



 rabbit, rabbit, rabbit  @therabbitdies

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## The Rabbit Died - PART ELEVEN

**Warning: This is an NSFW horror/fantasy story full depictions and mentions of abuse of all stripes, body horror, cannibalism, death, gore, incest, pregnancy, rape, sexual assault, and vomit.**

In the bedroom, you lay with your husband. He spoons you, his chin resting atop your crown and his bicep supporting your neck. Stroking your pregnant belly, he whispers with pride, "She's getting big, Mama."

That is what he calls you, Mama. The boys call you that too, Mama. Just Mama, you don't want to be called anything else.

(yes, you do.)

"If she gets any bigger, you might pop." He peppers your head with kisses, and, chuckling, he cups your breast. "These are getting bigger, too."

When he holds you like this, kisses and touches you, you imagine him an octopus. His limbs, the tentacles, and his cock, the hard beak at the center. And you're a mermaid trapped in his coils, useless and pretty. You're meat, you exist to be crushed and eaten alive, cunt first.

(no, you don't.)

The first thrust always hurts. You clench and hiss, and he grunts and pushes harder, holds you tighter. He plucks at your sore nipples as he fucks you, tugging at them with the same gentle force he uses on his cows when he milks them.

Your baby kicks.

"Stop," you say, "Wait, stop. Robert, stop."

He comes to a reluctant halt, sheathed deep inside of you. You guide his hand to your belly. "Feel that?" you ask. "She's moving."

"I don't feel anything," he says.

(good, he doesn't deserve to. fuck him.)

You untangle yourself from his arms, his terrible coils, and roll onto your back. His

cock slips out as you pull away, the loss sudden, but pleasant. "She kicked a second ago," you tell him. "I felt her do it."

He puts on a deep frown. "I didn't."

(and you never will.)

Your head throbs.

"Something wrong, Mama?" Robert turns you by the chin to face him. In the dark, his hazel eyes are black tunnels, unending and empty. Looking into them nauseates you. "You feeling sick?"

"My head hurts."

"Stay here, a glass of warm milk should fix you right up." Robert pulls on a pair of pajama pants and rises from the bed. Standing at his full height, he is close to seven feet tall.

"I can get it myself." You hold your arms out. "Just help me up, Robert. Please?"

He picks his teeth. Piano key teeth, they're long, narrow, and packed in a straight line. Your thighs and neck bare their marks. "Dr. Adams said you should be taking it easy."

(fuck adams.)

"Adams also said no sex."

His nostrils flare. "S'pose he did."

Robert helps you out of bed, his giant hands clasping you by the forearms. On your feet, you feel better. Less dizzy, less strange. Taking you by the throat, he plants a wet kiss upon your lips.

"I love you," he says.

(disgusting.)

"I know."

He keeps you in his hold, quiet as he observes you. Red eddies at the edges of your vision, and you smell curdled milk. Sour sweat. Wilted grass. Something peeks at you from his tunnel eyes, a slaving beast, a great hunger. You freeze in its presence.

"You know?"

(i will kill you, old man.)

You swallow at the lump of ice caught in your throat and you nod. "I know, Robert. I know you love me."

(fucking kill you!)

"You go get your milk and come right back." He releases you. "We've got unfinished business, after all."

Unfinished business is his cock, still hard, grinding against your hip. He plays with it through the fabric of his pajamas as you get dressed. Simple robe, made of cotton, and a white silk nightgown. He groans at the sight of you. "Damn it, woman. You're beautiful."

You rush out of the room as fast as you can.

In the hall, you catch your breath. You wait for your eyes to adjust to the darkness before waddling over to the stairs. Holding your belly, you descend, taking a step at a time. Slow goings, but safe. And calming.

"You get that rabbit?"

"Nope, fucker slipped the snare again."

Voices from the kitchen, the boys. Robert's children. Feral things, they skulk about at all hours of the night, always underfoot, always watching. You breathe through your mouth to avoid gagging from their stench.

"I think Mama's up," one says.

You hear a thwack and gurgling laughter. Pale faces leer at you from the open archway that leads into the kitchen. One holds a rolled-up magazine plastered with crushed dead moths. He smiles, "Hello, Mama."

"Go to bed," you say, "it's late."

The boy licks bug guts off the magazine. A second boy, a pug-nosed kid named Peter, slaps him aside. Huge boy, tall, athletic, you can see him joining the police when he's older. You can see him in riot gear, clubbing protestors to death.

"We don't want to," Peter says, his arms crossed, his shoulders squared. "Maybe you should go back to sleep - didn't the doc put you on bed rest?"

Snickering, fearless, the moth-eater lays a grubby hand on your belly. The boys tend to do this, rub your tummy like a crystal ball as if she will rise from under the surface of your skin and whisper premonitions. You wish they would stop. She belongs to Robert, not them.

(she belongs to you.)

You pry free of the boy's hand. "I'll tell Daddy," you say. "If you don't go to bed, I'll tell."

From the kitchen, there is a thump. And then silence. Peter glances back over his shoulder and then back to you, expression flat. The moth-eater sucks his thumb.

"Vervain," he says, "Mama said she'll tell Daddy."

"I heard her," Peter snaps.

"We should go to bed, Vervain. I don't want Daddy to get mad at me."

All the boys in the kitchen, half a dozen of them at least, gather by the archway. They watch you and Peter, murmuring. Fidgeting. You brace for what's coming.

"Vervain, we should go."

Peter's lips flatten into a bloodless line. "I heard her."

"Then let's go, Vervain!"

"I heard her!" Peter socks the moth eating boy's mouth. A violent flash of fist and blood. You avert your eyes, your whole body flinching as you hear Peter knock him down.

The rest cheer.

(stop him.)

Peter sits on the moth-eater's chest - Champion, you have heard your husband him - and backhands him. Setting up a rhythm, the larger boy, the cop-in-training, beats the smaller child's face. Fists pounding. Keening wails. You stand, mute, and listen.

"Help, please!" Champion begs the other boys, who like you, watch on, silent. A blow cracks the bridge of his nose, bends it crooked. He screams.

(don't just stand there, hazel rey! stop him!)

Hazel What?

"Will you can it?" Peter wrenches Champion's incisor, wiggling it, pulling it. Trying hardest he can to rip it from its pink roots. "Little pussy, Daddy will hear."

(hazel rey!)

Your tongue runs over your chipped tooth. You open your mouth, you shout, "ROBERT!"

The boys scatter. Propelled by their fear of your husband, they scramble out the archway, out the back door, and through the windows. Peter, fist frozen mid punch, snarls at you. "Snitch," he spits, and he stands. "Fucking whore snitch."

He delivers one last, petty kick to Champion before ducking past you. Champion stays on the floor, sobbing in that helpless, unabashed way child cry. Great, trembling fits, bigger than his body can handle.

"Hey, get up," you say. "You got to get up, I can't bend down to help you. Baby's too big. You have to get up."

He knuckles off the snot hanging over his busted lip, sniffs and rolls over. With much effort and whining, he stands. You gather him up for a hug. Let him bury his face against your sore breasts and weep.

"I hate him," he cries. "Peter's such a peckerhead, I hate him. I wish he'd die. I wish he'd choke on shit and die."

You pet his hair, picking out any knots your fingers catch. He stinks. Sweat, straw, and manure, he must have been playing in the barn again. And now blood too, thanks to Peter. You clean his face with the sleeve of your robe.

"What's going on down there?"

Upstairs, a light flicks on, casting the steps in warm gold. Robert's shadow spills down to the bottom, the inky form of it shimmering, edges rippling. "I heard you call me," he says. "What's happening? Everything okay down there?"

Campion looks to you.

(tell him to fuck off.)

"It's okay, false alarm!" You feel Campion rubbing your belly. For good luck, perhaps? You find your own hand drifting down to stroke your baby bump. Praying that your husband listens, that he goes away.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Alright then," he says after a long while. "I'm heading back to bed. Don't take too long."

The stairs go dark, his shadow retreats, and you exhale into Campion's hair. That was close. He hates when the boys quarrel and he hates it, even more, when they cry.

"I'm hungry, Mama," Campion whines. "I'm starving, can I have a snack?"

The baby kicks. She must be hungry, too.

Food wouldn't be a terrible idea. "Sure, I'll make you something."

You enter the kitchen. Campion shuffles after, sucking his dirty thumb. His gaze flits about, looking here, looking there, his large green eyes never settling on one thing for long. You smooth back his bangs and smile best you can.

"What do you want?" you ask.

"Egg," he says.

Nestled in a basket on the counter are fresh eggs. Got to give it to Robert's boys, they are terrible, sneaky creatures, but they do their chores. You collect a few, along with a

bowl, and move over to the sink. "Wash your hands," you turn on the faucet, "You're helping me."

He thrusts his hands under the stream and stiffly holds them there. You pass him the soap and, after staring at it for a while, he starts to wash. He scrubs and scrubs, working up a thick foaming lather. Rubs his picked cuticles ragged and red.

You shut off the water. "You okay there?"

Campion pouts down at his hands. "I'm okay" he mutters. "I'm just hungry. That's all."

"Something's up, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

(you should keep asking.)

Pressure throbs behind your eyes. Your headache has returned, the pain dull. More of a static crackle than a violent clanging. You twist the knobs for the hot and cold, adjusting them until the water runs warm. If Campion doesn't want to talk, who are you to force him?

"If it's nothing, then rinse your hands and go peel some potatoes." You start to wash the eggs, careful not to break the shells. "We can have some with the eggs."

(ever the coward. running away from confrontation. i'm ashamed to be inside of you.)

An egg slips from your fingers. It falls into the sink, cracks, and splatters. There was a chick inside, no bigger than the knuckle of your thumb. Tethered to its yolk by a black-red cord, it twitches, blue eyes bulbous. Tiny feet, tiny feathers.

Beak the size of a needle tip. You stifle a scream behind the back of your palm, breathing in fast and hard through your nose.

(that's what is going to happen to me unless you learn to face your problems. he will crack you open and eat me raw.)

Campion reaches for the chick.

"Don't touch it!" you blurt.

"I was just going to throw it out." He sucks on his thumb and kicks at the base of the sink, resentful. "No need to yell, Mama. I wasn't going to do anything bad."

"Fuck." You grab a kitchen towel. "Just fuck. Stay there."

Water sweeps the chick into the sink strainer, bloody yolk and all. With the towel, you retrieve it. Bundle it up. Gold and red stains the coarse, dripping fabric as you cradle it in cupped hands.

Your headache worsens.

"What are you going to do with it, Mama?"

"I don't know."

What the fuck do you do with a dead chick? Flush it? Toss it in the trash? The air thickens with the smell of raw egg, and you worry you may puke.

"We could give it a funeral in the yard," Campion suggests. "Like we did the man."

Holding an impromptu funeral for an unborn chick, only a child would think of such a thing. Campion takes the bird, swaddled in its kitchen towel shroud, and holds it to his heart. You sigh. "Let's go bury it."

"Thank you, Mama." He makes a beeline out the back entrance, letting the screen door clang behind him. You take care of the sink before going to follow.

The last remnants of winter haunt the night. It nips at the tips of your ears and nose and at your bare toes. You close your robe tight, hoping to ward off the chill. Campion scampers on ahead, pausing here and there to sniff the air.

More animal than human, Robert's boys. Never still, always moving, always begging, fighting, killing. They brought him everything they caught, cats, birds, groundhogs, rabbits, and dogs. Made a morbid kind of sense that one day they would bring home a dead man.

Peter was the one to do it. Two weeks ago, he strolled into the living room, leading his procession with a proud grin. He presented his catch, a man. He must have been thirty at most, shaved head, scarred face, eye missing. Your stomach dropped looking at him - he was gorgeous.

Robert slapped his knee and let out a howl of deranged laughter. Like your kids dragging home a corpse was the funniest damn thing he ever saw. He stopped when you started crying, and that was to slap you.

(should have slapped him back.)

Campion prattles at you, voice lilting, "Think you can say a prayer for the chick? Like you did the man? Do you know any prayers for chicks?"

"I can try."

At the edge of the yard, the grass meets the dirt road, lays a makeshift graveyard. Sticks, toy army men, and discarded kitchen utensils mark countless small graves. At the center of this cemetery, under a cairn of stones, rests the man. The handsome corpse.

"It's that fucking rabbit!"

A black rabbit digs at the cairn, sending rocks tumbling down around it. At Campion's shout, it startles, ears up straight, and stares at you with a runny eye. Your stomach cramps with the sudden sense of being known. Of being seen.

Do you know that rabbit?

"Here," Campion shoves the dead chick into your hands. "That rabbit's been picking at that grave all week! I'm going to catch it."

You hold him back by the collar. "Don't."

He whines.

The rabbit bounds off, black fur melding into the night. You approach the cairn and, with your foot, nudge a rock back into place. What did it want with a grave?

"I could've caught it," Campion sulks.

"Doesn't mean you should."

The dead man's remaining eye was blue, you remember gazing into it while you waited for Robert to decide the body's fate. Dark blue, almost black like the night sky above you. It scared you.

"I'll dig the grave here." Campion squats down by a circle of popsicle sticks stuck in the dirt closest to the cairn. Barehanded, he digs. "You say the prayers, okay? You said you'd try."

And you try. You rack your memory for verses, for psalms, scrape what few you can find together, and you pray, hushed:

"My soul is deprived of peace,  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
I tell myself my future is lost,  
all that I hoped for from the LORD.  
The thought of my homeless poverty  
is wormwood and gall;

"Remembering it over and over  
leaves my soul downcast within me.  
But I will call this to mind,  
as my reason to have hope:

"The favors of the LORD are not exhausted,  
his mercies are not spent;  
They are renewed each morning,  
so great is his faithfulness.  
My portion is the LORD, says my soul;  
therefore will I hope in him.

"Good is the LORD to one who waits for him,  
to the soul that seeks him;  
It is good to hope in silence  
for the saving help of the LORD."



"The Word of the Lord," croaks a voice from within the cairn. "Amen."

Campion ceases digging. You lay a hand on the crown of his head, keeping him still and you grounded. You lean in, ear cocked, and listen. Did you hear that? Was that voice real?

The cairn heaves as if breathing. Dust and rocks spill from the pile, clattering and falling about it. Champion clambers to his feet and tugs at you by the arm, urgent, his distress clear. Cold, hoarse with dirt, the voice speaks repeats: "The Word of the Lord. Amen."

"We got to get Daddy," Champion pulls at you. "Mama, we've got to get him."

(do you, though?)

Your headache threatens to crack your skull with a fresh wave of pain.

(dig him up.)

"Mama?"

(dig him up!)

"Mama, I'm going to go tell!"

Campion pulls and pulls at you, warning you over and over, desperate to appeal to your better judgment. Daddy needs to know! Come on, come on! You remain rooted to your spot, feet planted firmly, like a headstone.

"Mama!"

"Don't!" Snapping from your trance, you take Champion by the face. You cradle it. "Sweetie, we don't need to tell Daddy anything. Okay? We need to keep this a secret."

The cairns shifts, its stones clacking. Champion, unable to do much else, sucks his thumb. "A secret? But, but--"

"Yes, a secret." You strain to keep your voice a bare whisper. "It'll just be between you and me, no one else."

"What if Daddy finds out? He doesn't like secrets."

"If Daddy finds out, I'll take the blame."

(how brave of you.)

"Will you fuck off," you hiss, and then, when Champion winces, you coo, "No, I didn't mean you. I--" You're just hearing voices. Things are hunky-fucking-dory. "I'm sorry."

A hand punches its way from inside the cairn, scattering dirt, scattering rocks. It grasps about, claws. Champion koala-clings to you, hyperventilating. He cries, and

your breasts, stupid things, begin to lactate.

And then, with a final push, the dead man rises from his grave.

"Oh, fuck me," the words leave your mouth on their own, your aching brain unable to stop them. You stand, agog. The dead man dusts his clothes free of debris. Soil clogs the wounds in his chest, his throat, and his eye. He blows dirt from his nose.

"Oh, fuck me," you repeat.

"Where are my cigarettes?" He pokes through the pockets of his leather jacket. "My lighter's missing too, f--" he trails off when he notices Campion. "Fudge."

"You mean fuck," Campion says.

The dead man smiles. "Yeah, that's what I meant. Just don't make a habit of swearing - it's bad."

"Mama says it all the time, though."

"Mama? Oh, you." He looks you over, head to toe, pausing to frown at your belly.

"Thanks for not screaming," he says.

This man, this dead man, can't be real. You step into his space and, with a curious hand, touch his face. You explore the cut of his jaw and the jagged, pale fissure that runs from the corner of his mouth, up to his ear. His skin is cold, unyielding. Like iron.

"Getting a little handsy there, honey," he says.

"You're real," you reply.

He turns his nose to sniff at your palm and his remaining eye flashes with alarm. Then he seizes Campion, takes a deep whiff of his hair, and snarls, "Woundwort!"

"Woundwort?"

Pain lances through your brain, white-hot. The taste of milk floods your mouth, green grass, gunmetal, and your baby kicks. You hunch over to protect your belly from the apocalyptic onslaught of sensations. Voices. Car alarms. Blood and frigid iron.

Robert squeezing your hand, pupils huge with love, terrifying, mad love. In your hand, a knife, blood sizzling on its blade. "What a fabulous ending you've made for us, Hazel-rah," he says "Thank you."

You collapse against the dead man, and he embraces you. Holds you up.

More visions, of diving through a lake of skin the color of crude oil, of sinking through layers of flesh and fat. Your husband clinging to your hand. Bodies of children falling around you. Him laughing. You silent as you think, at least Quintana got away. At least she's safe.

Weeks, months, of living on this farm, sharing Robert's bed. Washing dishes. Cooking meals. Tending his army. Letting him and Adams pass your body between them like a fucking blunt.

"Mama?" Champion calls to you. "Mama, are you okay?"

"Give her a second," the man says.

The voice you have been hearing, a girl with antlers and bunny teeth, her body cloaked in running milk.

(recognize me now, hazel rey?)

"Mama, the upstairs' light's on! I think Daddy's coming!"

(recognize yourself?)

"Yes!" you shout.

You recognize the voice, yourself, and you remember. You remember everything, Adams and Lucy, your baby, Quintana, and-- you grasp the dead man's face and trace his scar-- "Cody?"

"How do you know my name?" he asks.

"You don't know me?"

He shakes his head, face earnest. Almost ashamed. "I don't," he says. "Sorry."

"You have to know me. You kidnapped me, you shoved a gun in my mouth." You beat his shoulder. "You have to know me!"

"Shit," Cody mutters, squeezing his eye shut. "Shit!" He turns from you and kicks at the rocks that once marked his grave. "Fucking happened again, oh god. Oh god, fuck!"

Champion yanks at your sleeve. "Mama!"

"Yeah, Champion?"

"Daddy's coming."

Robert advances across the yard, flickering, flickering. He is your husband, Robert, a man in plaid and bib overalls. Then he is Woundwort, a storm of meat packed into in a mascot costume. He switches forms with each step of his executioner's tread.

Watching him makes your eyes water, and you turn your head.

"Mama," Robert -- Woundwort -- calls to you. "What are you doing out of the house, Mama?"

"Run," Cody says, his face clear of his earlier shame. He sweeps his jacket away from

his hip, and there, jutting from a scar on his iliac crest, is the grip of his revolver. With a grunt, he dislodges the weapon from his body. "Run!"

His gun is a part of him? That is why he always seemed to just pull it out of nowhere. You touch the wound, the lip of it hard and serrated. That's why the barrel tasted of blood.

"What are you doing, lady?" he snaps. "Run!"

"Don't you listen to him, Mama!" Woundwort hollers. "He doesn't know what's right for you!"

"Fuck you, Robert! You shapeshifting piece of shit!" Your voice pitches shrill in your ears. "Go suck a cow's tit!"

Woundwort comes to a halt. Stunned and stuck mid change, he goggles at you with mismatched eyes. He raises a hand, forefinger extended, to speak. "Mama," he touches his finger to his churning lips and then, shakily, points it at you, "that was wicked rude of you."

Cody shoots, firing twice. Bullet number one shears Woundwort's finger off at the base, and he howls, "You cocksucker!" Number two nails Woundwort in the crotch. His groin bursts with a splash of black and deep, purplish-red.

"Will you fucking run now?" Cody asks.

Run where? You're pregnant. You're lost. Awful as Cody is, you know him, kind of, and the devil you know...

"Run with me?" you ask.

Campion tugs at you again. "What about me?"

(what about him?)

"Are you going to leave me?" he asks.

(he belongs to woundwort.)

Woundwort lumbers towards you, cupping his weeping groin. A shot to his thigh staggers him and, cursing, he drops to one knee. He will rise again, nothing keeps him down for long. Blow out his brains and he will return.

(that's why you need to listen to cody and run! he can't hurt you if you're not here.)

But what about Campion? Woundwort will rampage if you escape. He will blame it on Campion, and Campion will cry, and, fuck, Robert hates when the boys cry.

"Don't make me leave him," you say.

"Wasn't asking you to," Cody says.

"I wasn't talking to you."

He empties the remaining bullets, aiming for center mass. Heart, lung, stomach. Pop, splash. Pop, splash. Woundwort exclaims in agitation and slaps at the shots as if the bullets were mosquitos.

Cody hauls Champion over his shoulder and takes your hand. "C'mon, lady. Enough hesitating, run!"

So you run.

---

Pick one.

CLOVER

Being awake sucks. Awful experience. Dead plaster makes up the walls, and the people walk around in rotting bodies. You poke at the scab on your forehead and shudder. Wet from the shower, it's soft, lumpy.

"So it won't close?"

Blackavar's plummy voice drifts through the bathroom door. His pitch is high for him, straining on the edge of panic. You hear the air whistle as he talks, he must be waving his hands around. As always.

"Correct."

Inlé speaks now. She has been working on the gash on the Dream's skin since her return. You sag against the sink, the weight of her exhaustion pulling down on your limbs. She sighs, and you sigh. Maybe if she let you help, the wound would be healed by now.

"What's going to happen here, then? This is the kind of shit that started happening to Warren once the bastards sealed us off."

The cop, Holly. You perk at the warm gruffness of his voice. That comforting mix of cigarettes and fine aged whiskey that tough men develop as they grow older. Emile calls him a pig, but you know better. Under that uniform lurks a Dog.

"Think Cowslip's like this now? All weird?"

Emile, the almost Thousand. Inlé did well scrubbing him clean. You catch hints of his antiseptic smell wafting in from under the door. Sterile human scent. You hate it.

"This is all wrong," Inlé says.

You pick through the makeup bag Lori let your barrow. Pink lipsticks, green shadows, spring colors. You bat the jars and tubes around the bag, frustrated. Inlé is right; everything is wrong. If she spent more time in the Dream, she would know why.

"Should we consult Clover?" Blackavar asks.

"I would rather let her rest."

Out of pity. You saw it in Inlé's eyes when she found you, keening in the arms of Lori and her girlfriend. Deep pity, you bristle at the memory of it.

You trace the line of your single remaining antler. You were unable to stop your mother from escaping with Quintana's body. She ripped off one of your antlers. She also punted you in the cunt.

Also, Cody is gone, and so is your cabin.

Being awake sucks. Zero out of five stars, would not recommend.

"I'm consulting Clover," Blackavar says. He knocks on the door, the rhythm familiar. "Shave and a haircut..."

You answer, cracking open the door. "Two bits."

"You remembered." He slips in through the narrow space you afforded him, a hand covering his eyes. "Are you decent?"

"Never." Lori lent you clothes, a kitten print romper and a pair of lacy ankle socks. Dolly clothes. They sit folded on top of the toilet.

"Please get dressed, we need your help."

Please. Need. He says those words like he means them. And what's with him covering his eyes? Taking Blackavar by the wrist, you peel away his hand. "Why so shy, old man?" you ask. "You've seen me naked before."

"Don't start."

"What? Worried Inlé will get jealous?" You press up against him, smiling. "She has to actually want you for that to happen."

His eyebrow twitches. He blows out a breath, his cheeks puffing. "Why are you being like this?"

Yanking his ear, you hiss, "You shot Cody. That's why I'm being like this, you dusty old weasel. That's what you are, Richard Stoa, a dusty old dick weasel. If it had been me down there in the Dream, I wouldn't have stitched you back together, I would have left you to rot."

Blackavar grits his teeth. You hear the scrape of his veneers grinding together, the flex of his aging muscles. "Cody wouldn't have let those girls go, you know that. I had no choice."

You pick up the romper. Tabby kittens play across the pink fabric. They're cute but dead. The dresses you wore in the Dream hummed with life, sang with it, unlike the immaculate corpse you now hold.

"I'm alone without him," you say. "Meatspace is so dead, I don't know how anyone can handle it alone."

"You have Inlé now."

"She isn't Cody."

Blackavar gathers the hair from your shoulders. "I know, my dear," he says. "But, I implore you, don't be so quick to dismiss her. You two need each other - you're sisters."

You allow him to braid your hair. His deft fingers twist and weave, twist and weave, and you cinch your eyes shut. When you first met him, he did this for you. And like then, you struggle to hate him.

"Sisters aren't the same as lovers," you say.

"Cody wasn't your lover."

He could have been. One day, when you both escaped your mother, he could have looked at you as a woman instead of a fragile copy. A real flesh and blood woman with a soul and he would love you. He would love and marry you and you would kiss his scars and call him beautiful.

Blackavar coils your braid around your head, crowning you. "So the wound won't close?" you ask.

One beat, then a second. "Inlé has been fighting with it for the past few hours," he says. "The blasted thing keeps tearing open the sutures. I thought, perhaps, you could assist her."

"I'll help her."

You pull on the romper, picking at it here and there. It's tight on the hips and rides up in the back. Frowning, you tug and sigh. What else can you expect with dead clothes?

Blackavar smiles at you. "Thank you, dear."

You sock him in the gut.

"What the hell was that for?" he wheezes, doubled over. A cord of drool dangles from his bottom lip. "All I did was say thank you!"

"What can I say?" Applying a coat of pink lipstick, you shrug. "I'm fickle." You kiss his forehead and push him aside to access the door. He groans, long and exaggerated, and you have to roll your eyes at him. After being gutted, a punch should be nothing.

"What a baby."

"Is everything okay?" Inlé, still dressed in her stained clothes, pushes off the dresser. Holly glances at you from his place by the window, eyes unreadable thanks to his aviators. No sign of Emile. "I heard a grunt," she says.

"I punched Dick." You flick your bangs and flash them both a smile. Holly chuckles and you, now emboldened, giggle. "Don't worry about him, we have a wound to close."

"Maybe I should go check on him first..."

You step in her way and take her by the hand. Her eyes, ever honest, narrow, and you touch your nose to hers, careful not to bump her with your single antler. "Check on him after."

"But..."

Annoyed, you sigh, "Go check on him."

"I will be out in a minute." Inlé ducks into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

"You gave in easy," Holly says.

"Where did Emile go?"

Holly cocks his head at your question. Sniffs. Is he aware of what the Dream has done to him? When he licks his teeth, does he feel the change in his canines? How long they have grown, how sharp. "He's outside," he says. "He's trying to call his folks."

"His parents are alive?" You rise up on the balls of your feet, your ears perked. Periscoping, Cody called it. Something real rabbits do when on alert.

"His parents are up in Maryland, something about a spelling bee." Holly pushes up his aviators. Your mother had glasses like his; you hate them. "Lori is letting him use her phone."

A spelling bee. Emile's parents survived the slaughter of the Cowslip adults thanks to a spelling bee. You rock back on your heels, amused. "Lucky them," you say. "They didn't get eaten."

He turns back to the window, rumbling, "Yeah, lucky them."

"Take off your glasses." You squeeze in between him and the window. "I don't like them."

"No."

"Don't tell me no!" You take his glasses by the end pieces, lift, and pull. As the temples slide off his ears, he whips his head away, his lips peeled back, baring yellowed teeth. Then, a whine, like a dog being kicked. He shields his eyes from you.

"Give them back," he begs.

Humans are such addicts for dramatics. Putting on your most inviting smile, you take him by his stubbled chin. "Look at me," you say. "Come on, please? I want to see your eyes."



"This ain't funny, girl. Give them back." Even when pleading, his voice is deep, resonant. The rumbling of a volcano. Perfect for a Dog.

"Just look at me."

"Give me back my fucking glasses!"

Cursing, yelling, now you definitely can't give the glasses back. You wave them at him, teasing, "Say please."

"Clover!"

Inlé, she's back. So distracted you were by your game, you didn't hear the door open or the heavy tread of her boot as she approached. She rips the glasses from your fingers. "Stop assaulting the men!"

"They're only men," you say. "No need to get all huffy."

The anger in Inlé's eyes drains away, leaving behind an empty look of disappointment. What is that about? You reach for her, a touch might tell you, a touch might explain. She stomps her foot. Backs away. She passes Holly the glasses. "I'm going to try closing the wound again."

Holly, facing away, fixes his glasses. "Good luck."

"I'll help you!" you say.

She shakes her head, "No." And out the door she leaves, slamming it in your face as you go to follow.

"Think she's upset," Holly mutters.

Why, though? You exit the room, making haste to catch up with Inlé. "Hey, what's up?" you ask. "Did I do something wrong?"

She ignores you, continuing her trek over to room 302. The door is gone, rotted, and a scabrous moss clings to the frame. You pinch your nose--the smell! Pus and spoiled meat. It wasn't like this when you went to take a shower. What happened?

She halts and you grab her arm.

"Answer me! What did I do?"

Inlé forms a fist, the tendons drawing tight under her brown skin. You sense the tension in her muscles, the pick up in her pulse. "Do I really have to explain it to you?" She meets your gaze and groans, "I do. God, I do. Clover, you can't hurt people whenever you feel like it."

Can't hurt people whenever you want? What about them, Holly and Blackavar? One is a cop, the other a con artist, and both professions thrive on harm. How many people have they hurt for the hell of it?

It's unfair, her asking you to be considerate with them. Blackavar showed you no consideration when calling baby Rabbits parasites, or when--"He shot Cody," you say it aloud, your chin dimpling with frustration. "Blackavar shot Cody. He deserves more than a punch!"

"Cody shot a gas station employee." The brown of Inlé's irises, already near black, darken. She draws away from you and hugs her chest, hands cupping her elbows. "His name was Jay Pipkin, he lived a plain, ordinary life. He loved Coca-Cola and watching the news."

She shivers, and your skin pebbles with gooseflesh in response. Where is she going with this?

"He wasn't part of any of this. If you asked him what a Rabbit was, he would have said a long-eared rodent. If you asked him about the Dream, he would have said, 'to see the Reds at the World Series.'"

"So what?" There is a tremor in your voice. You back up a step and press your hands, folded as in if prayer, to your sternum. "Cody shot some guy. I don't know him, so what does it matter?"

"It matters because he was alive. It matters because Cody had options other than putting a bullet through that man's brain, and he didn't take them. He picked violence."

That was Cody, he picked violence. He kicked doors, he hurled phones. When he was frustrated, he banged his head with the heel of his palm. Or snarled. Or punched a wall. He jammed his gun down Hazel's throat when she mocked him.

He was unable to control it, the same way you're unable to lie. It was in the blood, laced in the marrow.

"But, Blackavar," you start. Blackavar had a choice, didn't he? He could have held fire, he could have--

"If Blackavar hadn't killed him, I would have!"

Inlé's shout splashes over you like ice water. Your eyes burn from the chill, and you do the first thing that comes to mind. You lash out. You slap her. She takes the hit, head snapping to the side. A droplet of blood, bright as a ruby, trickles from a cut in her lip.

"I would have killed him." She pokes at the split. Her hand is short a pinky finger. Out of compulsion, you touch your own, counting the knuckles to make sure they're all there. "If he stood in my way, I would have done it. I would have killed him."

Shoulders rounded, she rubs blood into the whorls of her fingertips and chuckles. Cody had the same kind of laugh. Short, rueful. "You know as well as I do that a violent man like him would have stood in my way."

"Shut up!" You stomp your foot. "I don't want to hear it! Shut up!" You wipe at your eyes, a freshet of tears spilling from them. "I know he wasn't the nicest person, I

know he hurt people, but I still love him! Can't I mourn him?"

"Never said you couldn't." Inlé combs her bangs back from her forehead. What happened to her antlers? There aren't even scars.

"Then why say these things?"

She catches you staring and covers her brow, her lips pressing into a bloodless line. "It's the truth, why else would I say it?"

A creak. Footsteps. Both of you turn your heads towards the sound. Blackavar, hands in the pockets of his borrowed slacks, approaches. "Cocking hell," he whistles at the state of 302. "Are those scabs growing on the door?"

You want nothing to do with him, or with Inlé. Their presence drains you. You sweep past them, nose upturned, and step into room 302. The miasma breaks as you cross the moist threshold, like the skin on pudding, and you breathe strange air.

Butterflies coat the room. Large and shimmering green, their wings fan open and shut in a lazy flutter. They drink from the gash on the floor and from the scab moss on the walls. One lands on your forehead, light as a sigh, and pokes at your torn cuticle with its proboscis.

"No!" You swat it away.

You taste minerals as you speak, salt, mostly, and stones. Under that pulses something crisp and tart, like the flesh of a green apple. The Dream has grown thick in this room.

"Clover!" Inlé enters after you. She goes still. "What? Did you do something?"

"You didn't do this?"

"I'm not a butterfly person."

They cluster on the front of her tank top, their greedy tongues probing at the gore-soaked cotton. With gentle movements, she tries to shoo them. She blows at them. Pokes at them with her fingers. She shakes and shimmies her shoulders. They scatter, only to land again.

"Take off your shirt," you say.

Inlé blinks at you.

"They're after the blood." You pluck at the collar of her tank top, disrupting the butterflies from their feasting. "You know, all this red stuff you soaked up back in the Dream."

Inlé groans, her face overcast, clouded with indignity, and pulls her shirt up over her head. As you expect, no bra. You never wear one and she is a Rabbit, like you. What you don't expect is the scar. A small, clean 'x' carved into her left nipple, dividing it into fours.

She balls up her shirt and chucks it. The butterflies give chase. "There, have it!" Then, sullenly, "That worked."

"Where did you get that scar?" You lift her breast to better examine the mark. The knifework, so precise. Whoever sliced her had a steady hand.

"From my father."

"Oh."

Inlé coughs.

You spin around to face the wound. A perfect pivot on your heel, like the turning of a knob. Click, Inlé. Click, wound. Hands clasped behind your back, you bend to peer into the boiling muck. The shape of the wound has warped, the swollen lip bejeweled with butterflies.

"I tried to sew it together," Inlé steps over the wound, "but the stitches keep tearing." She brushes away a butterfly trying to drink from her split mouth. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"You don't seem to be that great at healing." You poke at her scarred nipple, grinning. She flinches. "So no big surprise there."

There is a wet pop. A box floats up to the surface of the ooze. An old bankers box, the brown cardboard somehow dry despite having been submerged. On it, written in a child's scrawl, is your name.

"Clover--"

You dive upon the box, your fingers slotting easy into the handles, and yank it free. Strands of fluid stretch and snap. Butterflies take to the air. There is a great sucking sound, like a drain being unclogged, and the wound's fevered rim contracts.

Flashes of green blind you. The butterflies, they sweep over you and Inlé in a swarm. She covers her head. Cries out to you. But you can't hear a thing over the hundreds of emerald wings, beating fast.

The swarm funnels into the wound, spinning, spinning. And the wound sucks them all down, slurping and gurgling. When it finishes, it lets out a content sigh and clamps shut. Dark scabs, the color of rust, seal up the seam.

The gash in the Dream's side has healed. The room is clean.

"It's fixed?" Inlé lets her hands drop from her head to her shoulders. She taps the floor with her foot. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." You shift the box around, hugging it with one arm. Dream gunk drips off the bottom, pattering on your bare feet. You pull at the lid. "The wound must have been waiting for me to come pull this out."

"What makes you say that?"

"I mean, it's got my name on it. Duh. What else could it be?"

The box slips from your arms. Inlé catches it. "Here," she holds it up, "let me help you." With this more stable arrangement, you are able to remove the lid. You squeal with delight when you see what waits inside.

"My Playstation!"

"Your what?"

Your old Playstation! You thought it lost when the cabin collapsed. The faded butterfly stickers, the controllers Cody tattooed with Sharpie marker, it is all there. You cover your mouth, your eyes scrunched in joy. They sting. You might cry.

Inlé only stares. "What is a Playstation?"

There is a note with the careworn old system, written in green ink.

Mocking Inlé for her ignorance sure is tempting. How does she not know about the Playstation? Was she raised by Dogs? You pick up the note. It reads:

I never had the chance to finish this game. Could you beat it for me?

Sincerely,  
Rabbit 🐰

Rabbit.

Not a Rabbit. The Rabbit. You can smell her sharp Fall scent wafting from the note. You hold it to your nose, sniff, and then rub the green letters scored into the lined paper. She sent this for you, as she sent the book for Hazel.

"What does it say?" Inlé shuffles around to glimpse at the note, her shoulder bumping yours. The contents of the box shift, cables and controller jostling. Scratching. You grab it by the handle, pulling at it until she gets the hint and starts walking. "Wait, is this from--?"

"Hurry up!" you shout.

You dash out of the 302, dragging Inlé behind in your wake, and head for the previous room. The one you left Holly. You pass a confused Blackavar, who gasps, "Where is your shirt?"

"The butterflies took it," Inlé says.

"They what?"

"The butterflies took it," you repeat for her. Blackavar lets a sputtering sound, like a tire spinning in mud, and joins your procession. You reach the door. Lori and Emile

hang by close by, heads together, deep in a conversation you have no interest in hearing.

"What's going on?" Lori asks, her hands flying to Emile's face to cover his eyes.

"Heavens only knows," Blackavar says, "because I sure don't. Unless one of you care to elucidate us on this matter?"

"Is that a scar?" Emile asks.

All of the adults, including you, fall silent. Emile ducks Lori's attempts at shielding him. While Inlé, ashen, hugs the box to her chest. The scar across her windpipe shines golden in the yellow outdoor lights. It's a scar all Rabbits share - yours right now is on full display.

How did he not notice it until now?

"There, Inlé." Emile points to his chest. "Is that a scar?"

An icy lump forms in your throat. He did notice.

"It is," Inlé says.

"Did you inherit that from your predecessor, too?"

She shakes her head. "No. I didn't."

"Here," he opens the door, "I got it."

A change has happened in the short moments Emile spent apart from the group. His voice is edged, his shoulders tight. You nudge Inlé ahead of you to stare at him. Did he get a hold of his parents? And if so, what did they say to him?

"You going in?" he asks you.

Now you're interested in knowing what he and Lori were discussing. Later, you have to get your Playstation hooked up first.

"Yeah," you say, "I am."

Your little group gathers in the room, Holly already picking through the box. "A PS1?" he whistles. "I haven't seen one of these since high school."

"Set it up," you tell him.

"This really the time for video games? What about that slime portal to hell? Did you fix it?"

"Oh my god, will you just do what I ask?" You stomp your foot. "We don't have time to mess around! This is important!"

"You had plenty of time to mess around with my glasses."

Was he really going to hold that against you? Now, of all times? "Seriously, you're not over that?"

"No, I'm not."

"Emile and I will take care of it." Blackavar takes the box. "Miss Lori, could you find a shirt for Inlé? Best to remove all possible distractions."

"Sure." Lori takes Inlé by the hand, leading her back outside. "My Rachel's got some comfy jerseys you could wear, are you a fan of the Mets or the Yankees?"

"What team did, um, Darryl Strawberry play on?"

"Both, honey. Both!"

You listen until you hear the motel television being moved. Blackavar holds it while Emile plays with the connectors. Holly eventually joins in to help, moving the television stand aside to plug in the Playstation. You supervise, a task you excel at according to Cody.

You miss him.

Emile curses as he fudges with the cables. Says something that makes Blackavar gawk and Holly snicker. Cody would have liked that kid. Shame Inlé cleansed him of the Dream.

Loneliness swells in your breast, your heart heavy with a sense of loss. Cody is gone. Your cabin is gone. Your mother was already gone, and now, as you sit down on the bed, you are unsure if she was ever really there. With everything she has done, can you even call her a mother?

Poor Quintana, will she be okay? Will you?

"It's ready." Emile holds out the controller to you. The Playstation has been connected and television put back in place. He smiles at you. It's lopsided, like Cody's. "Want me to turn it on?"

"Yes."

You hold the controller in your lap, your thumbs on the control sticks, turning them in little circles. Holly interrupts Emile to check the memory card. Need to make sure it's in right before you turn it on, he tells him. (1/3)

Sparks shoot from the back of the Playstation the second Holly touches the card. Everyone shouts. Holly the loudest. The lights blink overhead. Green and pink electricity arcs along the wires connecting it to the television, snapping like firecrackers. (2/3)

You toss the controller to the side and raise your hands, hoping that whatever caused

this will honor your act of surrender. That it won't zap you along with the system. The television crackles, the screen going black. And you all hold your breath. (3/3)

Heartbeats fill the room. Yours? Theirs? An urgent woosh, woosh, woosh, pumps in your ears. The aqueous pulse of a fetus's heart heard through ultrasound.

"You hear that?" Holly rubs his hand. The tips of his fingers are singed black.

"Yeah," Emile says. "What the fuck is it?"

You hear a buzz beside you, and the others all jump. The controller is vibrating. Buzzing in time with the unseen heart as it inches towards you. You pick it up, that lump from before hard in your throat, and take hold.

Holly takes a step towards you. "Maybe you shouldn't--"

"Rabbit asked me to beat the game for her," you say, "and I'm going to do it."

"I can't keep track of all of this, who is Rabbit again?"

"She's Rabbit."

"The originator of the species," Blackavar answers. "Simply put, all Rabbits, such as Clover and Inlé, are clones of her."

"Thought that Rabbit was dead."

"She is, but she isn't. She lives by extension through the others like a genetic memory. They are all Rabbit and Rabbit is them."

"And they can infect people and change them." Holly's gaze bores into yours. You should have broken those glasses. "Like the Thing."

"You're making them sound a lot more sinister than they are."

"Will the two of you shut the fuck up?" you ask. "I want to play the game."

Holly's top lip crooks. He steps back, standing at a lean. "Then go ahead."

He doesn't like you, his sneer makes that clear, and you maybe you earned that dislike. Maybe you shouldn't have teased the Dog earlier.

The controller jerks in your grip. Booming, the heartbeat floods the room and the television snaps back on. Pink screen, green screen, and then black. Solid, suffocating black. The taste of dirt fills your mouth and you cough, hacking up something as black as the screen.

Emile pats your shoulder and you shoo him. You spit mud onto the motel carpet. Your teeth are grainy with soil, real, actual soil. This game hasn't even started yet.

A figure appears in the black, floating prone. A young man with a shaved head, he wears blue jeans and a white tank top. His pixel heart, bright red, beats visibly on his



chest. There is a scar on his crudely rendered face.

"Cody?" Blackavar says the name before you can, his voice going high.

"Isn't he dead, too?" Holly asks.

Press X to Continue. The phrase grows under Cody's body like time-lapsed footage of a blooming flower.

"Clover," Blackavar starts, "are you sure you want to do this?"

You answer him by lifting up the controller and pressing X.

END PART ELEVEN

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