



rabbit, rabbit, rabbit @therabbitdies

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The Rabbit Died - PART TEN

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 is gone.

You sit in the backseat of an Uber, sandwiched between Inlé and Clover. Emile sits on Inlé's lap and Blackavar sits in the front passenger seat. Interstate Love Song plays on the radio.

And Hazel is gone.

"Yo, you sure you don't need a hospital?" asks the driver.

"No, my good man," Blackavar shakes his head, "all we need is a motel."

What you need, you almost shout, is to go back for Hazel.

"Not to say that your concern isn't appreciated."

When you escaped Clover's dream, you found yourselves in the yard a derelict house. The corpse of Lucy's former life, Blackavar said. For hours, you waited in the dead grass and dust for Hazel to show. You would still be waiting if not for Inlé.

"Hazel Rey is no longer with us," she said, eyes downturned. She then whispered the same, cryptic thing Woundwort had uttered about Hazel's mother: "My heart has joined the Thousand, for my sister stopped running today."

Yet this time when heard it, instead of repulsion, you felt defeat. Defeat and anger and heartwrenching pain. Your friend was gone, and the last thing you said to her was: "You're so mean!"

What a miserable friend you are.

"What about the police?" The driver watches you as he speaks. "I mean, fuck 'em, but if something's happened--"

Blackavar fishes a roll of cash from his pocket, held fast by a rubber band. He peels free a bill. "Will a hundred shut you up?"

"I'm just saying these girls ain't looking too right."

"Two hundred?"

Clover coughs and burrows deeper into the ratty afghan you dug out of the house. Inlé peers out the window, distant, cold. You wipe your runny nose and watch houses pass by.

"Not after money, I just want to make sure these girls are okay."

Blackavar turns his head towards the driver, his sneering profile limned by traffic lights. "Ah, well," he says, "If cash isn't your thing--" He leans forward in his seat, hand going behind his back.

"We're okay!" you blurt out. Inlé and Clover tense on either side of you, and your nose stings, but you carry on the lie. "Thank you, but, but we're fine. We just need to get to the motel. Like, like he said."

The driver studies you for a long, dreadful moment.

You pinch your nose to staunch the bleeding. "We're just really, really exhausted. It's been a long day."

"Yeah!" Emile says. "What she said!"

"Alright," the driver concedes with a nod. He checks his phone, mounted on the dash. "We'll be there in five."

Blackavar shifts back to his previous position in the seat and lays his empty hands on his lap. Relieved, you let your head fall back and you sniff. Blood runs down the back of your throat. Sorry, baby, you think, but it had to be done.

For the short remainder of the drive, you watch the lights dash across the roof of the car. Golden yellow, green, red, and bright blue. Cody had blue eyes, and, in the right light, Hazel's were green. You're never going to see either of them again.

The car brakes and you scrub your nose against your already dirty forearm. Will this nosebleed ever stop?

"Thank you for your assistance," Blackavar says, smiling. "Your company provides such a convenient service. Are you sure you're not interested in that tip?"

The driver pops the lock on Blackavar's door. "I'm sure."

"That's a shame. I'll make sure to give you five stars, then." He exits the car. "Excellent conversation, and a cleanly vehicle."

The rest of you climb out. Emile and Inlé prop up Clover as she limps along, back hunched. You hang at the back of the group, holding Rabbit's book - the only thing you have left of Hazel - to your chest.

"Lil' sis," calls the driver.

You glance behind you. The driver leans across the passenger seat, holding out a pack of tissues. One of those little travel-sized ones. "Here," he says. "Think you need this."

You take them, and he smiles. "Thank you," you say.

"You have a good night."

As his car pulls out of the motel parking lot, you check the tissues. Tucked inside the pack is a business card: M. Kehaar, Flight Instructor, 680-555-1301. You stash the card inside of Rabbit's book.

"What was that about?" Blackavar asks when you catch up with the others.

"He gave me tissues," you say.

"Is that so? You do need them." He opens the door leading to the motel office.

"Everyone, stay out here, I'll handle the arrangements."

"I want to go back to sleep," Clover says once he has left. She huddles miserably to your side. "I don't like being awake."

"Neither do I," you say.

Inlé begins to pace back and forth. She takes sharp, hard turns, bootheels scraping the tarmac. "We're leaving in the morning," she says. "First light, we're gone."

"You okay?"

"No, Quintana. I'm not okay." She jams her fists into the pockets of her leather jacket.

"None of what happened back at the cabin is acceptable. I--"

The office door swings open and Blackavar steps out, keys in hand. "I was able to procure us three rooms," he says. "I'll take the single. You four can decide who stays with whom."

"Can I have the single room?" Emile asks.

"No."

"Let him have it," you say.

"Pardon me?"

You swallow hard. You should have expected push back. "Let him have the room," you repeat, looking at the ground. "We've been through a lot. I'm tired and--"

"Let's not fight over a room," Inlé finishes for you.

Blackavar heaves out a beleaguered sigh. "This is why I never work with children or animals. Fine, he can have the single. I can share a room with Inlé."

"You can share the dumpster with the rats," mutters Clover.

Inlé tenses, "I don't sleep well around men."

"I can share with Blackavar," you suggest.

"Are you sure?" Inlé asks.

"I am."

Blackavar's mouth screws up in a sour pucker. He doesn't like the idea, that's clear to see, but to your relief, he holds his tongue.

Clover plucks a key from his hand. "Let's go to bed."

Going to bed sounds nice. You wait for Blackavar to pass Emile his key before stepping up. "Which room is ours?"

"302," he says.

You grow cold as he speaks the number. "302." It feels no warmer as you say it. "Okay. I guess this is, well. I guess this goodnight, everybody."

The others bid you goodnight, Clover coarsely, Emile loud and chipper, and your group splits apart. Inlé props up Clover as she limps along, silent as a shadow. When they reach their room, she mouths two words: first light.

You nod and mouth the same. First light.

"Come on, I'm dead tired," Blackavar says.

Room 302 is your standard motel room. Two beds, a television, a desk, and a bathroom, all dingy in spite of countless cleanings. You go inside first, claiming the bed closest to the door and taking a seat.

Blackavar shuts the door. "Vidcon, 2016."

You draw your legs up onto the bed, quiet. Your silence is an invitation for him to continue. Already, you can predict what he is about to say, that you met before, that he knows you.

"You looked different back then," he says. "Your hair was shorter. Curlier. But I remember."

You gather and twist your hair, winding it tightly. You were healthier then, plumper, happier. "I remember, too."

"You brought me the most charming scarf." He sits at the foot of your bed, and you scoot back. He frowns at your skittishness. "You were too shy to give it to me."

"I made that scarf." Knitted it by hand. Hours of work, done between cram sessions

and doctor's appointments. Your mother threatened to burn it when she found it. She threatened worse when she found out you were leaving the state for a week.

"Yes, your father said as such when he handed it to me." He rests a hand on the covers, leaning in to meet your gaze.

You dodge his attempt at eye contact with an apologetic smile.

"A nice man, your father. He had the looks of a young Cab Calloway."

"He's dead."

Blackavar withdraws to the very edge of the bed, the cheap mattress creaking at the shift in weight. "My condolences."

Does he mean that, truly? You bite your lip, worrying at your hair, twisting, twisting. Hazel would call his gesture bullshit. Your dad would pat your hand and say, smiling brighter than any sunbeam, to not assume the worst. Deep down, all people are kind.

You miss your dad, and you miss Hazel, and remembering them hurts. So, quickly, you shake them both from your thoughts.

"Why are you here?" you ask.

Blackavar loosens his tie. "Why am I here?" he scoffs. "I'm here because you decided we needed to be bunkmates."

"Please, just answer me." You gather the book and the pillow and hug them. "You know that's not what I--please. Just, please? Just tell me why you're here-here."

"Why I'm involved with this mess, you mean?"

"Yeah."

He pops the top few buttons of his shirt. Fine collar bones, fine chest hair, the barest trace of a nipple. You hide your face in the pillow, embarrassed for looking.

"If that's what you wanted to know, you should have asked," he says. "Be more direct."

"Why are you involved with all of this?" you cry. "You're a-- you're a Youtuber. You make videos about haunted houses and ghosts and--You have a podcast! Why do you have a gun?"

Why did he shoot Cody?

"You shouldn't be here! Why are you here!? It, it doesn't make any sense!"

Your outburst leaves you panting. You peek up at him, expectant, eyes glossy with frustration. Out of all the bizarre, nonsensical things that have happened, his presence baffles you the most.

He forces a stiff smile. The same kind of smile you've seen him give when his guests annoyed him. "That is a long and complicated story, my dear," he says, "and I'm not sure I'm up to telling it at this time. Maybe tomorrow."

Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day after, and the day after that, and the day after that. Try next week, dearest. He might be in a better mood.

"No! Tell me now!"

"Didn't you hear me, kid?" his cadence changes, he drops an octave. "I'm not up for it."

You slap him.

He holds his cheek, agog. "What the fuck--?"

You never wanted to hit anyone. You don't like hurting people or yelling. Papa told you to be kind, and you want to be that. A good momma is kind. The stinging your palm feels good, though. Feels right, justified.

"How dare you hit me, you--!"

Your hand claps hard across his other cheek. He reaches for his gun, his shirt shifting just right, exposing his nipple. You, caught in your anger, shove him. Knock him off the bed. Tackle him.

"Tell me everything!" you shout.

Pinned under your tiny body, he curses, grimacing. He tries to push you off by the chin, and you, you have a target. And you go for that target. You pinch his nipple and twist it like an old radio dial.

He howls and bucks under you, your bodies rocking sideways together. You release him to swipe his pistol from the back of his pants. Why he kept it there instead of a proper holster, who knows. Who cares? It's yours now.

"Stop fighting."

You nudge his nose with the muzzle, tempted to shove it up one his flaring nostrils. Maybe jam it into his eye.

"Sure, sure." He goes still, one hand on your bare calf, the other on your opposite thigh. Two years ago you pictured yourself on top of him. Sitting astride his hips, his erect cock trapped under your cunt. Him begging for you to let him slip inside and experience paradise.

You drag the gun up the bridge of his straight nose and press your free hand down on his windpipe. Your teenage daydream floats distant, a flimsy, juvenile ghost. "You will tell me everything, Richard Stoa," you say. "Everything you know."

He winces at the mention of his true name, and you're sure fear has shriveled his cock to nothing. This, strangely, doesn't bother you. Your small, rounded belly fills with

fizzy warmth.

Is your baby happy?

"Of course," he gulps. "Where do you want to start?"

You switch off the safety. "How'd you end up involved with all of this?"

"I'm a scout!" He holds up his hands, the fingers of his right resting on his left wrist. You glance back down to his face and smile at the sheen of fresh sweat. "I look for surrogate candidates. For Lucy."

"Alright, and what does that mean?"

He babbles fast, "Rabbits don't gestate in just any womb, the surrogate has to be special. Already connected to the Dream through - ah, ah, ah."

"Through what, Richard Stoa? Through what?"

He slices his fingers across his wrist. There is a tingle where your wristband used to be, pins and needles. Nothing more. You switch the gun over to your other hand and flex your fingers.

"Shit, shit." He lets his head fall back against the floor with a hollow thunk. "I shouldn't have let her cut that--damn it!"

"What was that about?"

"The medical bracelet - it was to bind you." He rubs at his temple.

Cody did that gesture back at the cabin when Clover was hurting her wrist. It made her stop. You press wrist to your cheek, your pulse thrumming through the thin skin.

Cody took off Hazel's wristband, and Hazel took off yours. If you had been wearing it, what would have happened? Would he have hurt you?

Get back to talking before you start thinking too, too much. You'll start worrying about how bad you're being.

"When you said connected to the Dream, what did you mean?"

"Connected by pain, emotional and physical. The Dream calls to those hurt by the waking world." Blackavar's Adam's apple bobs. "Victims of violence, the bereaved, the sick. I've always been good at sniffing out vulnerable targets."

He chuckles. "I clocked you a mile away."

"Lucy told you to do this?"

You match the different versions of Lucy in your head. Nurse Lucy, clean and kind, and Cody's Aunt Lucy, dark and vaguely defined. She isn't a woman, she's a Rorschach blot. You can't make sense of her.

"Why would she do that?"

Some muscle of his twitches beneath you. You rap his cheek, right on the bone, with the barrel of the pistol and adjust on his lap. His hips are cutting into your thighs in a distracting way.

"Why wouldn't she?" he asks.

Why wouldn't she? You squint again at the messy batch of black dots, and this time you make something out. Sweet Nurse Lucy, the woman that treated you with a stuffed bunny and apple pie.

"Because Lucy was good!" you blurt.

You swallow purple. Blood. Thickly, it drips down from your left nostril. Your nose is bleeding.

Blackavar conceals his smile behind his large fist. Your body echos with his suppressed laughter. "Lucy wasn't good!" he says. "She was a Driscoll!"

"A Driscoll?"

"They were the top experts in cuniculture -the raising of Rabbits for meat." He eases his arm under his head to act as a pillow. "Villains - the whole cruel lot. The absolute worst of the Thousand before Woundwort came along."

You tug at the flimsy, ribbed fabric of your tank top. Your belly is covered but feels so exposed. "Meat? You mean--?"

"Never heard of laurices?" he asks. "You are carrying some lucky one-percenter's luxury meal. The most tender, delicious meat one can ever eat."

You go numb. This is a lie, that has to be a lie! Why would anyone want to eat a baby? Why would they want to eat -your- baby?

You barely feel Blackavar's fingers kneading on the thickest part of your thigh. Your heart is beating, you can hear it pounding, but your chest feels empty. Cold.

People want to eat your baby.

"They say it tastes like a Dream," he says.

"Do you--do--" You jab at the center of his forehead with the gun. Don't cry, you plead with yourself, don't cry, don't cry. "Do you eat them!?"

"No, Quintana, I don't. The side effects aren't worth it."

"But you sell them."

"I suppose I helped." His thumb strokes your smooth skin. "Lucy handled the selling, mostly."

"How can you do that? How can you do any of this?"

"We are meat, my dearest. We eat each other day. We steal bites from each others' hearts, we carve slices from each others' souls. We suck down our lovers' spit and cum. We drink our mothers' milk.

"It doesn't matter what we do or what we are, we are meat and meat is meant to be devoured."

The certainty in his voice pierces your gentle heart. His pure sincerity. Your chin trembles. This is what he believes for real, a vicious world of cannibals, hungry and all-consuming. What happened to him to make him this way? Who hurt him?

"Who devoured you?"

Blackavar's fingers cease their kneading. Flop sweat trickles down his brow and he looks left. He clears his throat, he mutters, as if hoping for someone offstage to feed him his lines. "I--" he stalls. "It--"

Deep down inside, people are kind. Your dad said as such. Mean Hazel, Miss Only the Bad Things Come, when Woundwort came she chose to fight. She chose to save Clover.

Cody, violent and scary as he was, gave you the clothes you currently wear. He held your hand as you sobbed and waited for Clover to repair Hazel.

Clover could have killed Hazel in cold blood. She didn't. She spared her and fixed the wound.

Inlé came to your rescue when she could have just hung up.

That Uber driver could have stayed silent.

People are kind when given the chance.

You turn the gun over in your hand, metal and thick plastic. The thrill of holding Blackavar hostage has left you, the girlish, sweet flutter gone.

"No one's devoured me!" he finally spits. "I'm the one eating here! You're on top but I'm in charge!"

Blackavar must have kindness hidden under those layers of oily charm. His rant smears across your hearing like slush, pebbles of ice and dirt rough on your ears. He flounders and you wonder, can you free him? Can you husk him clean of his ugly parts?

Your baby, that speck of life no larger than a pea, churns inside of you. His skin looks soft, like whipped cream. His eyes like jellies.

Reach on inside, squeeze his flesh between your fingers. The voice in your head is alien, neither you or the baby's, but both at the same time. She speaks to you, this

voice, let's take a dip into his head. Let's find his kindness.

Let's Dream.

"Quintana?" Blackavar's voice comes to you from deep underwater. You rub at your ears. "Quintana, darling, dearest, why are you giving me that look?"

You lay down on him, your breasts squishing against his chest. His skin feels like the kind that forms on heated cream. Press down, urges the voice, break it.

You seal your lips to his and press.

Skin, yellow fat, red muscle, blue veins, white bone. You plummet through meat and gristle. You're Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, squealing in frightened delight. You fall into Blackavar and come out the other side, clean and reeling. Giddy.

You're in his Dream.

You're inside him.

What the hell have you done?

Stage lights snap on around you. Caught in the glare, you shield your face with your arms and squint. You stand on a stage and before you sit an audience of cattle. Their large eyes fix upon you, their heads sway as they chew their cud.

"What the hell have you done!?"

Blackavar stands to your left, dressed in a magician's tuxedo and hat. His black clothes twinkle violet as he brandishes his fist at you. "Do you have any idea what you've done? How fucking dare you! How fucking dare!"

"This is your Dream?"

From the herd comes a long moo of applause. Blackavar taps his leg with a magician's wand. "It is. What of it?"

"You're always performing. Do you ever take a break?" You approach the edge of the stage. The warmth of a hundred gathered bodies laps at your bare feet.

Bare feet. You pat your body down, examine it. Your clothes have changed from what Cody lent you to jean shorts and a tank top. Things you used to wear during the good summers back home. The happy summers.

"A break?" Blackavar scoffs. "Never."

Your hair rustles as you turn your head, a cloud of soft coils. This is you from before the Clinic, this is you before your dad died.

An antlered girl in a green dress cheers from the front row.

"Have you ever considered stopping?" you ask.

"What are you trying to pull?" Blackavar grabs you by the elbow. "Not only is this a violation of my privacy, you're--" The audience boos. "You have no idea what you're doing!"

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you listen back at the cabin? That baby--" he glances down at your belly, now rounder than ever before "--is changing you!"

"So?"

"So? So!?" Flummoxed, he tips back his hat with his wand and scratches at his hairline. He melts here in the Dream, his sweat sheeting his brow.

"What do I do?" he speaks in a stage whisper. "So, she says! Like she wants to lose her humanity!"

Is he worried about you? Or is this a part of his performance? You wish he would stop putting on a show long enough for your figure out the truth. Asking him might help. Possibly.

You bite your knuckle, suddenly unsure.

The audience rumbles.

"Do something," he says, "they don't like it when we go quiet."

"Will you stop acting? For a minute?" You press the tips of your pointers together and mutter, "Please?"

"All the world's a stage, dearest."

A red, round thing arcs up from the crowd, sailing high before hitting the stage with a wet splat. An apple! The crisp, autumn smell of it assaults you. Blackavar kicks it into the pit.

"That's new - they're usually chucking tomatoes."

What would Hazel think of this? Pathetic? Most likely. You hop aside as another apple explodes to your left. Blackavar grabs and spins you into his arms, using his back to shield you from further attack.

"Wake us up, Quintana," he demands.

Rotten fruit knocks the hat off his head. He shivers around you, his body soft and spongy under his suit. You want to squeeze him until he bursts in your arms and coats you with his guts.

Do it, the voice strokes your brainstem with long, press-on nails. Apple cider, rancid butter, the tastes paint your tongue a sour pink. Open him up and find the kindness you seek.

What is happening to you?

"Quintana, you need to wake us up! Please, dear, you don't know what you're doing. You're going to get hurt!"

What if you get hurt, Quintana? You want to find his heart, don't you? You want answers, right? The voice fits its hand snug around your mouth. It makes you grin with a jerk of its pinky and thumb. Listen to me and we can get those answers, I promise!

Blackavar pushes you away without warning. The hail of garbage abates, and the crowd moos in excitement. You hear the beat of his heart, thumping like a broken washing machine, banging clang, clang, clang. "You're changing Quintana! Wake up!"

Your hands shoot out, your nails sink into his butter-soft flesh. He is right, the voice says matter-of-factly, we are meat. But, but, and listen to me closely, Quintana, meat can be changed! Meat is malleable!

Just dig in!

Blackavar burbles as you tear his jaw from his skull, his skin stretching. Strings of membrane go taut and snap.

Just dig on in and you'll find it!

Two Rabbits in a room, one wears the color of death, the other wears nothing but her milk-white skin. Who do you pick?

INLÉ

The light inside the vending machine is broken. 'I still function!' reads the torn paper sign stuck to the front. You tilt your head, pondering these words. I still function. Do you truly?

A better question: do you have the mental energy required to ruminate over the words written on a vending machine sign? Answer: you don't. You feed wrinkled bills into the slot and punch in code. Bags of chips, candy bars, pretzels, you buy until you exhaust your cash supply.

Ripping the top off a bag of peanuts with your teeth, you sink down beside the machine and eat. Moths bounce off the fluorescent lights hanging above. They hurl themselves at the bulbs, their bodies shedding powdery glitter upon impact.

You froze back at the cabin. Hazel Rey was there, you found your mother's daughter, her real, flesh and blood daughter, and you lost her. You froze and you lost her. Might as well have been dead, you were that useless.

A moth bashes in its poor head on the lights and plummets, stunned. It lands in your bag of peanuts, wings beating in panic. The mouthless wail of fear it releases, a cry to the Dream, turns the salt on your tongue to ash. You want to silence it.

You dump the bag, nuts, salt, and, finally, moth falling to the ground. On its back, the moth flaps around in circles until it rights itself. Bless, it says, shaking crumbs from its wings. Bless you, sister Rabbit.

It takes flight, leaving you to be alone with your thoughts.

You stuff the empty bag into your jacket's inside pocket to throw away later. With that stowed away, you open a candy bar and bite off a chunk. The milk chocolate and caramel melt into a flavorless sludge in your mouth. You chew and swallow, chew and swallow, tasting nothing.

Far from you, on the other end of the parking lot, two women kiss by their car- a redhead and a blonde. The blonde, petite, bird-like, stands on the tips of her toes. She smudges the redhead's mouth with her pink lipstick. The redhead's hair is cropped close to her skull.

Missing Daddy's kisses, Hrairoo?

Bile rushes up your throat and you retch. You put your head between your knees, hand over your mouth. Don't think about Woundwort, don't think, don't think. Count your squares and breathe.

The collapse of the cabin would have dragged him into the deepest depths of the Dream. Hazel trapped him.

Tiny squeals. The moths are screaming.

Lights flicker and you smell cider.

You hear the click of a safety being disengaged.

"Finally found you, bitch."

The cop from the crime scene at the Clinic, he hobbles towards you. Revolver held at the ready. Gouts of blood marbled milk run from his sockets.

"Had to gouge out my eyes to make the crying stop," he speaks in a gargling slur. Like his throat was full of phlegm. "But I can still fucking see!"

You squint. Wait. No. This isn't right. Revolvers don't have safeties. You shouldn't have--

The lights flicker and the cop is gone. Blinked away like a tear.

"Hey!" Clover stands in the door of your room, naked for all to see. The redhead whistles. "Hey! Black Rabbit, you feel that? Something's wrong!"

Dropping your hoard of junk food, you head for Blackavar and Quintana's room. The tarmac heaves under your feet. Cracks race you for the motel, zigzagging across the parking lot and up the walls. Around you, the air seizes, trembles.

"Dream's invading Meatspace!" Clover yells.

"Go check on Emile!" You toss your jacket at her. She shoves her arm through a sleeve. "Then gather all the humans in the office. I'll get Quintana and Richard."

The cracks multiply. Then they heal. You skip trying the knob and go right to ramming your shoulder against the door.

"Inlé!" Emile bursts from his room, running pell-mell towards you. "Inlé! The TV's puking bunnies and--PIG!"

Pig?

A bullet ricochets off the frame. The cop is back, armed with a pistol now. He calls you a slur before taking a second shot.

He, and the bullet, blip from reality.

"Yup, the Dream is definitely invading Meatspace!" Clover joins you by the door. "Ready, Eddy?"

Why is the Dream spilling into the Waking World? Is this your fault? The cop, he must be from your nightmares. Your guilt manifested?

"Inlé? Ground control to Major Tom?"

"Take your protein pills and put your helmet on," you recite the line without knowing why. This just happens when Rabbits share space. They sync up. Finish each other sentences.

You kick down the door, hinges snapping, wood crunching.

"Whoa," whispers Emile.

"Fucking gross! What's that?" The couple has gathered behind you, the blonde clinging to her red-haired partner. Ignoring their dumbfounded questions, Clover starts to herd them away.

Bed overturned. Ceiling and walls dripping. Emile pokes his head under your extended arm to gawk at the scene. There is a wound in the carpet in the shape of a man. Turbid pink slime roils in the hole.

"What is that?" Emile asks.

"A tear in the membrane between the Dream and this world," you tell him. A cancerous mass floats to the top of the slime, a stuffed rabbit clumped with tumors.

"What made it? Can you fix it?"

Quintana made this. The fact that she is nowhere to be seen tells you that much. She is pregnant with one of your kind, and pregnancy always comes with changes.

"Can you fix it?"

You shouldn't have left her alone.

"I can try."

You crouch by the wound in the carpet and dip your hand into the bubbling ooze. You lick a finger clean. Warm fall evenings, chilled air, burning pine, memories of home. And cider, you taste it. You reject it.

"Did the Milkman do this?"

"I don't smell fresh grass or much milk," you say. "Maybe a little butter, like from baked apples or pie crust."

You smelled cider back when you waked Clover. A Driscoll Rabbit?

The lamps gutter.

"What are you going to do?" Emile asks.

"I'm going in."

"What should I do?"

"Go join Clover."

You stand and prep for the dive. Stretching your limbs, shaking out the tremors in your fingers, you count.

"Hey, wait!" Emile grabs your hand. "You're not going alone, are you?"

"I am."

"What if the Milkman really is down there? And you can't smell him?"

Goose pimples cover his skin. Your own flesh prickles, the fine hairs on your nape standing straight. Pulling away, you rub your bare arms.

"Then I face him."

"What if there's something worse than him down there?"

"Then I face that." You lay your hands on his shoulders. "Emile, if I bring you, you could get hurt. You could die."

"Or I could get trapped, like Hazel."

Children, always observant. "That is a very real possibility."

"If you try to make me stay behind, I'll follow." He puffs out his chest. "You can't stop me. You shouldn't have to do this alone."

Bringing a human child to the Dream will be a risk. Emile has tasted the Dream, he could fare better in there than most humans. He could also be tempted easier.

"I mean it, I'll follow you!"

"Fine," you say, "then follow me. We haven't the time to argue."

You hold your foot out over the wound, look to Emile, and instruct him, "Stay close to me the entire time. Don't touch anything without asking me first."

"And don't eat anything," he adds. "I remember."

You card your fingers through his hair. "Quick learner."

Moths start raining from the ceiling. Time to go. You hop over the lip of the wound, and Emile hops in after.

You know something is wrong before you even land.

Your boots hit the dirt at an odd angle. Jarred, you stagger, reaching out for anything that could keep you upright. Your hand finds nothing, and you fall. Emile squeaks and crashes behind you.

"Ew, ew, what is thiiiiiiiis!?" he whines.

"Shit," you mutter.

Cow paddies. You're in a pasture. Above the sky hangs heavy with clouds the color of a bruise. Dairy cattle pass you, oblivious to your existence. They head for the center of the field, to where an open-air theater stands.

"Shit?" Emile asks. "Is this poop?"

"Emile?"

Plugging his nose, Emile kicks out his leg, trying to shake it free of filth. "I landed in cow crap," he whines. "Gross."

"Come on."

You lead him by the hand, treading carefully through the slow-moving herd. Warm bodies jostle you, bump into you, moo and nudge at you. Emile flicks at the clips hanging off one cow's ear. The cow sniffs at his hair.

"Hey, big girl," he smiles.

You tug at him. "Exercise caution, Emile. These are Dream creatures."

"You're a Dream creature, too, right?"

"I'm a Rabbit," the cows turn their sleepy eyes towards you, and you shiver, "We're creatures of both worlds. We're not human, but neither are we full Dream. It's--"

"I get it."

"You do?"

Emile ducks his head, speaking low. "My mom's white and my dad's Korean. I kinda look like my dad? But not really. I don't look much like my mom either. There's also the whole--"

He goes quiet for an uncomfortable minute.

"I just, I get it. The not fitting in thing."

You squeeze his hand.

You reach your destination, the herd spreading out, shuffling around the stage for spots to graze. Their shadows spit out rotten fruit, moldy tomatoes, bruised apples, wilted cabbages. They pelt the stage in an irregular, foul smelling hail.

"Kinda wish things weren't so weird here," Emile says.

You half smile at his complaint. Things could be so much weirder. Reading your thoughts, the stage lights pulse an eerie, fleshy pink.

Careful, you chide, it can hear you.

"Quintana!" you shout, ready to find her and leave. "Quintana, where are you?"

Emile joins you in calling her name. The two of you push onward, your hand in his, and cry. "Quintana?" his voice cracks. "Miss Quintana, it's us! Inlé and Emile! We're here to help!"

Gunshot. You definitely have someone's attention.

"Inlé, look!"

At the far edge of the herd, walking with a drunken man's swagger, the cop approaches. New gun - a double-action revolver. He threads cleanly between the cows, arms held high, as if in surrender. You shove Emile behind you.

"Is that guy a Dream creature?"

"I don't know." What is he, you beg the Dream, tell me. And, as always, the Dream sighs at you, you dumb bunny, when have I ever given you an answer? Find out for yourself.

"Bitch, I heard you!" the cop roars.

Agitated, the cows snort and paw the earth. If he continues to make a ruckus, he

might cause a stampede. You crouch and sneak towards the stage, towing Emile along behind you. This low to the ground, you choke on the animal stink of the herd and spoiled vegetation.

"You have any idea you did to my city?" the cop continues. "You exposed us to your diseases - everyone keeps crying! They quarantined us! Those fucking g-men locked us away and left us to rot in our own tears!"

They what? You come to a halt inches away from the stage, ears perked. The crying shouldn't have spread past the Clinic. Then you remember what Woundwort said: You made the whole town cry! They're right out straight bawling their eyes out like lost babes.

"Inlé?" Emile whispers. "You okay?"

Another mistake. One that you can't hope to fix at this moment. You lift Emile up onto the stage and climb up after. Higher ground might not be safe in the case of a gun, but at least you won't be trampled in case of a stampede.

The cop fades out - gone again.

"What is with that dude?"

"He comes from Warren."

Emile knots his thin brows together. The divot that forms between them looks so out of place on his young face.

"It's a city. Woundwort had a clinic there, he was using it to breed Rabbits."

A spotlight falls upon you and with it silence. The herd cease their aimless roaming and cast their attention your way. Ensnared, you clutch at your throat. Your scar itches.

"Inlé?"

It's only the Dream playing its games. Count, breathe, and go. "A woman named Lucy infiltrated it. She contacted me, told me that Hazel was there, and I was supposed to come and save her. From Father.

"I didn't arrive in time."

"You were supposed to save us?"

Quintana enters stage left. Her hair, her clothes, her posture, they have changed. She cradles a misshapen lump to her breast, a beating tangle of ventricles held together by caul fat.

"I remember now, you said you would try to help," she says.

Rosemary and pansies, fennel and rue, you taste them on the air. They fail to mask the sweet rot of apples and meat. She takes a dainty, practiced step forward. "But you

didn't. You left Hazel behind." A giggle. "No surprise you failed Lucy, too."

"Is that--" It's now Emile's turn to guard you. He cuts in front and holds his hand out to the side. "Is that Quintana?"

"I liked Lucy, she gave me a stuffed bunny!" Blood bubbles from Quintana's nose and the Dream throbs electric. "She was--she was good!"

"What happened to you?" You shouldn't have left her alone. You should have spoken out when she decided to share a room with Blackavar. There are so many, many things you should have done.

"I just wanted answers." She bites her lip. "The voice told me-- I'm sorry!"

"Calm down. I'm here." You step around Emile, hands held where they can be seen. The spotlight moves with you.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she asks, adjusting the bundle in her arms. It squirts thick blood. "You-you're useless! You can't help me!"

"She isn't useless, you asshole!" Emile cocks his fist and you, acting quick, grab him by the elbow. You shush him with a finger your lips.

"Name calling won't help," you say. "And neither will codling."

Quintana sways in place, her hair, a cloud of coils, shine red black. She licks the blood from her lip with a segmented white tongue. The tip is pink, like a cheap acrylic nail. She then coos at her charge of organs.

"What are you holding, Quintana?"

"This? It's Blackavar's kindness." She presents the mass to you. Heart, esophagus, stomach, lungs, she shows off the malformed, beating lump, smiling with the pride of a new mother. "It's sickly - he didn't feed it often - but here it is! I found it!"

"Did she--" Emile covers his mouth. "I'm going to hurl!"

The heart still pumps. Blackavar lives. If you can return his innards, stuff them back in, you might be able to save him. You need to get them away from Quintana.

"What are we going to do, she's gone apeshit. Hey--"

You launch past him, boots squeaking as you sprint towards Quintana. Don't give her time to react. Don't worry about the damage - you can fix it. You stove in her nose, crush cartilage, snap bone.

The crowd goes wild. They stamp, the stomp, they throw back their heads and revel in Quintana's fall. The mass - Blackavar's kindness - spills onto the stage. Fluids expel from the pile, their reek menstrual and sweet. Used tampons and bruised apples.

You shake out your hand. "I'm sorry, Quintana." You scoop up entrails and twine slick loops of meat around each other. "You didn't deserve that."

"But Daddy had to do it." Quintana, supine under the spotlight, whispers. Her voice is wrong - part human, part Rabbit, part Dream, part Awake. "Right? Your Daddy had to?"

"I don't like that," Emile says.

"Go look for Blackavar." The foul discharge starts to soak into your tank top, hot with life. When was the last time you had a chance to shower? "He can't be far. I'll stay with Quintana and keep an eye on her."

"Thought I was supposed to stay close?"

You look at him.

He stands tall. "It's what you said: stay close to me. I'm only trying to follow orders."

Quintana murmurs jumbled secrets, words clear in spite of her pulped nose. The plastic pink tip of her tongue picks at the wound. An icy spike of realization pierces you. That isn't her tongue - it's a finger.

"Is this like what happened to me?" Emile squats beside Quintana. The finger scrapes the blood from around her mouth and draws back inside. He flaps his hands in repulsion. "Looks like a tongue louse but worse."

"You were becoming one of the Thousand, this is different."

"Different how?"

"Quintana has a womb. If you have a womb and consume Rabbit flesh, you are more likely to become pregnant. There are exceptions but--"

Face blanched white, Emile hops up and breaks into a jog. "I'm going to look for Blackavar!"

"Emile?"

What was that about?

You adjust and readjust the collective of organs that make up Blackavar's kindness. Quintana rolls onto her side, dazed, the curls of her hair wild. She curls up around her swollen belly, vulnerable.

Women are at their most vulnerable when pregnant, Lucy said as such during your first meeting with her. You still see her, sunglasses on, circling an acrylic nail around the rim of her mug. There are the physical changes, and the mental

ones. Then there are the social changes. Everyone wants to touch you in one way or another. Maybe it's to feel your fat, bloated belly or to beat you until you miscarry. I know when I see a pregnant woman I just want to take a needle and pop her.

You flinched back then, and you flinch now. Lucy laughed at you. Quintana laughs now, lilting. She laughs and sings, "Comin' to you on a dust road... Good lovin', I got a

truck load..."

"What song is that?"

"What? Never seen Blues Brothers? I thought you were on a mission from God. Got to put the band back together to save the orphanage..." She pushes up on her elbow.

"Where's my stuffed bunny? I miss it."

"What?"

"Where's my stuffed bunny - I want it. I gave it to her and the dumb slut left it at the Clinic!" She grabs at your ankle. The air grows rank with cloying rot. "You stupid Rabbit, you were there, why didn't you get it?"

You jerk back your foot. Pregnancy makes you vulnerable to all kinds of things, disease, violence, death. Lucy said the mothers of Rabbits have it the worst. They have to deal with the Dream.

"Stupid, stupid, little bunny."

"I found Blackavar!" Emile shouts from upstage right.

"Quintana only wants to be kind," Quintana's grip grows feeble and you pull free. Her hand plops useless to the ground. "Stupid little tick, I could just pop her..."

The things Quintana says chill you. Was it the Dream speaking through her or something else? You decide to probe further later - Blackavar comes first.

Blackavar lays splayed across the upper right side of the stage, torn wide open. Jaw missing. Ribs pried apart. Skin peeled back like a box top. You compare the cavity with the guts you carry, awed by how much the human body can hold.

"This isn't going to be easy," you say, wishing for an Operation board.

Emile agrees, "It's going to be like trying to stuff cereal back into the box."

And he is right. As you lower the organs into Blackavar, they flop, they overflow. You shove and rearrange the yards of intestines, and they slither from your hands, wriggling like worms. Blackavar keens when you slot his windpipe back in place.

"Emile, hold his arms. Don't let him move."

Emile kneels and takes Blackavar by the wrists. "It's going to be okay, Dick. She's got you."

Blackavar, the skin around his eyes black, his nostrils flaring, whines. You're unsure if he believes those words.

Sweating under the spotlight, arms coated in juices, you work. Set the heart, connect valves, veins, and arteries, realign nerves and bone. The atmosphere thickens with excitement. Those dozens of cows watch you, riveted, expelling gas and hot breath.

You have put people back before, and you have taken them apart. Your father had you do it to your sisters, Lucy had you do it to your sisters' enemies. God made you for this gruesome work, according to Lucy. You are meant to rend and mend flesh like clay.

"I'm almost done."

Blackavar weeps milk. Gently, like a mother, you kiss the drops away as you thrust the last organ into place. The audience whistles and catcalls, while Emile goes coughs into his fist. Embarrassed, you seal up Blackavar.

"Ow, ow, ow," Blackavar moans. "Fuck me, that was unpleasant!"

"That was unpleasant?" Emile asks. "Dude what?"

"Fuck off, kid."

"Get up." You pat his shoulder. "We need to get back to Quintana and we need to fix the leak."

"Leak?" Blackavar stands on wobbly deer legs.

"The Dream is invading Meatspace." Emile says and you shudder. Hearing Clover say it is one thing, him saying it is another.

"Meatspace. Unpleasant." You now notice what Blackavar is wearing. A magician's tuxedo. He tugs at the tattered coat, trying to cover his chest. "We should leave. Quintana is a lost cause, her parasitic offspring has her."

"No, you're wrong!" You blurt it. "We change our mothers but we don't possess them. If she is possessed, it's not her baby, it's something else."

He plugs up one nostril and snorts. Clears his nose. "Right. Then what? What has happened to our dear Quintana? Hm?"

"It's Lucy."

Blackavar hacks and coughs. His lungs, his throat, you hear them grind in his chest. Emile holds him upright. His face, cheeks still round with baby fat, strains from the weight.

"Of course it's Lucy," Blackavar says.

"Who's Lucy?" Emile asks.

"Oh my god!" An invisible force jerks Quintana up to her feet. Her head cracks to the side and her body dangles, legs swinging under her full belly. Like a puppet. "My name's been said like a hundred times. Pay attention!"

"Smoke a dick, lady! I'm doing my best!"

You turn to fully face the puppet and her puppeteer, ready to shield the two fragile

humans in your charge. "You're dead, Lucy. Accept your death and leave Quintana at once."

"Nope." Pretense dropped, Lucy speaks freely, finger-tongue clicking her teeth. "Not interested."

"That wasn't a request, Lucy. That was an order." You drop into a sprinter's stance. "I will remove you from her - violently."

She stretches out the corners of Quintana's mouth. Already her nose is reconstructing itself, gristle crackling. "See about that, you could do that. I know you could."

Backing up a step, she raises her hand, displays her sharp nails. "But you see," she digs those nails into the swell of her belly, twists, "I've got the higher ground, bitch. Unless you want me to pull the bun from this oven early, you will back off."

Back at the cabin, when confronted by Woundwort, you froze. In Cowslip, you hesitated with Emile. Here, you can't. Here, on this stage with Lucy, you must act.

The smile drops from Lucy/Quintana's face as you surge towards her. She raises her fists to her cheeks, tucks her elbows to her sides, and blocks your hook to her jaw. You swing again, she guards. Laughing, she kicks in your knee.

Pain, hot, miserable, shocking pain. You gasp, you teeter, but you don't surrender, aiming a jab at her ribs. Her mouth pops open as your blow lands home, the finger jutting out straight.

"That hurt!" she wailed, lurching away from you. "No fair, you can't hit a pregnant lady!"

"Leave Quintana, or I will tear you out." You circle her and she, wheezing, pivots in turn. "I failed Hazel. I won't fail Quintana."

"How did you fail her? You barely knew her!" Lucy sets up guard again. "You barely know this little Chicana, why do you even care!?"

"I made a promise."

Rolling her eyes, she takes a swing at your face. You jerk back to dodge, inhaling a whiff of blood and cider. She screams, voice flanging in frustration, and overextends. She's exposed. Shoot.

"Bitch!" Lucy shrieks as your hook hits. Liver shot. Her cheeks bulge and she bends over, spitting bile. Gasping. Fingers grasping stained cloth, she glares up at you with stolen eyes. "You stupid, bitch Rabbit, I saved you!"

You hoist her upright by the front of her shirt, keeping her at arm's length. She swats and claws at you with broken nails. Those cracked disks of keratin leave crooked gashes in your bicep and shoulder. It hurts and your honest nature refuses to let you hide the pain.

"I should've left you to Woundwort," she spits. "Should've let him fuck and eat you,

but no! Tsukiko wanted you safe, that stupid cunt, I'm glad she's gone!"

Your lip trembles.

"I gave you a purpose! I gave you a name! I gave you a second chance, and you deny me mine?"

Lucy is afraid. Fear pours from her mouth with every vicious, cutting word she utters. You shutter your eyes, closing out the sight of her, the tongue louse, the pink acrylic nail. You count from four.

On the day you turned sixteen, Lucy rescued you. Rabbits are best consumed at birth, and if not then, at sixteen. At least, that's what your father said. He had prepared you for death long before that. He made you watch him put down your sisters, he had you prep and cook them.

You had accepted that one day, you would be the one going into the pot. Then Lucy. She showed up. She saved you. She gave you a mission - do everything in your power to disrupt your father's work.

It's what God wants, she said. God and your mother, saints bless and keep her. Lucy always wore sunglasses when the two of you spoke - why was that?

You open your eyes, tears clinging to your thick, black lashes.

Was it to hide the truth? That she was just using you, too?

"Inlé." A large hand rests on the small of your back - Blackavar. "Are you going to let Lucy prattle on, or are you going to keep your promise to Quintana?"

"Oh, fuck you, Richard!" Lucy snaps. "You ungrateful prick, I saved you, too!"

One, two, three, and four. You blink away tears and breathe. "Don't be afraid, Lucy."

Her lip curls. "What?"

"You're afraid," you say. "The dead shouldn't be afraid."

You shove your hand into her mouth, pinching the louse, pinching Lucy, between your fore and middle fingers. She bites at you, her teeth gnawing at the leather of your gloves. She trashes, she gurgles, spit foaming from the corners of her lips. Weakly, she slaps at your face.

"Accept your death, Lucy." You dig down for the root, squeeze and twist. Blood squelches and oozes around your wrist as the parasite tears.

So sorry, Quintana, you think, the pain will be over soon. Then at first light, as promised, we can go to Maine.

"Pig!" The cry is sudden, urgent. Emile flails for your attention. "PIG!"

Cheers are sounded, a salvo of excited, blood-hungry bellows. Hooves beat the earth.

You look away from your gruesome work and curse.

The cop - he is on the stage. Gun at the ready.

In a second, you assess the situation. Back to a revolver, Smith & Wesson Model 29, 6 1/2 inch barrel, you almost recognize it. The cop pulls back the hammer. In a second, you make a choice.

You free Lucy. Your glove snags on her teeth, and peels off your hand. She chomps at it, whips her head back and forth, snarling and drooling. You then tackle her to the stage in a clumsy dive, bullets whistling overhead. Blackavar pitches backwards, landing on his rear.

Instead of breaths and the corners of squares, you count shots. One - the crowd booms. Two - Lucy squirms and tries to worm her way out from under you. Three - you hear the soft, hot hiss of urine. Blackavar has just ruined his tuxedo pants. Four, five, six - miss, miss, miss.

"Damn it." The cop pulls the trigger, the torn skin around his hollowed sockets twitching. He unloads the spent cartridges, letting them spill onto the stage. Their brass bodies sparkle as they hit the boards with a musical tink.

He feels up his pockets for more rounds, body quaking with fitful spasms. "Don't move, you're under arrest," he mutters, "Under arrest."

"Hey, piggy! Catch!" Emile scoops up a rotten apple and hurls it. Perfect shot. The fruit bursts into chunks of oxidized flesh and red skin.

Lucy slips loose, legs kicking at your face as she pushes away from you. You grasp at her ankle. The heel of her foot knocks you on the chin. Cackling, she crawls up on all fours, lopping towards the edge of the stage.

"Race you to Maine, Hrairoo!" she laughs.

You jump up.

Emile yells.

"Little maggot!" The cop is advancing upon him, loading rounds into his revolver in furious, unsteady stabs. Fruit splatters and pings off his body. He doesn't slow. He accepts it. "Disrespecting an officer of the law..."

Blackavar quivers on the floor, curled in a ball, hands over his ears. He so freely pulled the trigger on Cody, but now, when faced with taking a bullet himself, he crumbles. You wish you were surprised. You wish you were angry.

Go after Lucy or save Emile, which do you choose?

Emile, he is but a child. One that, like you, who has suffered at the hands of Woundwort. Was twisted, made to do cruel, violent things to others. You saved him from Starvation, you can't abandon him now to die at the hands of that officer.

That cop is your fault, too. It makes no sense - he, the receptionist, the other officers, the first responders, they should have cried out their infection by day's end. It shouldn't have spread. Unless the whole town was infected by Woundwort's influence.

How deep does this all go?

That's the thing, Rabbit, purrs the Dream. Things can always go Deeper.

Lucy leaps off the stage. Her laughter, and Quintana's weeping cries, are swept up in the audience's revelry. You lost her.

You failed Quintana.

Screaming, you charge the cop, lifting him off his feet in a rough tackle. His gun flies from his hand, arcing high and crashing hard somewhere offstage. The two of you plummet and land in a tangle, you on top and him below. He gropes for your throat.

"Assaulting an officer is a serious crime," he grunts, the heel of his hand bumping your breast. You snatch and crack his arm, wringing until the bones snap. Until they puncture his flesh.

His inarticulate wail of agony silences the audience.

Hazel, Quintana, your sisters, this no-name officer you barely know, everything you touch turns to failure. Everything turns to death. But what could you expect? Lucy christened you The Black Rabbit of Inlé, and you, a fool, accepted that thorny crown. Best bear it.

The cop's nails scabble at your cheek. You shatter that hand, too, crush it in your palm until it bursts. Lucy, another Thousand, an enemy of Rabbit kind, and you trusted her. You mourned her.

"Inlé!"

You failed Quintana.

"Inlé, stop! You're killing him!"

You halt. Blood spackled, panting, you sit back and see what you have done. The cop whimpers beneath you, his arms from the elbows down are splatters of red, white, and blue. You bite your hand, your teeth cutting at the base of your thumb, and stare. Everything tastes like milk.

You're crying.

"It's okay, Inlé." Emile's thin arms embrace you. He buries his face in your hair. "It's okay, you stopped. It's okay. You're okay."

"Quintana," you wipe at your eye, "she's gone."

"We can find her, and we can get her back."

Sweet child, he believes it. Believes in you.

"Lucy said she was heading to Maine." Blackavar draws near, limping, reeking of fluids. He speaks slow, words weighed and measured with care. "Same destination as us, more than likely."

Your father's dairy. "Hedgenettle Farms."

He proffers his hand and you take it. He pulls you to your feet, then pulls you in for a hug. Your soaked clothes squelch. "Thank you for putting me back together."

"You're welcome."

The cop coughs, chest hitching.

Emile makes a face. "What are we going to do about the pig?"

Kill him.

You should kill him.

Cloudy tears leak from his sockets and mucus drips from his nose. "I can't stop thinking," he says, his voice blood from an open wound. "I can't stop thinking..."

You part from Blackavar. You ignore his disappointed huff and kneel beside the officer. Days worth of scruff grows on his square jaw, on his hollow cheeks. The Dream lead him to you, why? Did it intend to torture him or you? Or both?

"What's your name?" you ask.

"Officer Mateo Holly." He lifts his stump of an arm, rags of meat dangling. His hand hangs on by threads of tendon and sinew. "When will the crying stop? I took out my eyes and it won't fucking stop."

You should kill him.

You should leave him.

"I just want it to stop."

Emile watches you, sitting on his haunches, hands on his lap. His disdain for the officer is a black cloud on his brow, his eyes dark. Blackavar hangs back and tries to shake urine off his leg.

You sigh.

"You're coming with us, Officer Holly."

"But he's a cop!" Emile protests.

"Cops are killjoys," Blackavar adds. "And bastards."

"All cops are bastards." Emile slips Blackavar a weak high five. They exchange smiles, and you sigh again, louder.

"We're taking him. That's final."

Pulling your remaining glove free with your teeth, you plan out your actions. Bones need to be rebuilt, muscles corded, skin sewn, should be short work. You scoop and gather up the fleshy mush in handfuls, squishing them together.

"I can't believe we're saving a pig," Emile says.

"She saved you, you little cannibal," Blackavar replies.

"Fuck you, MC Pee Pants. I'm not a cop."

That's right, you did save Emile. And you saved Blackavar. And if you do this right, maybe you can save this Officer Holly. Maybe, along with Clover, all of you can band together and save Quintana.

Maybe the Dream meant for this to happen.

From the corner of your eye, as you shape and mold Holly's flesh like clay, you see green. A slip of a girl in an emerald dress watches you from the wings. Antlers, scarred throat, Rabbit. She curtsies at you before vanishing.

"Maybe not the Dream," you mutter.

Hands grab by the sides, lift you. Holly hefts you off of his body, his strength surprising. Before you can react, Blackavar and Emile drag you into the fortress of their arms.

Holly stands.

For a terrible, long moment, no one speaks. Don't make me regret my kindness, you pray to the Dream and to Rabbit. You remember the woman you saved, how she tried to convince you to kill Emile, and how she fled when thwarted. Quintana, Lucy, Hazel, your father, all come back.

Holly towers over the three of you, uniform black with his blood, sticky with smashed fruit. He reaches for his holster. Draws a fresh gun.

Silly rabbit, you wanted to take him with you. How could you be so stupid?

He flips the gun around, handle out, and offers it to you. "Thank you for saving me," he says.

Tears no longer run down his cheeks.

You take the gun.

"So," he pulls out sunglasses, black aviators, from his shirt pocket, and slips them on. "Where we heading?"

END PART TEN

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