



 **dreams of rabbits**  @therabbitdies

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THE RABBIT DIED - PART FIFTEEN

CONTENT WARNING: Depictions of abuse, cannibalism, death, gender dysphoria, gore, pregnancy, racism (responded to appropriately by the cast), and vomit. Mentions of/references to CSA, rape, sexual assault, and sex trafficking.

They call it empty nest syndrome.

You wake with a head full of cobwebs. Your dreams cling, sticky and wet, to your thoughts as you sit up in bed. Beside you sleeps your wife, Bea, and the droopy-jowled basset hound she adopted after your youngest moved to Philly.

In your dreams, you flew a charter flight across a dense forest of pines, their branches interlocked. Your bad arm pricked pins and needles straight down to the bone. The sky shimmered pink. An ocean of red clouds and toxic green butterflies charged the cockpit.

You dreamt that the world was ending.

She mutters and rolls over, the dog copying her movements. You fix her silk cap before your pull back the covers, swing your legs over the side of the bed, and rise. The house is quiet. Usually, your youngest would be up playing a game.

Your youngest works nightshift or did work it, and on her off nights, your kid played video games. Old ones, new ones. Horror games were her favorite. She even hooked up your ancient Playstation 1 and 2 and set them up to stream games for Twitch.

Your smart girl made streaming into a career. Now, she has moved out. Same with your two sons, the electrician and the chef. Your nest is empty and bless that dopey dog, but he does not fill the gap your children left behind.

The dog, sensing your departure, grumbles awake and jumps off the bed. The click of his short nails follows you downstairs to the kitchen.

Those girls you taxied tonight, the light skin girl and the twins, looked close to your daughter's age. Maybe younger. You wonder if their parents know they're gone. Are they missing from their nests? That Asian kid with them most certainly had to be.

Who the hell was that Brit with them? Armed with a thick roll of cash and gun, he must be up to no good. Should have cold-cocked that prick the second he reached

behind his back for his pistol.

But, you did not. You know better.

You slipped that girl your old business card. If she has the chance, she will call it. Your gut told you as much as you watched her walk away.

If your sons were here, they would have gone to that hotel themselves to make sure things were okay. No holding out to wait and see. Direct action only, your boys.

You miss them.

You flick on the kitchen lights and the bulbs illuminate in succession. When the last lamp snaps to life, you curse. There is a stranger in your house.

"Who the hell?"

The stranger, a girl in an MCR shirt and short denim cut-offs, shushes you with a finger to her lips. She bears an uncanny resemblance to the twins, with big brown eyes and full lips that rest in a pout. She could be their sister, a long lost triplet.

With antlers.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The girl picks up the dog's water bowl and dumps it in the sink. Milk, which you would never give to any dog, let alone one as flatulent as your wife's, sloshes out of the saucer.

"Who are you?" you ask.

"Rabbit," is her answer, plain as plain could be. She turns on the faucet to wash the milk down the drain. "One of many."

"What are you doing in my kitchen?"

You feel foolish asking these basic questions. Who, what, and maybe a why depending upon what Rabbit says next. But, they are suitable questions, who is this girl and what is she doing in your kitchen? Why was there milk in your dog's bowl?

"I don't know, really." She takes sponge and dish soap and washes out the bowl. Rinse and repeat. "The membrane is thin here, probably because you were near the others. Could be Clover's fault or Inlé's or someone else's."

You go to open the fridge for a bottle of water. Red clouds jet forth like blood from a decapitated neck. Butterflies, dozens of them, pour out with the clouds. Milk drips from them as the column of them spirals over your shoulder. "The fuck is this?"

The television turns on in the living room. You hear a news anchor joke, "Never heard of crying milk," before the voice distorts and fades. Your dog howls in distress. You do what your sons would want you to do, protect the girl.

You hurl your body between the girl and the clouds of eyes and butterflies. She grabs at your shirt. "Answer the phone!" she shouts.

"What?"

"Answer the phone!"

You wake up. Your phone is ringing, the standard jingle thunderous in the still room. You check your wife, she sleeps, and the dog sleeps with her. He rips a fart and kicks his hind leg.

The caller ID on your phone shows an unlisted number and you consider hanging up. It is late. No one calls this early for any good reason. You wish your daughter was here to pick it up, or your sons. They would do it without hesitation.

A nest really is nothing without kids in it.

You answer the phone.

"Is this Mr. Kehaar?" asks a hoarser version of the antlered girl's voice.

"Yeah," you say. "It is."

QUINTANA

LUCY SWALLOWS YOU. You plummet down the pitch-black pit of her throat, falling through veils of thin tissue. They cling to your exposed muscles, encase them. You grow fresh skin, fresh hair, fresh nails, and teeth, a whole new you.

Past the pit, you hit a slope and slide down on your back towards a bright light. Your bottom meets a mattress and you bounce and tumble onto a cold floor. You land on all fours, your palms making a sharp PLAP against the tile.

Nail polish, the scent of it assaults your nose. That and the strong, sterile odor of a clean hospital room. You spit lice. You spit pink acrylic. You spit bile and mucus. Their flavors burn your tongue all colors of the rainbow.

You vomit, and vomit, and vomit, your guts pushing out what little food you have eaten in the past few days. When you finish, you sit up on your knees and look around.

You are back in the Clinic.

The Clinic. You touch the familiar cracked tile, faded jade, and crawl to the bed. The blankets give when you grab them, and you slip, landing hard on your bare bottom. Attempt number two is a success. You grasp the fitted cover and climb up onto the mattress.

Everything aches from the tips of your extremities to the roots of your hair. Your skin burns. Your muscles throb, knotted and stiff.

You take your time to recover your strength. Rushing is pointless, you are on your own now. It is up to you to protect your baby, it is up to you to escape.

As you lay on the bed, your body mending, you look around the room. This is your room; the dresser is decorated with the washi stickers Dr. Adams gifted you and your stuffed bunny sits on the top. Books sit in a neat stack on the plain wood desk.

Even though you dropped out of college, Dr. Adams encouraged you to learn. He bought you codices to read and dotted journals to fill with your study notes. He gave you pens, stickers, and these pretty highlighters imported from Japan. He spoiled you.

He used you.

Nurse Lucy gave you things. Pillows, a knitted quilt, the bunny plush, and clothes. The giant pink sweater she gave you hangs from the back of the desk chair. There are little white rabbits stitched into the pattern. They wear green ribbons around their necks.

She used you.

You leave the bed to get dressed, panties, non-slip socks, and the sweater. Nothing else in your dresser fits. Your belly has grown too big. You tie up your hair in a scrunchie and check the desk. There are a pair of scissors in the top drawer.

The scissors chill your hand as you take them. You weigh them in your palm, the cold burrowing deep into your skin as you inspect them. Heavy, solid, with long blades and black handles, tailor scissors. Your father used ones like these at his dress shop.

You flip them over and gasp. There is a word scrawled on the blade in gold marker, CUCO. Your father's name. These are your papa's scissors.

You do not mean to cry, the tears happen on their own. You kiss the blades. The cold stings your lips, and you taste the burnt orange of iron, but you do not care. Somehow, your father heard you. Somehow, he is helping you.

Bolstered by your find, you turn to face the door. It looks the same as you remember, white with a green frame. The Clinic rooms were kept locked, a fact you avoided questioning Dr. Adams about for the sake of being seen as a good girl. You regret not asking.

The baby in your belly wriggles and stretches. You place your hand over her and she squirms in response. You feel a flutter; your baby has hiccups.

You turn the doorknob. To your delight, you find it unlocked. Might be wise to leave the room while you have the chance..

You are not always a wise girl.

Leaving the door, you backtrack to the desk. You rummage through the drawers, sort through your box of stationery, and shake out your books. All on the chance that there might be other hidden gifts to discover. Abuelo's knife. Tío Chico's lighter. A gun.

One of your deceased relatives must have a gun to lend you.

You find little of interest. Paper, pens, stickers, tape, and fancy markers, such as your Japanese highlighters. You read the label, Mildliners. Too bad you cannot take these with you. They are pretty.

The dresser provides you with not much else. Clothes that no longer fit, sheets, pillowcases, and the stuffed bunny. You hold the bunny. It is different from what you remember, the collar. Before, when Lucy gave it to you, it wore a green ribbon. Now it wears a medical bracelet.

You set the bunny down, you might come back to it. There are other places here to check first, such as the bed. You angle your body best as you can with your baby bump to peek under the bed. There, sitting under the frame, is your busted up, old backpack.

You can use a backpack. With your foot, big toe hooked in the handle, you drag the bag out from under the bed. You set it on top of the mattress and pack the Mildliners in the front pocket and the bunny in the back. The scissors you keep on hand.

The door opens.

Dr. Adams enters.

It is the doctor as you last saw him, squashed, and broken, and with his white coat soaked in his juices. He carries his guts in a sling tied to his back. His colon connects his mouth to the mass of organs like a breathing tube. It undulates with each breath he takes.

Dr. Adams ignores you, whether out of blindness or indifference, you cannot tell. He drags in a mop and rolling bucket and starts to mop the floor.

Maybe now would be a good time to go.

You sidestep around the doctor as he runs his mop through the wringer. He left the door cracked. He must not care about your possible escape. You push it open the rest of the way.

Hmm, hmm.

Adams lets out a feeble murmur, hmm, hmm. His breathing tube inflates and deflates, and the mass of guts on his back squirts. They release noises, farts, burbles, as he whines at you again.

Hmm, hmm.

He wants your attention.

"What is it, Doctor?" you ask.

Dr. Adams takes one of your notebooks and colored pencils and writes. Once he

finishes, he passes you the book. You are unable to read it. He wrote his note in a doctor's loose, indecipherable scrawl. It is all squiggles and loops.

"I don't understand." You hand him back the notebook and he inhales through his nose, agitated. He tears out the sheet and tries again, this time writing slower.

From the hall, comes a shuffle and a groan and a stink that ruffles the hairs on your arms. Fecal matter, perfume, and pink, lots of pink and urine. You pinch your nose, eyes burning, and rush to shut the door.

Dr. Adams cuts you off by thrusting his mop in your path. Hmm, hmm. He shoves his new note in front of your face.

DON'T GO OUT THERE, it read. NURSE LUCY WILL KILL YOU IF YOU LEAVE THE ROOM.

"Then how do I get out?"

Adams shows you his ID badge. Hmm, hmm--he taps the plastic rectangle, laminated in clear slime. The picture is of him, his pug-nose scrunched in disgust or contempt. You found him attractive once, now, with what you know, you are not so sure.

"I need an ID?" you ask.

His head bobs, a nod. You guessed right. He writes you a new note. I CAN GIVE YOU MINE IF YOU DO ME A FAVOR.

A favor, he always asked you for those. Do me a favor and I'll tell you a secret, sweet Quintana. Do me a favor and I'll let you break Clinic protocol. "I'm pregnant," you say, "I shouldn't do that kind of favor for you anymore. Might hurt the baby."

He shakes his head hard enough to knock his glasses askew.

"You don't want sex?"

He writes: I WANT YOU TO TAKE A LETTER WITH YOU. MY CONFESSION.

You blurt, "Sure you don't want sex?" and kick yourself for asking such a question. But, can he blame you? He used you, he lied to you, you need confirmation that he has no hidden intentions.

As if his word means anything. He promised you that the baby you carried would have a loving home, loving parents. Your baby is a special blessing, he claimed. She will bring great joy and spiritual enrichment to one lucky couple.

And the money, there was a promise of money, would help you cover your father's medical debts and buy him a proper gravestone.

What a fool you were for buying into Dr. Adams's lies.

Dr. Adams, to answer your question, crams the badge into your hands. His face and tube swell and redden, and he shakes his fists at you. They hover inches away from the sides of your head, the air between vibrating with his rage.

You stomp--thump.

He trips over his big feet to escape you. He stumbles back to the desk, hands clasped and pressed to his forehead in supplication. And you, well, you stand there. You stand there and hide your face in your hair.

Adams writes his letter in one of your notebooks. You wait behind your curtain and listen to the pen scratch and his juices plip upon the paper. When he finishes, he gives you the book. His confession fills every page.

You read the first few lines:

I, ADAMS, AM A CLONE. NUMBER FIVE OF THREE HUNDRED AND TWO.

He yanks the letter away and, with a rough shove, turns you towards the door. You struggle as he sticks his confession in your backpack.

"GOMPH!"

Adams casts you from the room. You hold your arms out to the side for balance as you stumble-run into the hall. Head down, as if you were pretending to be an airplane. You bump against a steel door.

You stand in the hall of a storage facility.

Adams rolls the door to your room shut. You wait and listen for the telltale click of a lock, and when you hear it, you nod. You accept that there is no going back. Time to move forward.

The hall runs wide. The floors, walls, and ceiling are pink, and the doors are a dishwasher gray. A foul current courses through the air here, the stench from before mixed with a new, unplaceable odor. Acid green and--

"Blond?"

Your baby kicks.

"I know that doesn't make sense to you," you pull up the collar of your sweater over your nose, "but I don't know what else to call it. It smells blond."

You walk forward down the hall, touching each door as you go. The storage units are labeled with phrases instead of numbers: AARON KISSED ME, DISAPPOINTED MOM, THAT MEAN GIRL VISITS THE SHOP. The last door hangs open by an inch.

You wonder what is inside.

The door rips from your hand when you tug on the handle, the steel whispers as it rolls upwards. Flakes of pink-sugar rust scatter about. They catch in your hair and coat the sleeves of your sweater.

Why must everything in this place be so pink? You shake out your hair and slap the rust from your clothes. The grains become bugs when they hit the floor, tiny living

sparkles with legs made of translucent filaments. They flee to the dark corners of the hall.

"I don't like this dress."

You forget the insects and take a step towards the storage unit. There, standing before a tailor's mirror pouts a girl of fourteen. A tall girl, slender, with smooth brown skin and sleek shoulders. She lifts her chin high.

"Cuco did all the adjustments you asked for."

Your mother's voice pipes in from above. You enter the unit. Racks of dresses slide up on either side of you. They corral you towards the girl and the mirror.

"I just don't like it," the girl says.

She hunches her back as she scowls at her reflection. The dress she wears, you hate how good it looks on her. The bodice fits snug at the waist. The skirt is an explosion of sparkling white ruffles.

"You're stressing us all out, you know that?" your mother's voice chides. "There are girls that would kill for a dress like this."

"Then let them fucking kill me," the girl says.

You know this girl.

Hazel.

"Hazel!"

Yanking down your collar, you waddle up to her and the mirror. The panels show you at a different time. Age fifteen, two inches shorter and up to sixty pounds heavier. Pimples the size of pearl heads dot your cheeks. Your joy at finding your friend turns to rust.

"Would you kill me for this dress?" Hazel asks.

She straightens her posture and turns. The tips of her fingers almost touch when she sets them on her waist.

"Killing is wrong," you say.

Hazel rips a bead free from the dress's modest neckline. The disapproving hiss of your mother's disembodied voice makes you shrink. "That's what you think," Hazel says. "Some people, though, deserve to be killed."

She links her hands under her chin. Her pinky fingers form a triangle, the nails connecting over her bottom lip. The lights limn the sharp lines of her cheeks with rich gold. She wears no makeup, her face shines clean and flawless in a way you find distressing.

"No," your reflection says. You touch two fingers to your throat as it adds, "No one deserves that. Don't say that."

Hazel picks and preens at her long, black hair, trying her best to smooth out the frizzy waves. Your reflection glares daggers at Hazel, cheeks puffed, and presses a fist to a plump hip. You were cute back then, and fat. Cute and fat and, outside of this situation, happy.

"What's that look for?" Hazel laughs.

She cradles the reflection's face, your face, in her hands. When did this happen? Why did you forget? And why did Hazel never bring it up?

Hazel smiles, biting her lip. "Have you changed your mind?" she teases. "Do you want to kill me?"

"No," you say, and you now know why you boxed this memory away. You brace for what follows.

"I'd rather kiss you."

You were cute back then, and fat, and happy, and awkward on a catastrophic level. Your earnest confession shocks the grin off of Hazel's face. She laughs then, high and startling loud, but somehow, it has a pleasant ring to you. She stifles it behind the back of her palm.

Your mother shouts your name, shouts at Hazel to cut it out, stop laughing. You brat, stop it. ¡Callate! ¡Callate! The shouts escalate to howls when Hazel pulls your reflection in for a kiss.

The noise chases you from the storage unit. The dresses bite at your heels as you run, their teeth made of tulle and horsehair, and claw at your hair with fingers of lace. You curl up back in the hall, shivering. Near tears. The storage unit clangs shut.

"I hate that Rey bitch," your mother's voice echoes from behind the steel door. "She's as terrible as her mother, I swear she's her fucking clone."

Clone.

I, ADAMS, AM A CLONE.

Cover up your nose. Grab the letter. Pick out a mildliner. You do these things in a flurry of shuffling, pulling, and zipping. You settle against the wall and flip open the notebook to the beginning.

I, ADAMS, AM A CLONE. NUMBER FIVE OF THREE HUNDRED AND TWO. My unfortunate existence is the result of an expedition funded by RX HEDGENETTLE LLC to the parallel reality known as the DREAM. The DREAM is the origin of the meaty delicacy I shall hereby refer to as RABBIT.

You follow along with the end of the mildliner. The stinking hall, along with the pain of ripping open a forgotten wound, distracts you. The words slide off your thoughts as

you try to read. At least you already know some of this.

Rabbits come from the Dream. People pay to eat the baby Rabbits to gain what-- powers? New Rabbits are made (conceived?) when a special person eats Rabbit meat. A person that has suffered through great grief, according to Blackavar.

MY TEAM WAS TASKED TO FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO RABBIT MEAT. AN ALTERNATIVE TO ALL MEAT IN GENERAL, ACCORDING TO OUR BENEFACTOR. A new kind of meat that could be mass-produced in a sustainable way that caused no harm to animals nor our benefactor's precious RABBITS.

New kind of meat, you highlight that phrase in a soft blue. RX Hedgenettle LLC sought to end the Rabbit trade and if you are reading this correctly, to end the meat industry in general. RX Hedgenettle. Hedgenettle. You mark that name and read on:

OUR BENEFACTOR IS A STRANGE PERSON, he appears to harbor no love for his fellow man. He built a career on being a jolly New England dairy farmer when in reality, he has the temperament of a dictator. And like the infamous Fidel Castro, our benefactor is obsessed with milk.

The door to a unit clangs open and a cat-sized mound of lice zooms into the hall. They dash past you, their legs brushing over your toes, and turn sharp left at the end of the hall. Once your heart slows, you head in the opposite direction.

Adams's confession carries on, bogged down by details of the history of American farming. Anecdotes on American consumption. He implores you to consider that he is but one in a long line of poor, white souls burdened with the weight of bettering the world.

You skip ahead until you reach the details about Adams's expedition. He lists his colleagues, Bianco, Potter, McBratney, and the Howes, and their fields of study. Together they entered the Dream via what Adams calls a wound.

THE WOUND WAS YONIC IN SHAPE, WITH PUFFY, FURRED LIPS. Stepping inside of it was like a return to the womb. We traveled a canal that brought us to a scenic field of green, the sky above us was gray and the clouds pink-violet. We grew warm. I experienced an erection.

You experienced his erection a few times.

It was nothing to note.

The hall bends to the north, there are no names on the doors here. The air grows clear and the walls less pink. Adams details the precautions his group took. They brought their own food and water and armed themselves with crossbows and iron-tipped arrows.

Your baby wiggles inside you.

Behind you, a baby laughs.

You walk faster.

THE HOWES WERE THE CAUSE OF OUR FAILURE. They insisted that we were being followed by their dead son. When Potter informed our benefactor of the Howes delusions, he demanded that we return immediately. They had lied, according to him.

He had picked us for our detached demeanors, not our skills, he said. He wanted people with cold hearts and estranged families. When the Howes applied, they told him their marriage was a loveless one on the rocks. That is why he hired them, otherwise, he would have passed.

They were on the rocks, they hated each other and remained married due to the inconvenience a divorce would cause. All because they had lost their son.

The Howes had paid to keep that detail hidden from him.

WHEN THE ORDER TO RETURN CAME THROUGH, THE HOWES KILLED POTTER, EXCEPT POTTER DIDN'T DIE. The Dream, we learned, doesn't let you die until IT wants you to die. The Howes dismembered Potter.

The image of Alice flinging Potter's testicles against a tree trunk and Dorothy crushing his windpipe under her boot still comes to me at night in my most lurid nightmares. I'm ashamed to admit, I ejaculated when I watched them tear Potter apart.

Why did Dr. Adams have to include that? No one cares about his penis, least of all you. You wish Hazel was here. She could read this instead and give you the details after.

Your lips burn.

Or you could read on and not think about Hazel.

That will work, read. Lose your thoughts in Adams's account of his journey into the Dream. You skip forward through paragraphs of over-detailed gore, of bones and bits being crunched, smashed, and torn, until you reach the aftermath of the Howes' attack.

THEY LEFT STREAMERS OF FLESH STREWN ALL OVER THE CAMP. Bianco shot Dorothy, but she ripped the arrow out and, cackling at a high pitch, stabbed her through the knee. The Howes called the name of their son as they fled. I went to give chase when I heard McBratney scream.

The pieces of Potter's body were moving. His mouth, nothing more than a scrap with lips, formed soundless words. His organs pulsed. His heart still beat. His eyes reacted to changes in light. He was alive.

We tried to put him out of his misery. We shot him in both the brain and heart with the arrows, but still, he lived. Bianco suggested we build a pyre, but McBratney and I refused out of fear of attracting the attention of a Dream creature, or worse, the Howes.

I dialed up our benefactor to ask for guidance. He said to abandon Potter. Potter belonged to the Dream now, she decides when he dies. And in spite of Bianco's

protests, we did. McBratney and I gathered Potter's scraps in a pile and left him there.

I FEEL NO REGRET OVER LEAVING HIM.

His statement does not surprise you, and that bothers you. You readily accept that Dr. Adams, who you once thought kind and loving, left a man to suffer in pieces. Why would he not? He stuck a baby in you with the intent of killing it.

You need a break from reading.

Sliding the notebook under your arm, you progress down the hall. Symbols now mark the units, long, looping squiggles and dots. Crude sketches of crustaceous insects, butterflies, and dead four-legged animals. Dead people, too.

The walls fade from pink paint to white stone tile, and the floor becomes stained concrete. Ahead, the hall opens up into an empty subway. You halt and glance behind you. The hall twists shut, squeezing you out onto the platform with a gust of stinking, pink air.

And like that, you now stand on a subway platform, your heart and head pounding as you adjust to the change in location. The different odors, the dim, slushy light, you absorb them in small measures.

"Where do we go from here, baby?" you ask.

The laughter from before rings from behind the wall where the hall once stood. There is a poster hanging there. A white, blond baby the size of a whale inhales a sea of drowning bunnies. You turn away from puking at the sight of it.

A train pulls up the platform. The doors cycle open and a woman steps out, her heels clicking on the concrete. Tall, blonde, and white, she wears little, red bottoms and a butcher's apron. Blood and smoke trickle from a bullet hole in her left thigh.

"What a day," she moans, stretching. Her foundation is a shade too dark and has not been blended right at her neck. "What. A. Day."

The woman smiles at you.

"Hello, pumpkin."

You raise the scissors. This woman, it's Lucy.

EMILE

The creature that flew over the fields terrified Prim. Shaking, she sits you down in an overstuffed armchair and rushes around, shuttering the windows and closing the curtains. You rise to help, only for her to shove you back into your seat.

You ask, "You okay?"

And Prim, her skinless hands in tight fists, says, "That thing that passed us, it was Mada. The Dream."

"Aren't we in the Dream?"

Prim pulls on a silk robe and bends to toss a log into a stone fireplace. Without a match or a spark, a fire ignites. The flames burn silver, their edges sharp, and they strike against one another like swords. Their fight casts light throughout the room.

"We are," Prim says. "The Dream can see within itself the same way any Dreamer can." She gives you a helpless shrug. "The Dream is both the Dreamer and the Dream."

"I think I got that."

No, no, you are clueless at what she means.

"I'm going to slip into something more appropriate and less--" She appraises her arm, the muscles bare and shimmering wet. "--naked."

"Naked's fine," you squeak. "I don't mind naked."

Shaking her head in disapproval, Prim gives you a stern, "No!" and flicks your nose. Then she swishes down the hall and into another room, her wide hips swinging.

Is it bad for you to stare? It must be bad to stare, you need to stop that. Creepers stare. You sit and twiddle your thumbs until Prim returns, dressed in a grey and white sweater and a high-waisted, navy skirt that stopped below the knee. She wears no shoes.

"I can't offer you anything to drink or eat."

"That's okay," you say.

She flits around, turns on lamps, adjusts bottles of oils and glass jars full of herbs and pastes on their shelves, and picks out fat packets of sewing patterns.

The room is cozy, now that you have a chance to look around. Dried things hang from the rafters, flowers mostly, along with some berries, mushrooms, and herbs. A pair of black antlers decorate the mantle. And, in the corner, is an antique desk and sewing machine.

This is a witch's cottage. The kind of place Lola would save pictures of in her Pinterest boards. Cottagecore is her favorite style right up there with the Dark Academia aesthetic. You found both silly and sort of pretentious.

"So, you want to help Inlé?" Prim asks.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then let's fix your hands."

Prim lays out three pieces of leather on her coffee table, white, black, and green. You stare at them.

"Can we talk about Mada first?" you ask.

"We can." Prim glances up. "Hides, please."

"Hides, what?"

Creatures appear from the rafters, long-bodied, ginger-haired beasts with cow horns. They hang upside down from the ceiling and pass things hand to hand, needles, scissors, bowls of buttons, and finally, dyed leather hides. Prim takes the hides, black, white, green,

and piles them beside her sewing machine. "For when you make your choice," she says. Then, smiling, she pats the arm of one of the beasts. "Thank you, you can return to grazing now."

The beast licks her face with a cow's tongue. It withdraws to the rafters with its fellows.

"What were those?" you ask.

"My highlands."

Prim settles in the chair across from you, she rests one foot on the arm and lets the other dangle over the side. You try to place her age. She could be as old as your parents, or old as Blackavar. Hard to tell with brown women. Definitely older than Inlé, you decide.

"You want to talk about my mada, then, I shall speak of them." Prim folds her hands over her bent knee. "The Dream is mine, our, birth parent. We Rabbits call them Mada instead of Mummy or Daddy, though some of us will use other names."

"So the Dream's pronouns are they/them?"

"They are."

"Mine are he/him!" You then blush. "Not that you couldn't, you know, tell that already. I guess."

Prim chuckles, smile lines marking her deep brown eyes.

"I have another question."

She gestures for you to speak.

"My name, Emile. It seems important to you." The heat in your face and ears dulls down. Prim stretches her toes. When she grew skin from the neck down, you are unsure. Things just happen in dreams. "Why's that?"

Woe, a great, unfathomable woe, floods her features. You shy away from the beauty of

it. "It was the name Richard and I were going to give our son," she says. "If we ever had the chance to have one."

"You fucked Blackavar?" You shudder in your chair, your boney hands flapping. You stick out your tongue. "Ew."

"What a crude thing to say, and inappropriate."

Prim grabs a few sewing patterns and compares them to the swatches of leather, her jaw and plump lips clenched in indignant anger. Her offense, and the way she holds her posture in the chair, sets you off. You say, "He's a greasy old Youtuber that pees his pants."

"Emile."

"He hits on Inlé and he's got to be a thousand years older than her." Not that Inlé seems to care, she kissed away Blackavar's tears when she put him back together. She watches his lips when he talks with his snobby accent. "It's gross and creepy."

Silent, Prim places the patterns she has picked by their respective leathers. You ignore them. "He shot a guy in cold blood right in front of me," you add, a funny, sour taste rising in your chest. "I guess the guy was bad, but it made Clover cry, and Clover's--"

Clover is a Rabbit, pretty. She is pretty like Inlé, but taller and albino. Prim is taller than Inlé as well, did that make Inlé a runt? Predators always pick the odd ones out in a pack, that you learned that from folks in your fandom Discord. And Inlé is nineteen.

"That makes Blackavar basically a pedo!" you say out loud.

Prim stutters. "P-Pardon?"

"And isn't he an enemy? Tsukiko said he's a threat. How could you fuck that crusty freak, let alone want to have his babies?"

"Emile."

"Yes?"

"Shush."

You blow a raspberry and, arms crossed, cram your body as far back in the chair as you can manage. You are right. You are certain of it. Blackavar is everything you said, a creep, a freak, and he pissed his pants in front of you, Inlé, and that pig, Holly.

"Never take anything Tsukiko says at face value."

Prim taps the table for your attention. The patterns are for gloves, batting gloves, driving gloves, and a pair that remind you of Inlé's. There goes your brain, zipping back down the Blackavar-is-Bad highway, tires smoking.

"Tsukiko has a grudge against my Richie, and he against her." The silver light reflects

off Prim's teeth, even she has the big incisors and canines that Clover and Inlé do.
Which, yeah, dumbass, clones.

"Why's that?"

"He stopped her from killing Inlé."

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