Let me explain," Blackavar says, having moved from one plate to another. "This is a Dream. The cabin, the clearing, the payphone, this fine china I'm holding, is Clover's dream. All of it. For her to leave she must wake."

"I'm not waking up," Clover says. "Cody needs me."

"Woundwort is coming," you say.

"Because you called him."

Blackavar chokes on a piece of venison. He pounds on his chest until it dislodges, spitting it out onto the plate. "You what?! You called him? Have you lost your precious mind?"

"Why would you do that?" Inlé asks.

"In my defense, I'm stupid." You wait for the cramp. It doesn't come. You blow your bangs from your face. "You're stupid, too, if you think it's okay to stay behind."

Clover scrunches her nose. "I'll go if we take Cody."

"Fine, I don't get it, but fine. Whatever. Fine."

"I suppose I'll go clean out the trunk," Blackavar grumbles as he steps out of the cabin, plate in hand. He shouts at someone. A new name, a boy's name, and a young voice shouts back.

"That sounded like a child," Quintana says.

"His name is Emile," Inlé says, "We found him in town. I managed to heal him before he changed fully."

Changed into what? You peer out into the front yard, curious. Blackavar pops the trunk of an old Buick and starts emptying it, passing cameras and mics to a small boy.



Son of a bitch shot someone with a kid present. Your finger stings - a splinter. You were gripping the door frame hard enough to crack the wood. All without noticing.

"Fuck." You suck on your finger.

Clover, Inlé, and Quintana stand around Cody, quiet. Clover, clutching the nape of her neck, Inlé, fists firm against her round hips, and Quintana, hands clasped in prayer. He lays motionless, the ruin of his head haloed by congealing red.

"I'll help move him," you say.

"We should cover him," Quintana says.

"Grab his jacket, we'll use that." You squat down by his head and wait for Quintana to drape the jacket over his face. "Clover, can you get his legs? And Quintana, go out and tell that kid not to look until Cody's packed away."

Packed away, like luggage. What a disgusting way to speak of a body. You flick your thumb over the lid of Cody's remaining eye, shutting it. You should be glad he's dead - why aren't you?

"Hazel, the book," Quintana says.

"Take it."

You toss it to her. She fumbles the catch and it falls, spine down, on the floor. The pages split dead down the middle. Inside, simple, shining, rests a knife.

"Is that--" Clover starts.

"--a knife?" Inlé finishes.

Rabbit hid a knife in the book. She wanted you to have that. "Hand it over," you say.

Quintana lifts the knife up by the hilt. Yelps. Drops it. "It's freezing cold!"

She wraps it up in her shirt, shuffling over quick to pass it to you. And she is right, it is cold. Holding it is like holding an icicle. You ignore the burn. After your teeth, the cramps, and everything else, you are used to pain.

You tuck it into your pocket.

"I'll go do the thing now." She runs out, grabbing the book as she passes it. She relays your request with a shout, and you sigh. Now, to carry Cody.

"Everyone ready?" you ask.

Inlé grabs the carrier, the rabbit inside grunting. You never knew rabbits could be so noisy. She makes a curious sound. "I would like to explore more, but we don't have the time."

"I'll help you load Cody into the car," Clover says, taking Cody's ankles. "Then I'll

have to go upstairs to my room to wake myself up. We'll have seven minutes to leave the clearing before the Dream collapses."

"What if we don't make it out?" you ask.

"We'll be trapped."

You go pale. "Good to know."

She laughs, "You should see your face, you're whiter than--"

She belches.

"Clover?"

She drops Cody to stifle a hiccup. Her shoulders work, and what little color she possesses drains from her face. Her eyes grow big and helpless, and she burps again, louder.

Not again.

"No, no, no," you run to her. "Stop it! Stop! Leave her alone!"

She shoves you away. "Get out! He's here! Get out!"

Milk drips from her nose, from the corner of her mouth. She folds over, retching, coughing up thick white curds and thin bile. Soured milk. Apples. This is Adams all over again.

"Hazel!" shouts Quintana from outside.

Blackavar curses. The kid follows up with a curse of his own. Pipes bust in the kitchen, milk spraying out in shrieking blasts. Inlé grabs you by the arm.

"We have to go!"

"What about Clover?"

Clover horks up a glob of pink slime. "You pick the dumbest time to care about people, Hazel Rey. I can handle myself."

"But!"

"Get her out of here!"

Inlé coils an arm around your middle and drags you out of the cabin. Her one arm contains more strength than your entire body. You kick, you shout, and watch as Clover waves goodbye. As she does, she smiles.

"Get in the cocking car!" Blackavar shouts.

You elbow Inlé in her jaw. She grunts- a quiet oomph of irritation. You mewl in pain.

She is rock fucking solid. Add your elbow to your list of shit that hurts.

"Fucking let me go!"

"No."

Rain starts to fall.

Inlé goes still. You freeze, too.

"What are you two doing?" Blackavar asks. "Get in the car!"

"Guys," the kid says, oddly calm. "I don't think the car's going to help."

He points and all of you follow the line of his thin arm, you all look. At the end of the drive stands a poorly made man. Giant, with long, lumpy limbs, he is crude meat stuffed into a clean white uniform.

His mask is what fucks you up the most. Big, goofy Bugs Bunny knockoff with a tiny milkman's hat stapled between the ears.

Woundwort. He's here.

"Hello." He takes a sluggish step forward. His foot squishes as it hits the gravel. "I believe I'm here for my asskicking."

END PART EIGHT.

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