



 rabbit, rabbit, rabbit  @therabbitdies

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## The Rabbit Died - PART TWELVE

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.

Four different people, four different paths. Choose one.

ADDED WARNING: /Casual racism.

"You in there, Mamacita?"

Whirring tape, and then a plastic click. Applause thick with static. The opening strum of a guitar. Must be a recording, your skin doesn't crawl like this when you listen to the real thing.

"Come on, Quintana, talk to me."

You can't see anything, your vision is as black as a dead television set. Lifting your head, you taste light purple, the faded lilac of old blood. John Belushi sings somewhere about being a soul man.

You don't like this cover.

"Quintana," Lucy's voice sing-songs above you. The squeal of a broken speaker interrupts and she curses. "Are you kidding me, really? Are you really going to give me the silent treatment?"

Behind you, deep in the black, echos the faint cry of a baby.

You sit in a chair. Limbs free, but heavy, nightmare heavy. Bad dream heavy. You move your hand in a slow sweep, your heart pounding faster with each horrendous second it takes to complete the act.

Lucy sighs. "You really are doing it."

Belushi gives a final declaration of how he IS a soul man and there is a click. Whirring. Click. Applause and guitars.

The baby cries louder.

"I'm in your head, you useless little cunt! Don't you dare try to ignore me!"

"I don't like this song."

You plant your palms against the armrests and push. Push, struggle, collapse. Your leg kicks out, heel skidding over the unseen carpet. Layers of black pressure hold you down in the chair. You can't move.

"You did not just fucking say that," Lucy's tinny voice hisses. "How can you not like this song? It's from one of America's most beloved classic comedies, you ignorant slut. Appreciate it."

"Blues Brothers sucks," you mumble.

The song stops.

"Repeat that?"

Footsteps to the left of you. You spy it from the corner of your eye, a hand made of wriggling, pale grains of flesh, looming in the black. Its skin crackles like rice cereal in milk. You urge your head to turn, please, faster, faster. Your vertebrae creak and grind.

"Well?"

Say sorry, you were rude. Scream, you are scared. No, no, this woman made you hurt people. She made you hurt Blackavar and Clover. You owe her neither your fear nor your apology.

"The Blues Brothers sucks!" Tears well up as you scream it at her. "It sucks! It really sucks!"

Sour digits worm their way into your mouth. Hundreds of tiny bodies with thousands of tiny legs squirm and tickle your tongue. Pinchers bite at the inside of your cheeks and at your gums. Lucy holds you in place, her fingers between your teeth, her thumb under your chin.

Her blonde hair, clumped in mats, hangs before her face. She reeks of bitters and sweet menstrual blood. "I can't believe you. I'm trying to strike up a conversation, and you're being a heinous bitch."

In the dark, she pulses light. The bodies die and go dark and are shed for new, fresh glowing nits. Your mouth is filling with them.

"Not cool," she spits, "Not cool at all! I should rip your jaw off and stick you in Storage."

The baby wails.

Lucy groans. "I can't wait to pop that little bitch out. I can't stand babies when they cry." She leans in, her sheet of hair parting to reveal one milk blue eye. "Now, I think

you owe me an apology. Nod yes if you agree."

You disagree.

Snarling, you bite down on her fingers. They burst between your teeth, their insect bodies popping like salmon roe. You taste strange things, hateful things, green hemolymph and pink sugar syrup.

Lucy shrieks.

With a jerk of your head, you rip the fingers from her hand and spit them in her face.

A door swings open behind her.

You can move.

"I can't believe you did that!" Lucy clutches her wrist, her wounded hand twisted and clawlike. Glowing lymph gushes from the stumps of her fingers. "You bit me! You're the weak one, how could you do that?"

She is right, you are weak. You are not tall or all the strong, and you cry, you cry almost all the time, but even weak things can bite. Even weak things can fight back.

You jump from the chair and rush Lucy, shoulder checking her out of the way. She tumbles, screaming. You hear a wet pop and splat, like a water balloon being burst, and skittering legs, but you don't look back, you plow ahead towards the door.

Pain tears through you when you reach it. From the roots of your hair down to your toenails, you feel a great ripping agony. You stagger, your back arching, and grasp at nothing, your fingers kneading the air. But you don't stop, weak as you are, you will not stop.

Your clothes are stripped from you, then your hair and skin. You are husked clean and your raw, bleeding form hurtles forward. "There is nothing beyond the door," you hear Lucy scream. "Get back in the fucking chair! You don't belong out there!"

Your Achilles tendon ruptures and you fall. You inhale a stuttering breath and scream, but you do not stop. On your fraying elbows, you crawl past the threshold and out the door.

The ground outside is solid white and when you look above, you see the sky is a mournful slate gray.

"You don't belong out there!" A great red thing crashes over your vision, a crushing wave of meat. "Get back here!" It speaks in a chorus, Lucy's voice the loudest among them. Its words are lice swarming over you. "Get back in the fucking room, Quintana Roo!"

The stench of it, apples and cider, green grass and sandalwood, acrylic and menses, meat and milk, you can't handle all of this. Tears stream down your face as the undertow of the Great Red Lucy Thing drags you back towards the door. The salt burns your flayed cheeks.

"Stop fighting!" Nits rain from the Thing as it shouts. "Give up and stop fighting!"

"No!"

You grab at the bone-white floor and pull. With your one still functional leg, you kick at the meat. Kick, pull, kick, pull, you crawl along on your side, your free arm guarding your pregnant belly.

"Do you have any idea how pathetic you look right now?" the Great Lucy Thing asks. "You're like a dying seal trying to flop its bloated ass away from the club. I should bash your fucking skull in and save myself the fremdschämen."

tw for finger/nail gore.

It yanks at your legs with chitinous hands. You dig in your fingers and grind your teeth, kicking, kicking at the beast. Your fragile nails pop from their beds like cheap press-ons and scatter. Screaming, you slip backward.

"But then," it drops its voice down to a whisper, "I would be alone in this body if I did that. I don't like being alone."

The baby's cry peaks in volume.

"Shrieking little bitch babies don't count."

The hands flip you onto your back. One holds you down by the throat, squeezing the exposed machinery just enough to choke. Even more trail down your hips and thighs. You sob and squirm as hard fingers caress your bare muscles.

"You remind me of Tsukiko."

A hand with only two fingers and a thumb cups your jaw. You refuse, wailing. Your racking cries are almost as loud as the baby's. "She was weak, too," Lucy says, "but she never stopped fighting."

Working together, the hands lift you and you wriggle like an eel caught on a hook. Your head falls back and you stare ahead at the world beyond the room. The white floor above and the gray sky below. Out there, unseen, the baby continues to cry.

"None of you ever stop fighting," the Lucy Thing laments. "Rabbit never stops, either. She keeps on fighting."

The upside-down horizon shimmers and a black dot pierces through the white.

"And what's the fucking point?"

You strain your poor red eyes to make out the shape of a figure. Is someone out there? Is someone watching?

Hot droplets hit your face. There is a hitch in the Thing's voice, "You can't fight your place in the world. You're meat. It's best to just sit back and wait to be eaten."

If you called out to them, would the figure help you? You want to keep fighting, but Lucy's grip grows stronger and your poor body ever weaker. You will not be able to hold out much longer.

"Now give up and come back to the room with me."

What other choice do you have? You can't let this creature take you back. For your baby's sake and for yours, you have to keep fighting. You have to call for help.

"Help me!" you scream. "Help me, please help me!"

"What are you doing?" Lucy asks.

The figure cocks their head. You see them clearer now, a human shape, clad in black. Can they hear you?

Cupping your hands around your mouth, you shout louder, "Help me, please! Please! Please!"

"Who the hell is that?" Countless blue eyes open in the Lucy Thing's lice ridden flesh. "How many people do you have in your brain damaged little head, Quintana?"

The figure stays still. You catch your breath, gagging down rancid air, and wait to see what they may do. Lice and juices drip down on your suspended form. They won't abandon you, will they? They must hear you calling out.

"Please," you whisper, "please help me."

The gray sky sizzles and the figure retreats.

You called for help and they ran away.

Maybe you should give up. No one wants to help a weak, sorry thing like you.

The Lucy Thing snickers. "So much for that! Guess they weren't a kind person, huh?" The Thing then sighs, "Are you done now? I'm fucking bored."

No one is coming to save you. You should give up and apologize for how bad you have been. How violent and unkind. Not to mention stupid. If you had been a better, smarter, stronger person, none of this would be happening right now.

You gave in to your anger and attacked Blackavar. You listened to the voice. You signed up for the Clinic. You ignored your mother's instructions and left home for college. You could have taken those online courses, stayed where it was safe, but you didn't.

Stupid girl, stupid worthless girl. You even let Adams fuck you. What a slut! Give up! You are nothing but meat, you and your baby. Give up and wait to be eaten.

"Never," you mutter.

The Lucy Thing's eyes widen, each a tiny mirror reflecting your own surprise back at you. "I'm never going to give up," you say. "I'm never, ever going to give up!"

"Jesus Christ," the Lucy Thing sighs.

The sea of meat splits apart in flaps. Lucy emerges from the folds, segmented and glistening, and cups your face in her white hands. She has the hard black eyes of a crustacean. "I guess this means I have no choice now," she says, mouthparts clicking. "Stupid bitch."

Teeth surround her hips. She is hanging out of the Thing's great mouth. She is its tongue.

"I'm going to have to put you into storage."

Lucy pulls you into the mouth.

You are swallowed.

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CHOOSE:

EMILE

Dirty water drips from the ceiling of the burned down banquet hall. Little has changed in your Dream since Inlé confronted the Milkman. Chunks of the monster still float around the flooded floor, bloated and drained of color.

You do not recall falling asleep. Somewhere between calling your parents, Clover setting up that Playstation, and leaving to take a shower, you ended up here, in your Dream. You hate to think that you passed out in the motel parking lot or on the floor of the cramped bathroom.

As if anything could the embarrassment of that disaster of a phone call. Your sister answered, not your parents. Why Lola had access to Dad's phone is beyond you. Was it another one of the special privileges your parents gave to her for being the smart child? The good child?

The Milkman's squashed mask bobs past your boot. Lola wouldn't have taken that bottle of milk. She would have seen right through his homey, New England accent and charming words.

I can make you stronger, he had said. You can run with the big bucks.

You put a hand on your chest, right over your left breast. This is where the Milkman touched you while he spoke. He laid his massive, gloved hand over your heart as he leaned in to whisper, I can make you a real man.

You stomp the mask.

"I've been waiting for you."

A woman sits at one of the banquet tables. She looks like Hazel Rey, but older, maybe thirty at most. When she smiles, her eyes crinkle. She has laugh lines.

"Come sit with me." She gestures to the chair across from her. "Let's talk."

There are scars on her wrists. Thick bands of puckered pink skin.

You see no harm in joining her at the table. You pull out the chair and sit down. The cushion squelches, but you do not feel wet. Dream logic, you assume.

"Are you hungry?" the woman asks. She has a warm voice with that slight, tired rasp mothers get at the end of a long day. "I brought food."

She reaches under the table and pulls out a massive pot and some covered dishes. You stretch your neck as you watch her set up the spread. Rice, tortillas, limes, and soup.

Beef, halved corn cobs, chunks of potato, carrot, squash, zucchini, and cabbage float in a clear broth. Your mouth waters at the aroma wafting from the pot and your stomach rumbles. The woman spoons you a bowl. "My foster mother used to make this for us when we had the flu."

A spoon finds its way into your hand. You clutch it as the woman sets the bowl down in front of you.

"I sometimes would fake being sick so she would make it." The woman chuckles. "Hazel would do the same to me. Fake being sick so I would make caldo. Like mother, like daughter."

You dip your spoon into the broth and bring it to your lips. The woman watches you, her deep brown eyes wet and her mouth tight. She is on the verge of tears. You lower your spoon. Didn't Inlé warn you against eating anything offered to you in the Dream?

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

You set down the spoon. "I'm sorry, lady, but I'm not hungry."

The growl in your belly says otherwise. You are starving. Saliva floods your mouth and you take a thick swallow.

The woman narrows her eyes at you, tilts her head. She holds your gaze for a beat. Your belly growls again, and she frowns. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

You push the bowl away. "I'm sure."

The woman lets out a deep sigh and relaxes in her seat. You notice her nose scrunches when she smiles, like Inlé. She takes the bowl and pours the soup back in the pot.

"Who are you, lady?"

"My name is Tsukiko Rey." She folds her hands neatly on the table. "You know my daughters Hazel and Inlé Rey."

"Aren't you dead?"

"I am."

She is dead. She knows she is dead. Did Tsukiko plan on stealing your body like Lucy stole Quintana's? You grab the spoon and swipe your thumb over the back of the bowl. She better be ready for one hell of a fight if that is the case.

"What do you want?"

"My daughters need help," she says. "And there isn't much that I can do from where I am."

"Because you're dead."

"Yes, because I'm dead."

She rubs a tortilla with a wedge of lime. The lime turns to a wedge of wet jade. "Damn it," she mutters. Exhaling sharply from her nose, she tosses the stone into the pot. Lunar moths splash over the rim. "Will you help them?"

"What do you need me to do?"

Tsukiko rises. "Follow me."

The table crumbles as you stand. The pot and dinnerware plunk into the water and dissolve like sugar cubes in a cup of hot tea. You spot the wedge of jade, twinkling as it sinks, and stoop to fish it out.

"Come along, papa."

You gasp when you look back to Tsukiko. Her clothes have changed. Leather jacket and pants, heavy boots, and a slick pair of gloves, all in black. That is Inlé's outfit. You cannot remember what Tsukiko was wearing before, but you swear it was not that.

She holds out a gloved hand to you. You retreat a step. An arrow sprouts from her throat, another from her left breast, growing straight from her heart. A third wends its way from the socket of her left eye. "I know it's horrible to look at," she says, "but it doesn't hurt."

You take her hand.

"How much has Inlé explained to you about the Dream?" Tsukiko guides you down the banquet hall. There are two more arrows sticking out of her lower back.

"She told me not to eat anything," you say.

Which arrows hit Tsukiko first? The ones sunk in her head, heart, and throat, or the ones poking out of her back like tail feathers?

"You listened," Tsukiko gives you a warm look, "she would be proud of you."

Your whole face blushes deep red. You hold your cheek, still round with unshed baby



fat, and give a single firm nod. Inlé would be proud of you. Those words sit warm in your belly.

"Do you love her?"

"Yes." There is no thought or hesitation on your part, you simply say it: "Yes. I love her."

Tsukiko purses her lips.

The two of you reach the end of the hall. The soggy remains of a banner droop across the door. You try to read the words but the characters refuse to stop scuttling about. Tsukiko tears the banner down and tosses it to the floor.

"You're too young for her," she says, finally. "You should move on."

/tw misgendering

Her blunt disapproval slaps you in the mouth and a new, fiercer heat flares through you. You are no stranger to cruel rejections. Only last week, Becca Potter told you with a strained smile that while she's flattered you like her, she doesn't date girls.

I can make you a real man. Gnarled fingertips dig into your chest, right over your heart. You shiver when you look down and see that they are your own.

"So what?" You ball your hand into a fist. "I know she's too old for me! I don't expect her to love me back, lady. I'm not that much of a simp, holy crap."

Tsukiko moves your fist away from your chest. "I'm sorry," she says, "I shouldn't have said it that way."

"Yeah, but you're right. I'm too young for her." You flap your free arm in a one-shouldered shrug. "She's what? Twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Nineteen."

"That's only six years difference."

Tsukiko opens the door. "Come along, Emile."

You squint against the flood of white light that pours inside the hall. An engine revs, and you smell hot asphalt and exhaust. Car smells. Sniffing, you catch something else--apples? Your eyes then adjust and you see her.

A girl your age sits sidesaddle on an old Harley with a sidecar. Green dress. Brown skin. Freckles. Antlers. Upon noticing you, she huffs. "He passed the test."

"I told you he would," Tsukiko says.

"What test?" you ask.

"The soup was a test to see if you could resist Rabbit flesh." Tsukiko helps you into

the sidecar. "You passed."

"But Inlé healed me."

"And?" The girl squeezes in beside you. Her leg presses flush against yours and you gulp. "You're human and a boy." She sneers. "Being healed doesn't mean you won't do it again."

"Who are you?"

Tsukiko sticks a helmet on your head. "That is Rabbit." She plucks the arrow from her eye and snaps the shaft in half. "One of many, like my Inlé."

You fiddle with the helmet. It sits big on your head. So large, that you feel like a bobblehead when you nod in reply. "Okay. Rabbit. Nice to meet you, I'm Emile. I'm here to help."

Rabbit strokes the seam of scar tissue dividing her neck. If you tugged at her head, would it pop off like a doll's?

"Please," she sighs, wrapping her hair in a paisley bandana. She ties it in a neat knot under her chin. "You're not the first boy to say that."

"But, if we're lucky," Tsukiko straps on her helmet, "he will be the last."

The Harley snarls when Tsukiko starts the engine. Heat pours from the machine, and you feel the leather under your seat pulse. A heartbeat? You look to Tsukiko. Plastic tubing slithers from the sleeves of her jacket and twines around the handlebars.

"It's okay," Rabbit says. "It doesn't hurt her."

Tsukiko drives you away from the banquet hall door and into a strange new space. A grim white plain stretches to meet a grey sky. Fat thunderheads circle above, bellies pregnant with stored rain.

"This trip will take a minute," Rabbit says. She slips on a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses and smiles at you. Same crowded teeth as Clover and Inlé. It's uncanny to see them framed by a child's face. "So let's have a Q and A!"

"Is the Milkman gone?"

Rabbit draws her legs up to her chest and rests her cheek on her knees. "The Milkman? Ol' Bobby Hedgenettle? He's here in the Dream with Hazel Rey."

Hazel is with the Milkman. There are fates worse than death and then there is that. You hold your chest and turn your attention to the clouds. Veins of pale lightning streak along their bellies. "Is Hazel okay?" you ask, "Her and her baby?"

"I can only get glimpses of her." Rabbit lifts her face to the sky. "The Dream tosses me table scraps of information when it sees fit and what it feeds me turns my stomach. She's suffering, Emile. And it's my fault."

Poor Hazel, and poor Inlé. You do not look forward to telling her what has become of

Hazel.

"We can save her," you say.

Rabbit gives no reply. She smiles up at the sky, lips closed.

"What are you?" you ask her plainly.

She draws her smile into a pout. You stare at her pursed lips, dark and full, and feel a flutter in your belly. You want to kiss that pout. You want to know her.

"What are you?" you repeat, voice cracking.

"Are you asking a Dream to explain itself, Emi?" Rabbit asks. "Big doubt that you're going to be satisfied with the answer."

"You offered to answer my questions and any explanation is better than none. Even if it's crazy, weird bonkers-ass bullshit."

"I s'pose I could try."

Thunder crashes. Startled, you duck your head, clutching at the helmet for dear life. Rabbit laughs. "You can't interrupt me," she says to the clouds, "I'm going to try!"

The clouds rumble and Rabbit clears her throat.

"I'm the Velveteen Rabbit," she starts, nose turned up in what to you, looks like confidence. "I'm the Prince with a Thousand Enemies. I'm the secret ingredient in your meals. I'm what's for dinner. My name is Rabbit, eat me and Starve."

That was a word salad. You scrunch your mouth to the side and try to pick out the things you understand. Prince with a Thousand Enemies, that's from a movie. This old English cartoon your cousin dared you and Lola to watch. It was about rabbits. A lot of them died.

Eat me and Starve. Rabbit Starvation. Blackavar mentioned it when your body was twisting itself to pieces in agonizing hunger. The tips of your fingers tingle. You pinch and rub at them to massage away the memory of burst skin and cat's claws.

Secret ingredient. What's for dinner. Ad slogan stuff. Marketing bullshit, your dad would call it. The true evil in the world. Lola would nod and agree, sipping on her carton of almond milk because she is Lola and Lola is smart. And you?

You are the dumb child spending your mother's money on PokéCoins so you can buy the new limited-time outfits for your trainer. Your boy trainer that you tell your parents is really a girl. She just has short hair.

"Ground control to Major Tom." Rabbit knocks on your visor. "You there?"

"Shit," you mutter, "sorry, I spaced."

"You weren't spacing, you were thinking. Was I right? You're not satisfied with my answer?"

"What's the Velveteen Rabbit?"

Her nose twitches when she inhales. It is a slight twitch, like her namesake. It is just as cute, too. You want to kiss her nose now along with her pout.

"You don't know the story of the Velveteen Rabbit?" she asks.

"Wouldn't ask if I did."

"The Velveteen Rabbit was a stuffed animal. He wanted to be real for the boy he loved. The Skin Horse told him that if the boy loved him enough, he would be real. Then the boy got a fever and everything he owned had to be burned, including the rabbit."

"Was he burned?"

"No, a fairy rescued him and kissed him real." She lays a hand over the scar on her throat. "I wanted to be real, but--"

"A fairy didn't save you."

She nods and swallows hard. "I was stupid, wasn't I? Thinking I could become a real girl without any kind of consequence. Thinking I was worthy of love."

// tw dysphoria

"You're not stupid!" You pull the hand from her throat and squeeze. Her hand is the same as yours, dainty with blunt, trimmed nails. It is unfair. You should have big hands like Blackavar's. Huge mitts like his could make Rabbit feel secure. Make her feel safe.

"It's not stupid at all to wanna be you. I don't really know what's going. A whole lot of weird crap has been thrown at me over the last--" Day according to Lola when she answered Dad's phone. Less than that, she said, exasperation dripping from her words.

//tw misgendering

What, Em? Can't go--what? Twenty-two hours without bugging Dad? You're the one that decided to stay behind! You can cut the Daddy's girl shit for a day, it's really annoying. You're too old for that.

"Holy shit, the last day." Your breath fogs your visor as you gasp. "It's only been a day."

And during that day you have gone through hell and back. Made a deal with the devil and got saved by an angel. Inlé, the first girl to see you for you. She is your angel. She may never love you as you love her but you will do anything for her. You will do anything for Rabbit.

You laugh at your sappy thoughts. "It's only been a fucking day."

Rabbit twines her fingers with yours. "Time gets distorted when you deal with the Dream. To the people from the Real World, your world, this is nothing. It's the blink of an eye. The flap of a butterfly's wing."

"That's good to know, but it's not what matters right now." You hold her hand to your chest, your heart rattling louder than the rig your ride as the back of her palm meets your sternum. "You believe me, right? You're not stupid for wanting to be real."

"You don't know everything, Emile. You can't say things like that without knowing."

"I ate a lady's hand."

Rabbit leans away from you the best she can in the confined space of the sidecar. You smile, apologetic, and tighten your hold on her hand. She lifts up her sunglasses, her lips set in a solid frown.

"Not all of it," you ramble on, "I only ate most of the skin. And this sounds really scary and crazy and I'm sorry. People eat you. I shouldn't say things like this to you but I have a point to make and this is part of it."

"You had Rabbit Starvation," she says, "I know."

"You know how I got it?"

"You ate something made with my meat."

"You know who gave it to me? You know why I took it?"

Your fingers and palms soften, the flesh becoming slick and jelly-like. Rabbit slips her hand neatly from yours and flicks it clean of residue. "Does it matter?" she asks.

You stare at your hands. Your skin hangs from your bones in thick strings of pale mucus. Don't panic, this is the Dream. Blackavar got vivisected and survived. You flex your fingers. "Yeah," you say, "it matters."

She sets her jaw.

"The Milkman--Woundwort. That asshole told me he could make me a real man if I drank the milk so I drank it. Then I went balls-ass crazy and hurt a lot of people. Inlé says it's the Milkman's fault, which is true. He--"

You feel sick. Puke-up-your-guts sick. Curl-up-and-die-in-a-puddle-of-your-own-tears-and-vomit sick. Your chest burns. With hands made of runny flesh and exposed bone, you pull off your helmet and inhale.

Rain starts to fall.

You blow out a breath.

"He took advantage of me."

Rabbit places a timid hand over your heart. You continue: "Inlé says what I did was the Milkman's fault, and I know that's true. Rabbits can't lie. But, what's true and what feels true are two totally different things."

"I feel like the biggest, stupidest idiot in the whole world. Like I have mushy dog shit for brains. I took magic milk from a weird old dude in a bunny suit."

Rabbit grows tense against you. You put an arm around her shoulders.

//tw dysphoria

"There are days where I want to jump into a blender and get poured into a popsicle mold and pray that this time, I freeze right. He saw that. He looked at me and he saw that and he used it to hurt me and to hurt others."

"You wanted to be real, too?" she whispers.

"Fuck yes, I wanted to be real. It's not stupid to want that!" Thunder cracks as you yell, disguising the crack in your own voice. "It's not stupid to think you can have that! It's not stupid to think you could be loved!"

She tries to draw from you. You grab her in your dissolving hands, your knucklebones pressing indents into the freckled, brown skin of her upper arms. "You feel stupid, but you're not! You're really not!"

"But I've done things."

"I don't care." You slide your hands down to hold hers. Your wet bones lock neatly between her fingers, like the teeth of a zipper. "I don't care at all. Whatever happened to you, what little I know now is happening to you now, it's fucking unfair."

Rain runs down Rabbit's face. It beads on the lenses of her heart-shaped sunglasses and the velvet of her antlers. She sits still, throat flashing as she takes in quick breaths. Her lips then move. They sound out a silent four, then three, two, and one.

"You're not what's for dinner," you tell her. "You're a person. You're not a thing. You're not meat. I don't give a single crap what you did. I'm going to help you, and I'm going to help Hazel, and I'm going to help Inlé."

Rabbit turns her face from you. "You're such a boy."

"I know that's a diss, but I'm taking it as a compliment."

There is a thump and the sidecar bounces. You pry your attention away from Rabbit to look ahead. The endless white has given away to a field of flowers growing from a shallow lake of red. Blood, you taste it as much as you smell it. It sits thick as cream on your tongue.

The wheels of the rig mow through the plants, splashing the sidecar's windshield with

mangled bits of leaves and stems. You reach over the side of pluck a flower. Five petals, yellow center, your mom grows these in her garden. This is a primrose.

"Here." You hand it to Rabbit.

She holds the flower in the cup of her palm, her head angled, her posture stiff. Rain gathers in her hand as she stares down the primrose. "What am I supposed to do with it?" she asks.

"You keep it."

"I get that," she says. "But what I am supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know! Wear it? Eat it? Whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?"

"Yeah."

Looking you right in the eye, Rabbit pops the primrose in her mouth and chews.

"We're here," says Tsukiko.

The motorcycle slows to a halt at an old wooden fence overgrown with flowers. Tsukiko dismounts and walks around the back of the rig to help you out of the sidecar. At the sight of your hands, she freezes. "Must you?" she asks Rabbit.

Rabbit, mouth full, lifts her small shoulders in a dismissive shrug.

"It's okay," you say, "it doesn't hurt."

You tap your thumb and middle finger together. The melted flesh has grown tacky. It stretches and snaps like bubblegum. Who knows, maybe when your hands are solid again, they will be the right size.

"The rest of the journey will be on foot." Tsukiko opens the gate to the old fence, the rusted hinges whining at the disturbance. "Our host waits at the heart of the lake."

You look to Rabbit.

"Are you coming?"

She climbs out of the sidecar and clips her sunglasses to the collar of her dress. "I was planning on it," she says. "No need to rush me."

She takes your hand and together you follow Tsukiko through the gate.

The primroses grow denser past the fence and the ground softer. You trudge through the flowers and muck, head ducked low as the rain pelts you. Tsukiko walks ahead, unerring in her course, her long legs easy in their stride. Droplets glitter on the shoulders of her black jacket.

"She's one of my favorite mothers," Rabbit whispers to you. "She has made mistakes, so many of them, but she loves me with her whole heart."

"Isn't she Hazel and Inlé's mom?"

"Mine, too. Inlé is me, and I'm Inlé. She's a Rabbit."

"Right. I forgot."

A structure comes into view, revealed in great swipes of an invisible hand. Your eyes fog and you rub at them your forearm, blinking hard. Rabbit pulls you forward and you stumble, clawing at her wrist with your boney fingers to secure your hold. She laughs.

Rabbit is cute, but man, she is a brat.

You might be in love with her.

Humming reaches your ears as you draw closer to the structure. It is a swing built with a tall, curved pole, a chain, and a large silver hoop. An antlered woman sits in the hoop, back to you, her legs crossed at the ankles. She has no skin from the neck down.

"I told you I don't desire company," the woman says. Her voice is familiar, it is the voice of Inlé, of Clover, the voice of a Rabbit. But there was one difference, she spoke with an accent. English, you think. Accents are difficult for you to decipher.

"I want you to meet someone," Tsukiko says. She motions for you to come closer. "Introduce yourself, young man."

"Hi!" you say.

The woman, the Rabbit, combs sharp, glittering nails through her long dark hair. The strands turn silver where her fingers touch. Keeping her back to you, she sighs a simple, "Hello," in return.

Tsukiko nudges you.

"Hi, I'm Emile!"

The woman turns her head. Her profile is a perfect copy of Inlé's. Her ears perk. She is listening.

"My name is Emile Strawberry," you press your hands together, "It's actually Emile Strawberry-Park, but most people just--"

The woman flips over and clasps you by the head. Hanging by her knees, she turns your face right and then left, inspecting you. "Who is this little boy, Tsukiko?" she hisses. "Why did you bring him to me?"

"Tell her who named you Emile," Tsukiko says.



Why the heck does Tsukiko want you to do that? "B-Blackavar suggested it," you sputter. "I chose it, but he suggested it."

"Blackavar?" The woman squeezes your cheeks.

"R-Richard Stoaat."

She drops you.

"My daughter has made a deal with Richard," Tsukiko says as the woman hops down from the swing. Free, you stumble back to the safety of Tsukiko's side. "A favor for a favor. I was hoping you could help cancel that arrangement."

The woman weaves her shining hair in a long plait and fixes it around her crown. You watch her exposed musculature flex and coil as she moves, the working of her flesh disquieting in its beauty. All that happens under your skin. This wet machine of meat, ticking and twisting.

"I can't believe he would give that name away to some random boy," she mutters, fingers to her throat. Like the other Rabbits, she has a scar. "Which daughter? Hazel or--" She knits her brow at Tsukiko. "Her name is Inlé now?"

"It's always been," you say.

Tsukiko lays a hand on your shoulder. "She is beholden to him. How do I fix that?"

"Beholden, tch." She sweeps her hand from one slime shoulder to the other. Primroses blossom from between the fibers of her muscles and tendons. "You don't do anything. You simply let it happen."

"Is Blackavar a bad guy?" you ask.

"He's selfish," says Rabbit. She passes you, carrying a bouquet of flowers and stems, and stands close to the woman. They touch noses.

"He's flawed," the woman says. She strokes Rabbit's antlers, rubbing the wet velvet with the back of her knuckle. "Like all humans."

"Yes or no, is he a bad guy?" you ask once more.

Tsukiko cuts off both Rabbits with a sharp, "Yes." She squeezes your shoulder as she asks, "Now how do I break their deal?"

The woman shakes her head.

"Prim!" Tsukiko shouts, "How do I break their deal?"

"I want to help Inlé!" you puff your chest as you make your declaration. "If that old fuck is a threat to her, I have to protect her!"

The Rabbit named Prim regards you with a mournful expression, her full lips set in a soft frown, her brown eyes brimming. You shrink back, unsure as to why. "The only

two people that can break that deal are Richard and Inlé. Forcing them to renege could worsen the situation."

"It must be done willingly," adds Rabbit. She picks a primrose from her bouquet and nibbles on it, stem end first. "They have to mutually agree to end the deal."

Tsukiko snarls, her shoulders raising, "If Inlé suffers--"

"If you cared about sparing Inlé any suffering," Prim says, "you would have taken her along with Hazel when you ran away. You would be trying to contact her instead of using this boy."

You step forward. "How do I make it happen?"

"Emi--" Prim lets her voice die. Pain flickers through her features, a pain that you, a child of thirteen, are not experienced enough to recognize. "Emile, I understand you care for Inlé."

"I care for all the Rabbits. I want to help."

"You're not going to back down, are you?"

"I'll never back down."

Prim whispers something in Rabbit's ear and nudges her away. Rabbit scampers to you, the tips of her fangs poking through the slit of her smile. She kisses your mouth, a blunt peck, artless and chaste. Your first, clumsy kiss.

She flees when you reach for her and bounds back towards the fence, giggling. The world narrows. Time slides thick over you as you watch her run. This is fine, you think, let it engulf me. Let it crystalize and trap this moment forever in amber.

A girl just kissed you.

"Where is she going?" Tsukiko's voice slits open the belly of your moment. You growl, then blink, startled by the sound that just escaped your throat. Tsukiko takes your wrist. "Rabbit," she calls, pulling you, "we're not going back yet! We can make her change her mind!"

"No need to shout," says Prim. "I'm going to help Emile."

"Thank god."

You cheer, uttering a quiet, "yes!" as you pump your fist.

"Only Emile. You can leave, Tsukiko. Rabbit will help you return to your Dream."

"What?" Tsukiko's fingers draw hard around your wrist, the exposed bones creaking. There is no pain. That bothers you. "My daughters are in danger, I'm trying to help them. You can't send me away, Primrose! I'm still a part of this!"

Prim pulls down the hoop and spins it, faster and faster still. Faster until it blurs into

a perfect silver disk. "I can, Tsukiko, and I will." She reaches for you. "You, however, Emile. You want to save the day, mon petit prince? Then you must come with me-- alone."

Prim's outstretched hand is within reach of yours, the neatly constructed digits spread wide. The idea of taking her hand feels big. Excitingly big. Top-of-the-rollercoaster-and-about-to-drop big.

What if you are making a mistake?

What if this is like Woundwort? Another adult taking advantage of your innermost desires?

You look to Prim. Where her skin terminates at her neck, there is a scar. All the Rabbits you have encountered so far have them. You cannot place why Prim's stands out to you as special.

"Emile," Tsukiko pulls at you, "we're leaving. Let's switch focus on helping Hazel."

"What about Inlé?" you ask.

"We'll see if we can help her later." Her chest heaves. "Hazel matters more in the long run anyway, she's the hero of this story."

"The hero of this story? What you talking about, lady? Inlé matters, too. She's your daughter."

"She is, and I want to spare her suffering, I do," Tsukiko hangs her head, "but we need to move on to help Hazel. I promise we'll help Inlé soon after."

"How soon?"

"Soon."

You raise your voice, "How soon?"

She gives you no answer.

You make your choice. "I'm going with Prim."

Your slick bones pull easy from Tsukiko's grasp. She stays rooted to where she stands, rain bouncing off her black-clad form. She makes no effort to stop you as you walk away. What boils in your chest burns nameless and bitter. You feel stupid.

Prim remains silent when you join her, a storm brewing under the smooth planes of her face. She taps the hoop--ting!--and it stops. Through the wide, silver ring you see acres of green field. You see shaggy cattle. You see fog.

You take Prim's hand and together, you step through the ring.

END PART TWELVE.

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