



 rabbit, rabbit, rabbit  @therabbitdies

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The Rabbit Died - PART NINE

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.

"Hazel, Hazel, there you are."

Woundwort leads with his pelvis, his bandy legs trudging forward, molasses-slow. His knee jumps between steps. His arms dangle, gloved hands flapping like dead balloons.

"I have been waiting a long time to meet you. A wicked long time."

He lifts his lolling head to the sky. Drops of white rain plink off his stricken plastic eyes.

"You looked so different in your Dream. But here, here you look like my Tsukiko."

Here he is, the consequence of your actions. The bad thing has arrived as you said it would. Woundwort draws closer, his prancing strut set firmly between hilarious and hideous. But that is how all predators go, isn't it? Great, stupid, and frightening.

"Tsukiko," he quavers. "She's gone now, isn't she? My heart has joined the Thousand, for my love stopped running today."

You draw the knife from your pocket. "Stop saying my mom's name, asshole."

"Hazel," Inlé cautions, arm out to guard you. "Be careful."

"Hrairoo." Woundwort slumps forward, bunny head hanging sideways. Inlé flinches from head to toe as if slapped. "Hush you slut. Cavorting with that pencil-dicked prick, I won't let you drag your sister down with you."

He reaches for you. Beckons. "Come here, Hazel. Let us talk."

"Sister?" Quintana whispers.

Inlé refuses to meet your gaze as you look to her.

"Hazel, we don't have to fight." Woundwort's chest bulges under his shirt. Boils. There is something inside him. "Let us negotiate."

"No," you say.

A flare of heat licks at your spine. Your wrist aches like an old wound, long since healed. And then, nothing. Woundwort snarls and loosens his collar. Small fingers, children's fingers, poke out of his skin.

"Where's your ribbon, Hazel?" he asks. "Where is it?"

"You three, get over here," you urge.

Quintana falls in first, the kid rushing after. Blackavar takes his time to move, gaze darting from Woundwort to you and back. He holds his gun. Thinking.

"Move your butt, Dick!" the kid says.

Snapping out of his reverie, Blackavar scrambles over to your small group. He stands beside you, gun drawn, muzzle down. "You look foolish waving that pig sticker about."

"I really don't care," you say.

"Hrairoo, tell Hazel she better answer me." Woundwort continues his shuffling advance. "Or there's going to be a helluva reckoning. Remember when I pulled your nails? I'll do it to her! I'll make you watch!"

Inlé's breathing hastens, her chest moving with the slightest hitch. Terror radiates heavy from her small body. It spreads to Quintana, it spreads to you, and you fight to think.

"Hrairoo, are you listening? Hrairoo!"

"That's not her name," the boy says in a cracking voice.

Woundwort is knocked off balance, head jerking back. A spasm travels up his bumpy, gummy-limbed body. Did that hurt him?

"What did you say you little shit?" he hisses.

Did that hurt Woundwort? You have to find out. "Mijo, say it again."

"Are you mad?" Blackavar says. "Do you want to piss him off more than you already have?"

"Say it again!"

The boy puffs up his chest. Nods. "You deaf, boomer? I said: that isn't her name!"

"You--you--!" Woundwort bellows out in agony, body rattling. He pulls at his threadbare ears. Froth drips down his neck. "Hrairoo, stop him!"

"Stop calling her that!" the boy picks up volume. "Her name is Inlé! It will always be and always has been Inlé!"

Woundwort howls, "No, no, shut up! Shut up!"

"You shut up!"

The tension drains from Inlé's stance. She mutters something, a countdown, one, two, three, four. She fixes her gloves. Her fear is gone, and with it, yours.

"There is an emergency exit out of the Dream," Blackavar whispers quick. "Back in the cabin, through the root cellar."

The howling grows, human in its pain and rage. Woundwort falls to one knee, pounding the ground, tearing at his shirt. Big bastard is having a tantrum.

Let him have his fit - you're getting out of here. You tap Inlé on the arm and point back to the cabin. "Come on," you say. "Vámonos."

"I'll watch your back," she says.

You break into a sprint, yanking Quintana along with you by the wrist. She grabs onto the boy and he grabs Blackavar. The four of you run. Pumping your legs fast as you can straight for the cabin door.

"Go, c'mon, go!" You usher your group (friends? allies?) up the steps. They jumble together, bump, shout, and stumble. Blackavar trips and you shove him up the last stair with a kick to his ass.

"Was that really necessary?" he asks.

"Go open the cellar, whineass!" you order.

You pivot back to the yard.

Woundwort's gut swells to obscene proportions. The remaining buttons on his shirt pop. Things squirm and trash under his veiny, straining skin. Hands and feet and faces.

Inlé backs away slowly.

"What are you doing?" you shout. "Get in here!"

As she starts to run, Woundwort pops.

Boys, dozens upon dozens, fire from his burst belly. They swarm across the yard in serpentine lines, some scuttling on all fours, others dashing on two. None of them look older than the kid. All of them have the same, starved expression.

"Bring me Hazel!" Woundwort commands his army. "Bring me Hrairoo! Kill the rest!"

The children snap at Inlé's heels as she books it towards you. You wave her in, yelling, hurry, hurry! Fucking hurry! She bounds past you, up the steps.

"Hazel, I just want to talk!" Woundwort calls after you. "Why can't we just talk?"

Inlé pulls you inside the cabin. You, together with her and Quintana, slam the door shut. It jumps as the children ram it. They slam their bodies against the solid wood, pound at it, scream.

"We need to block the door!" Quintana says.

You cast around, chairs, coffee table, sofa. Sofa! Sturdy built - heavy upholstery. That could hold the door long enough to aid your escape. "Hey, Blackavar, kid, bring that over here!"

"You expect us to move that?" Blackavar asks, affronted.

"You seriously going to question me every step of the way?"

"Seeing as how this is your fault, yes! Yes, I will!"

"On it!" the kid shoves at the sofa, sneakers skidding on the slippery floor as he struggles. He may be tough, but he is small, and the sofa is huge.

Without being prompted, Inlé drops the carrier, drops the door, and stomps over to the sofa. She hefts it up onto her shoulder. You forget the chaos for a second to marvel at the ease in which she works. Just squat, grab, and up.

"Move!" she says.

You and Quintana dive out of the way as Inlé slams the sofa down in front of the door. You pant, hand to your chest. Quintana, somehow, landed on her butt. You go to help her up.

"The exit, where is it?" you ask Blackavar.

Blackavar gapes at the door, jaw hanging. When he hears you, he blinks. "Huh. The door is under the coffee table," he says. "Emile, will you assist me?"

"Hazel?" Quintana asks.

"Yeah?"

"Where's Cody?"

In this brief calm, you finally notice that something is missing. Two somethings. Cody and Clover, they're gone.

"Where'd they go?" you ask.

Is Clover still alive? Adams didn't last long after he started puking. Clover isn't human, though, she's like Inlé. This is her Dream. She could be strong enough to keep

her guts in check.

"Look for them. Cody and Clover, find them!"

"Of course you're going to make us look for them," Blackavar mumbles. He shoves the coffee table sideways with a kick. "May I make a proposal?"

"Shoot," you say.

Quintana flashes you a look.

"I mean, ah. Sure. What do you have in mind?"

Blackavar stoops down to feel around the floor. "This Dream belongs to Clover. Seeing as it hasn't started falling down around our ears that means she is yet to wake."

"Yeah, she said it'd fall apart once she did. We'd only have--what? Six minutes to leave? Seven?"

"She was going to do it before Woundwort arrived," Inlé says.

Hands splat against the windows. The glass somehow holds as the children batter it. One begins to bang the pane with his head. Another boy bites at the frame, shrilling.

"Cut to the chase, Blackavar."

"The Clover you know is but an extension of her Dream. Trying to find her would be folly." He finds the latch to the cellar door and with a quiet, 'ah-ha,' hauls it open.

"The real Clover is upstairs in her room, asleep. If you want to help

her, heaven only knows why, you must wake her.

"So my proposal is thus, one of us stays behind to wake her while the rest of us escape. All of us scrambling around here will do no good. If our blockade holds, you should have enough time to escape once you've waked her."

"And Cody? What about him?"

"What about him? He's dead! He's gone!" Blackavar smacks his hands together in a loud clap. "There is nothing you can do for him!"

"Then where's his body?"

"I haven't the foggiest. The cabin probably ate him, swallowed him up."

You could throttle this man. "That's just bullshit."

"This is a Dream - nothing makes sense in a Dream."

"We're wasting time, Hazel," Inlé says. "We need to pick a path and act. We can't keep them out forever."

"What about Woundwort?" you ask.

"You're stalling." Blackavar's sneer deepens the fine lines around his eyes. "But, fair question. When Clover wakes, he'll be trapped in the Dream. Him and his terrible infants."

"Cody will be trapped, too?" Quintana asks.

"Yes."

Clover wanted Cody's body to come with you. She wouldn't leave without it. You didn't like him, but her, you don't know. You shake your head. It's complicated. "I can't just--"

"We don't have time!" Spittle flies from Blackavar's mouth as he yells. "She may have seemed loyal to him but believe me, Rabbits are fickle things. She'll forget him once she meets some other darkly handsome young man.

"Now make a choice, Hazel! Now, before we all die!"

"I'll stay."

"Pardon me?"

"I'll stay. I'm staying."

Your confirmation sucks the air from the room. Quintana squeaks, Blackavar turns his head and coughs, Inlé slips into a deep silence, and the kid casts a questioning look to each. His floppy hair, the way he cocks his head, he is like a lost puppy waiting for his next command.

"I'm doing it," you say.

"Hazel, Clover tried to kill you," Quintana says. "And Cody--"

"I hit my kid." Telling the truth isn't easy, even upon the threat of pain. You rub at the back of your neck. "I shouldn't have done that, Quintana. I shouldn't. Clover did what any good big sis would do.

"Cody, I don't know, shit's fucked, Quintana. Don't ask me to explain."

She smiles. "Okay. I won't."

"Can we go now?" Blackavar asks.

"Not yet." You take Quintana's arm. "There's one more thing."

With the knife, you slice off her wristband. The green plastic fades to a sickly, dull shade and unravels. She inhales, sharp, like a newborn taking her first breath. Rubbing her wrist, she tears up.

"Now you can go," you say.

Quintana yanks you down for a hug. As you flail to reclaim your balance, she kisses your cheek. "Please be careful, you're my only friend. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You deserve better than me."

She breaks from you, wiping her messing face. A forced smile. Has to be, all to make you feel better. She plasters it on as she laughs, "Stop being so mean!"

And she off she goes, into the cellar. Blackavar watches her hop down before looking to Inlé.

"I'm staying," Inlé says.

"Alright, let's go."

"Wait a minute," Blackavar says. "Inlé, what about our deal? I did what you requested - I brought you here. You owe me."

Inlé tightens her gloves. "And? I'll repay you once we're escaped the dream."

"What guarantee do I have you'll keep your word? You could decide to skip off and never speak to me again!"

"That's true," she says with a shrug, "We Rabbits are fickle."

Blackavar flushes deep crimson. "I--You know I didn't mean anything by that, Inlé! You--"

"Emile," she says, "Keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't cause harm to Quintana."

The kid, Emile, bobs his head in a quick nod. Inlé kisses his forehead. "I will," he tells her. To you, he says, "Nice meeting you, Hazel-rah."

"It's Hazel Rey, mijo," you say.

"Uh, sure." Rolling his eyes at you, he leads Blackavar down into the cellar.

You catch Blackavar sputtering apologies laced sweet with honeyed words. Inlé, I didn't mean any insult! Inlé! Inlé! They peter off into nothing. Useless white noise.

"Fucking asshole."

Inlé sighs, "He's human."

You wave her over to the stairs and she jogs over to join you. She waits for you to ascend the first few steps, neck stretched and head high in full alert. The walls contract around you in a guttural croak of protest. You pat them, finding the wood slick and pliant.

"Careful," you warn Inlé, "The stairs are feeling bitey."

She inspects the walls, the railing, and with a stomp of her solid, black boot, tests a step. The stairs rustle in a brittle, laughing way, and the wood relaxes under your fingers. She crinkles her eyes up at you.

"They should cooperate now," she says.

Muttering thanks, you dash forward, skipping every other step. The treads are spongy under your feet and the railing gives up all pretence of being wood. You're scurrying up the cabin's gullet. You're climbing up its spine.

When you are two stairs away from the top, one leap away, the clamoring outside begins to cease. Pattering hands fall away from the walls and the hungry cries become a murmur.

"What the hell?" you ask.

Inlé signals for silence.

Scuttling. Excited whispers. Deep laughter. You strain your ears to listen, your backbone straighter than its ever been. You and Inlé hold your position on the stairs, waiting, uneasy. Outside, metal creaks, and a car alarm sounds.

Woundwort's army roar out a cheer.

"Fuck," you mutter.

Did that bastard pick up a car?

You hear chopping wind, you hear shoes spinning in gravel, you hear Woundwort, cackling, his Mainer accent thick as he announces, "The windup!"

The chopping stops.

"And the pitch!"

Two tons of glass, rubber, and steel whistle through the air, alarm howling in terror. You wonder which car it is, Blackavar or Cody's. Which did Woundwort decide to throw? Does it matter? A car crashing through the cabin is a car crashing through a cabin.

Inlé rushes you up the rest of the way up to the second floor, the two of you diving to the floor, hands thrown over your heads.

Below you, the world explodes.

The cabin recoils, a beast wounded, and the floorboards under you undulate. Sucking heat rakes over you as the stairway preps a scream. You're back in the car, terrified as Cody plows the car through the darkness. Your ears ring. Your brain treads water.

"STRIKE!" Woundwort laughs mad, and his army snickers along with him. "See that, Red Sox fans? Ol' Bobby Hedgenettle's still got his arm!"

Dozens of small feet pitter-patter downstairs.

Woundwort, he's inside.

"What do we have here?" You hear him drawl, and you push up on your hands. Stomp, stomp, stomp, skitter, skitter. He and his children clamber through the wreckage. "A fruit cellar?"

Your eyes widen.

"Is that a fruit cellar? I'll be! Hazel are you down there?"

No, no, if he goes down there, he will find the others! He will kill them!

You twist around and, with blurry eyes and blurry mind, look to the stairs. If you called him up, the stairs would eat him! But were they strong enough to still help you? Could you risk it?

Better question: could you live with yourself if you didn't at least try?

"I'm up here!" you climb to your feet. Stumble over to the top of the stairs. "Come and get me, motherfucker!"

"Hazel?" Woundwort's great bulk appears at the foot of the stairway. His plastic eyes shine and the mask's mouth pops its stitches. Rips open. Flashes an endless red tunnel of teeth.

The mask smiles.

"There you are!"

Boys peek from around him, from the gap between his legs, from the center of the weeping hole in his stomach. They jibber and suck at their fingers. Suck at their thumbs. Their faces smudged and lips chewed raw.

"I don't understand why you're running away." He moves and they move with him. He climbs on all fours, belly flaps and mouth drooling. "You called for me, Hazel. Don't you want to play hero? I'm ready, and I'm here. I'll be your Boogie Man."

Did you ever want to be a hero in the first place? Is that why you ran your mouth? Is that why you picked a fight? You suck on your chipped tooth, unable to pin down the answer.

"Ah, are you playing strong and silent now?" He crawls past the halfway point. Around him, in that cramped stairway, the cabin groans.

"You and I know you're neither of those things. Oh-oh-oh," he warbles. "You wicked thing, don't break your promise. Come fight me!"

"FIGHT ME!"

"I am fighting you," you say.

"This isn't a fight, this is a retreat!" Woundwort bellows, his rows of teeth clattering.
"You're running away, Hazel. You cowardly, pathetic, useless little girl, all you ever do is run away!"

His hand, bloated in its glove, slaps down on the top step.

"You think you can sweep me back under the bed? You think you can avoid me like every other problem in your life?"

"I'll come for you, Hazel. I'll come for you, over and over, I'll beat your doors down.

"I'll hunt you to the ends of the Earth, little Rabbit - and if you escape me, I'll come for your baby."

Life sparks in the mask's oval eyes - obsession, pure and undying. Fascination freezes your limbs, he wants you to fight him so badly. Why? Why? You're everything he said and more, you're a useless, cruel coward that does nothing but run away.

All it takes to win you over is a nice guy offering free food. You're a terrible friend. You run your mouth all the time. You abandon people when they need you. You watched Adams die when you could have called for help.

You can't even think of a reason to stay alive.

You're just meat. Stupid, pointless meat.

You're the bad thing.

"Hazel Rey!" Inlé cries. "Back away from the stairs!"

You don't think, you listen, you move. Woundwort's fingers snatch air as you hop out of reach. The stairway roars and it twists sideways, sending Woundwort and his children spinning. Walls and ceiling crack and splinter and break apart into long, wooden teeth.

Inlé pulls you over to her, covers her ears with your hands, and presses your forehead to hers. She whispers not to look. You don't want to watch this, you don't want to hear it. But you look. You turn your head and stare, mouth and eyes open wide.

Tangled in the railing, Woundwort fights the stairs. He kicks his children away, pushes them down to the floor below. He rips out wood teeth. He barks orders. All to little avail.

The stairs snap shut on Woundwort and his army. Stake-like teeth shred flesh from bones great and small. They crush and smash and grind.

"Hazel, please," Inlé says. "Don't look!"

You peel your eyes away from the scene. Look at her. "We need to find Clover."

Through her hands, you still can hear gnashing wood and gristle. Squelching and the pitiable mewls of the dying. The stairway horking them all down, down into unknown depths.

"Let's just find her and get the fuck out of here."

The two of you turn your backs to the stairs.

"Do you know what room is hers?" Inlé asks.

There are four doors in the hall, one on the right, two on the left, and one at the end. The door on the right is the bathroom, you hope. Remembering things proves difficult.

"My head is shit," you say. "I can't think."

Antlers hang above the second door on the left.

Antlers. There were antlers on the wall when you first encountered Clover. That door must be the one.

You rattle the knob - it's locked.

"You don't happen to have a key do you?" you ask Inlé.

"Let me." Once you're out of the way, she rams the door with her shoulder. When it stays firm, refusing to budge, she steps back and kicks. The door flies open and you storm inside.

Stagnant air scented with mothballs. Stale cloth. Old paper. Closet smells. The room is pink and crowded with white wood furniture. Child-sized furniture. Have you made a mistake?

Then you see it, laying on the brass bed, trussed up with green ribbons, a cocoon.

"Is that her?" You step over plush rabbits and kick aside broken baby dolls. "This has to be her, right?"

The cocoon pulses warm under your careful palm. It's dry, brittle, made of white hair, and baby blankets, and the yellowed pages of Little Golden Books.

Inlé leans in beside you and plucks a ribbon. "It smells like apple cider."

It does. Warm apple cider. You draw the knife and, holding your breath, start to cut through the layers. Ribbons first, then the paper mache of hair and pages. The scent grows cloying the further you go.

"Father used to tell me the Driscoll Rabbits smelled of cider," Inlé whispers. "But this smells sour. Not pure, like I thought it would."

"Driscoll Rabbits?"

"I'll explain it to you when we've escaped, promise."

The tip of your knife nicks something solid and blood wells up. Shit. You stop, pocket the blade, and move from cutting to tearing. You rip through what feels like yards of muslin until you reach the center. And there, naked and curled in the fetal position, sleeps Clover.

"Jackpot!"

"Wait," Inlé stops your hand. "We can't just shake her. Waking anyone, let alone a Rabbit, isn't simple. Think first. Observe."

"For fuck's sake," you mutter, but you listen. You follow her directions and observe Clover.

She is nude, ribs, elbows and collar bones press sharp against her milk-white skin. She holds an apple with a single bite removed. And a green ribbon is tied in a bow around her wrist.

"That!" You tap the tip of your blade against the ribbon. "I'm cutting it."

Clover stirs, eyes darting under her lids. Is she aware, you wonder. Does she know what is happening? You slit the ribbon open. It writhes, spitting blood, and slithers away.

"I should have known," sighs a voice, a woman's voice. Inlé and you look up and turn in wary circles in search of the source. "I should have known..."

"Lucy?" Inlé asks.

"Sure, why not?" You don't want to be flippant, but what else can you do? What else can you say? You're dead, I saw you! You were laying inside out in a puddle of curdled milk and blood.

"Lucy," Inlé repeats, strained.

"Warning, warning," the voice drops to a mocking monotone. "The self-destruction system has been activated. Seven minutes until detonation."

You hear a choking gasp. Clover rolls off the bed, landing on hands and bony knees, her spine arched. She jams two fingers down her throat and retches. A hunk of fruit tumbles from her lips. A bite of apple.

"Inlé, pick her up," you say.

She lifts a confused Clover from the floor. "Who the hell are you people?" Clover asks. "What--where's my mom? Why am I awake?"

"No time to explain, we need an exit - now!"

Clover cups your jaw with a wet hand. "You look familiar - did Cody bring you here? Are you his friend?"

"Why doesn't she remember me?" you ask Inlé.

"Do you always remember your dreams upon first waking?" she replies.

"Warning, warning!" the voice drones on repeat. "The self-destruction system has been activated. Five minutes until detonation."

"Shut the fuck up!" you flip off the unseen speaker. "Why is there a countdown? I fucking hate this video game crap, we need to get out!"

"There's an exit in the cellar," Clover says.

"We really can't go downstairs."

"Then go up - the attic. It's the last door in the hall."

"We don't need a key or anything right? No knocking three times, or cutting magic ribbons?"

Clover furrows her brows. "What?"

Inlé carries Clover out of the room. Her way of telling you that you're wasting time and to get your ass into gear. You agree - you are wasting time.

The three of you reach the door at the end of the hall. Simple door. No keyhole or weird decorations. Open it, go into the attic, and leave - easy.

Then why are you hesitating? Why does your wrist have the faintest itch?

You glance over your shoulder. Down the short stretch of the hall, at the mouth of the stairway, sits Woundwort's terrible head. Next to it is a rabbit - white as sun-bleached bones. It fixes you with a baleful, pink stare, and then stuffs its face into the hole of the mask.

It kicks, caught, and drags the mask, streaking the floor red. You cut in front of Inlé. She tries to cut in front of you, but you refuse. She may be stronger, but you're stubborn, stupidly so.

And you're the one that challenged Woundwort. Whatever happens next is your responsibility.

The white rabbit pulls a man's head from out of the mask, right by his gray hair. His smile is a wedge of bright yellow. "You coward," he says. "You think some stairs can kill me?"

"Is this a fucking joke?"

"Is that the exit, Hazel?" Strings of veins and nerves burst from the top of his skull.

They net the white rabbit, who submits without fuss, and draw it into his mass. "How about we leave together? How about we all leave together?"

"Who the hell is that?" Clover asks.

Inlé opens the attic door. "Hazel, we're going!"

"Yes, Hazel." Woundwort sprouts a spine, a ribcage, and shoulder blades. "We're going. Don't you hear the lady? The system's been ac-ti-vated!"

"Hazel!"

Hips, femurs, patellas, tibias, and fibulas. Tarsals, metatarsals, and phalanges. Gristle, meat, and blood. Woundwort rises up on twitching legs. "It's okay, be a coward and run. I'll be right behind you.

"I'm always going to be right behind you!"

"Hazel!"

Inlé and the woman's voice, they grow distant, murky as you stare down Woundwort. Flayed of his costume, stripped down to his bones, he staggers forward by determination alone. He will keep coming. He will always keep coming until you face him.

The stairs did nothing, and trapping him in the Dream? Who says it will hold him? You want to run away - you could run away - but that's what you always do.

You look back to Inlé, Clover cradled in her arms. Past them is the exit, you see the waking world waiting for you. You look down to your hand and you see the knife. Then, at last, you look at your belly.

You make your choice.

It may not be the smartest choice, but you make it.

You shove them through the exit Unprepared, Inlé topples, she falls, taking Clover with her through to the world outside. Shock and betrayal. Shock and horror. Their soft eyes round as saucers. You're glad you don't have to see those expressions light Quintana's face.

As you slam the door, you whisper an apology. Sorry to Clover for ruining her Dream. Sorry to Inlé for not getting to know her better. Sorry to Quintana for everything. Just everything.

The voice declares that you have two minutes left.

You say one more apology - this one to your baby. Sorry that she had to get stuck with a dumb bitch like you.

Woundwort swoops upon you, rams you up against the door and knocks the wind from your sails. He has the advantage, height, weight, strength. You have Rabbit's

knife.

"Yes!" Foam gathers at the corner of his lips and his hazel eyes bulge. "Yes, this is what I want! Fight me! Fight me!"

He dashes you against the door again, singing gleefully, fight me, fight me! He shakes you by the neck like a dog does a rabbit. You lash out blindly, take a wild stab at his side, and scream in triumph as the blade slots neatly between his ribs.

"What the dickens?" He drops you, and you fall. The flesh around the knife freezes and blackens. Frostbite in fast forward. "What is this?"

You lunge forward, grip the hilt, and yank. You strike and he blocks. "Who gave you that, Hazel?"

The knife flashes as you swipe at his face. You miss. He punches you in the belly, one quick, hard jab. An act performed with years of cruel practice.

"Your silence is galling me, little Rabbit," he says.

Bile floods your mouth. Spitting, wheezing, you curl in to protect your baby.

"Ten seconds until detonation," says the voice of Possibly Lucy.

Woundwort squints up at the ceiling. It, along with the hall, start to dissolve. You no longer can see the stairs at the end. "Wonder what silly little video game that girl picked this nonsense up from," he asks.

You're going to puke - is your baby okay? You try for the knob and he slaps your hand away. You try to stab him and he slaps your face.

"They don't have an original thought in their silly heads, you know," he says. "They pick it all up from us."

Are you going to die? This is why you don't face your problems. You're not strong enough to fight them. You're not a hero, you're a coward. Even with a magic fucking knife, you can't win.

"Detonation," Woundwort scoffs, "Dreams don't explode. They fade away."

With a gentle, fatherly grin, he brushes the spittle from your chin. He brings his face to yours.

"Are you ready to fade with me, Hazel-rah?"

At least Quintana got away from this.

At least you did one thing right.

When Possibly Lucy reaches five, Woundwort takes your hand, the one holding the knife. "What a fabulous ending you've made for us, Hazel-rah. Thank you."

END PART NINE

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