



 dreams of rabbits  @therabbitdies

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THE RABBIT DIED - PART SIXTEEN

The Rabbit Died is a NSFW horror fantasy CYOA about pregnancy, the effects of trauma, dreams, and meat.

You can read past installments here: tinyurl.com/rabbitdoc

Content Warning: Ableism, abuse, (mental, physical & reproductive), body horror, cannibalism, CSA (mentioned only), death, gender dysphoria, gore, incest, pregnancy, racist microaggressions, rape (mentioned only), sexual assault, torture, & vomit.

The Black Rabbit's warren is different than the others. Where the other pieces of you chose cabins or picturesque cottages surrounded by fields of green for their Dream homes, she chose an old garage.

Squat, square, and made of brick and mortar, the garage floats alone on the white noise sea. The specters of black rabbits silflay by the garage's foundation, where they eat cowslips and the scant few tender blades of grass growing at the base. They ignore your approach.

You yank the door open and shove it up as high as you can, which is not very high. You are young.

The Black Rabbit stashes a motorcycle in her scrape of a garage. A white one from Italy, a Ducati. Bobby gave it to her for her birthday. You crack the mirror with a flick.

"Spoiled," you mutter.

On the Black Rabbit's workbench, there are dozens of things, tiny skulls, bones, shiny stones that glitter, loose game tokens, dice, and a single, silicon strawberry with a chewed up end. You sweep them off with a fling of your arm.

You trash her meager collection of board games, as well as her short shelf of books. The Black Rabbit may have little here, but it is more than you were ever given. You toss everything in sight stopping short of her road maps. Those you need.

You grab the maps, using the skirt of your green dress to hold them all and scamper out the Black Rabbit's garage.

INLÉ

"What's the ETA?" Holly asks as you hang up the phone. The call lasted for a while, you had much to tell him and maybe more still, but that can wait for when he arrives. His wife was determined to get you to their house and get you fed. That meant hanging up.

"Thirty to forty-five minutes," you say. "Then we group there."

You roll onto your back and gaze up at the plain white hotel ceiling. Holly sits near, his warmth pressing upon your skin. He rests his hand on your bare belly.

"Thirty to forty?" He rubs his thumb around your navel. The secret areas of yourself, the ones you neglect to explore, cry for attention and you squeeze your thighs together.

How distracting.

You guide Holly's hand down by the wrist to the button of your jean shorts. If he insists upon touching you, then he can take the lead. He can break open those long-sealed doors. Get it over with and be done.

Holly skips over your crotch to hold your thigh. "I was going to say that thirty to forty gives you enough time to take a nap." He handles you with caution, stroking your skin, kneading your muscle with gentle presses.

"Thirty to forty-five is enough time for sex."

"Not if you want to do it right." Holly kisses you, and this, too, is done with intense tenderness. You bite his lip. He jerks back and sucks on the wound as he asks, "Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes, stupid Dog."

You, with one hand and a deep pout, yank up the simple sports bra Lori gifted you. The shorts take more effort. Holly wipes his mouth with the back of his hand before helping you. You seize his lips with yours.

He tastes of blood.

You want more of it.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Holly says, removing his uniform shirt and the white tee underneath. Dark hair grows thick on his chest and stomach. "You want this. I'll stop asking."

You ball up his shirt and badge and toss them into the bin by the bed. His hand on his belt, he grunts a, "Hey!" To which, you reply with a bite to his clavicle. "Pain in my goddamn ass," he laughs.

You laugh back and, sitting up, embrace Holly. You bite his shoulder, your fangs break skin, and you taste your sweet reward, blood, thick as syrup. He takes you by

the chin and shares in the taste, his tongue flicking your teeth.

Things are said. Loving curses and rough praises, all growled by him as he touches you. You do not listen, neither do you utter a word. You roam your fingers down his back and sides, you nip at straining tendons and muscles.

Holly takes you by the hand and kisses your stub of a pinky. Disarmed, you whine. You shut out the sight of him with a scrunch of your eyes. Why do that when he barely knows you? He kisses your bare forehead, one for each missing antler, and nudges a path down to your chest to lick your scarred breast.

"You're perfect," he says.

You catch Holly's thumb in your teeth and with a glaring pout, bite. Bite and then suck. He calls you cute.

Anticipation turns into fidgety impatience as he explores the rest of you. Your ribs, your wrists, the underside of your breasts, and the stretch marks on your hips. He even licks your underarms. For a man worried about time,

he seems determined to drag out the act for as long as possible.

Woundwort never took his time.

Holly lifts you by the hips, humming, and brings your cunt to his bloodstained mouth.

CHOOSE: CODY OR HAZEL?

Your head is full.

Mom - you might stop calling her that - left Quintana to be eaten alive by Lucy Driscoll, a beast made of blood, lice, and lost souls. This happened after you discovered Mom is a murderer and that you might not have a father. How can you not have a father?

Cody attempted to explain how exposure to the Dream can change a person enough to make such a thing possible. You attempted not to be a short-tempered asshole while you listened. But when he mentioned the Rabbit Test, the one he intended to give you in the cabin, your chest

locked and you started to hyperventilate. You flung a bag of FRESH CHORPS at him when he, the fucking nerve of him, asked what was wrong.

Everything is wrong, you screamed.

Cody's eyes hollowed - his shark-stare - as he retreated into an unsettling silence.

An hour has passed. He hasn't said anything else and that suits you fine. Your brain throbs like an abscess, you want to drill a hole in your skull to let it drain.

"My name's Jay," the gas station guy says. "I forgot to mention it earlier." He laughs. "Do you guys like things? Comic books? Movies?"

You groan.

Jay smiles at Cody. "What's your favorite drug to deal?"

"Are you being racist?" you ask.

Squealing out, "No!" Jay loses control of the wheel. You and Campion jostle and slide into each other. "I'm not being racist." Alternating between barking coughs and fraught laughter, Jay rights the vehicle. "Cody has that look."

You kick his seat. "The drug dealer look? What's that, güey?"

"It's the scar," Jay says. "And the jacket and his whole everything."

"Like his complexion?"

"You're putting words in my mouth. And hey, I don't have to have a positive opinion on this guy--he shot me."

Cody flicks down the visor to check his scars. He runs his tongue along the torn corner of his mouth and then checks his teeth. The way he holds his jaw open gives you a view of his molars, they are made of metal. Iron?

"And another thing," Jay says.

Campion rests his round cheek on your belly and tucks his thumb in his mouth. He sucks on it while you stroke his hair and wait for Jay to add on to his weak, white argument.

Cody taps his fangs - the most recent addition to his rough, hard exterior. Jay gulps. "I forgot the other thing," he says.

"Pussy," Campion says.

You nod. "Racist pussy."

"How am I being racist? His name's Cody Driscoll." Jay waves his hands in Cody's face. "Driscoll's Irish!"

"Eyes on the road," Cody says.

The car swerves. Cussing, Jay takes the wheel. "And another thing, this guy sounds like he crawled right out

of the North End."

The nonchalant way Cody takes Jay's comments, his foot on the dash, his head leaning on the window. He allows Jay to ramble. You get why - sometimes it is better to hold your peace than to explode when it comes to dealing with fragile white men like Jay.

Cody hurt you, you repeat in your head. He stuck a gun in your mouth. He kidnapped you. He shot this man. Quick on the violence, Cody is a terrible person.

"He does look kind of ethnic now that I look at him," Jay says. "Mexican?"

Why is Cody taking this shit?

"You think of a name for the baby yet?" Cody asks. You shrink back in the seat. Caught you staring, the arch of his brows seems to say.

You face the window. Naming the baby has not crossed your mind until now. You signed up to be a surrogate - thinking up names is a parent's job. "No," you say. "Open to suggestions, though."

"What about Tate?" Jay asks.

"Tater," Campion mumbles.

"Not Tater - Tate. My mom's named Tate and she's a badass womanboss. She runs her own business on Facebook."

"Tater."

"Tate!"

"You're arguing with a kindergartner." Cody opens the bag of FRESH CHORPS you pelted him with only moments before. "Cut it out."

"How'd you like it if someone mocked your mom's name?"

"He's a kid. I don't get angry with kids."

"What's your mom's name? Rosita? Maria?"

You clench all over, your jaw, your fists, even down to your toes, your body winds tight with the need to slam Jay's face into the steering wheel. Cody reaches back and, gingerly, squeezes your knee. "My mom's name was Xochitl," he says.

"Nahuatl." You push Cody's hand away from your leg. Campion pulls at your sleeve. He pouts at you for an explanation. "Old Mexica language. People still speak it to this day."

"Do you speak it?" Campion asks.

You shake your head.

"My mother spoke it," Cody says. "That, Spanish, and English, and I'm sure a crap ton

more, but she got so much hell from Lucy when she spoke anything other than English that she barely spoke at all."

Mom told you once her birth mother was a Japanese American teenager, a runaway from San Antonio. She often mused if authorities had left Mom with her mother if Mom would have learned a lick of her mother's tongue. You wondered the same. If she did,

would she have taught you? Would she have taught your sisters, the one she killed and the one she abandoned?

Stop thinking about Tsukiko.

"I like Xochitl," you say. "I'll keep it in mind for the baby."

"What about Tate?" Jay asks.

"Fuck your mom, Jay."

Cody turns in his seat. "You serious about that?"

"Dead serious."

Cody worries at his scar, his thumb pressing it in place as he gnaws upon it. He sits in shut down mode, unreachable. Good as dead. You chance a touch to his arm. "I'm okay," he says, drawing away. "Thank you." He

zips his jacket to the neck and sits low in his seat. "Thank you."

"You're an enabler," Jay says.

"You're a whiny fucking racist," you say. "Now shut up and drive."

"So it's okay that he shot me? I say the wrong things and it's okay to be shot?"

"You can be mad about that without being a racist dick."

Jay grumbles, "Is calling you a bitch racist?"

Cody chops Jay in the throat. Jay grabs at his crushed windpipe, sucking in air with a hideous, choking rattle. Let loose, the car spins in a complete circle, the tires screaming with you and Champion as the vehicle swings you both. Your baby flips inside of you.

The engine stalls. Cody and Jay exit; Jay exploding from the driver's seat to thrash and grovel while Cody, hands spasming, storms out of the passenger's side to howl. Champion hugs your belly and whispers it's okay. Is he speaking to you or the baby?

Calling Cody's name, you get out of the car and circle around the trunk to get to him. He prowls back and forth, his boots kicking up powdered static. You stay at a distance. "Cody," you repeat.

"He can't say those things to you. He can say all that to me, I hurt him." Cody scratches at his scar. "I killed him. He can say that shit to me, I can take it. But not you, not to you."

"You didn't need to judo chop him in the throat," you say. "You could've told him to shut the fuck up instead."

"Is Rabbit okay?" Cody switches from clawing to gnawing. He sucks and chews with a frantic determination. "The baby, I mean the baby. Is she okay?"

"She's good. What about you? Are you okay?"

"Why do you care? I hurt you, too."

Cody hurt you, that is true. This man, the one biting a hole out of his cheek, the one vibrating the flesh from his bones, hasn't. Not directly. He protected you and Campion. He listened to you. Laid his head on your lap to comfort you. He struck Jay to defend your honor.

They share a name and face but as you scrutinize him as he acts now, your certainty that they are one and the same wanes.

"Are you okay?" you ask with a motherly firmness. Cody stills his worrying teeth. "Are you okay? Can you answer me?"

"I wasn't thinking about the car when I nailed him," Cody says. "I'm sorry about that." You tense as he comes near you. "It's a real fucking nightmare to die and come back and hear about the shit I let Lucy talk me into doing. There's also the other things -

things I do to avoid pissing off Lucy, like shooting witnesses. Fucking luckless assholes that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Jay has every right to say what he wants to me. He can call me slurs for I care."

He hangs his head, he whimpers.

You remember Rafa.

Rafa was a dog your parents adopted. A friend of a friend of your dad knew a lady that rehabilitated fighting dogs, she needed to find a home for an old pitbull mix no one wanted. Mutt was feo,

a rangy beast covered in scars and missing an ear. You loved him at first sight. When you stretched out your hand to him, he gave it a timorous lick and wagged his crooked tail. And you cried, you are adult enough to admit it, you burst into tears over this ugly dog.

For a year, he was your best friend.

Then he disappeared.

The night before he led you to a pregnant stray cat hiding under the shed. He licked

her face while you convinced your parents to keep her. At least until she has the kittens, and see, Rafa loves her. Your

dad agreed while your mom stared up at the ceiling.

Next day during school Rafa and the stray vanished. Your mom - Tsukiko - was home that day. She never said what happened.

How much do you even know about your own mother?

A timid hand bumps yours. You start, half expecting to see Rafa gazing up at you with his head cocked, instead there is Cody. His head is cocked. You laugh.

"Sorry," he says. "For everything."

"What about me?" Jay shouts, his windpipe restored. "Gonna apologize to me?"

"Get in the car, Jay." You lead Cody back by the sleeve. Jay waves his middle finger at you, his features twisting in a theatric display of disgust.

"Get in the car, peckerhead," Campion says. "Or I'll tell Tater!"

Jay flips him off. "You people have no respect for victims."

You punch the roof of the car, screaming, "Get in the car, Jay!" The metal dents under your fist. The windows on the passenger side crack. Everyone jumps, even you.

Jay gets back in the car.

You return to your seat and sit. Cody retakes his and messes with the caved ceiling, banging, brow furrowed, at the bump. The dent pops up, and you all startle, shoulders tensing. Jay wheeks like a guinea pig.

Jay starts the car. "Could you always do that?" he asks.

You rub your hand. It does not even sting.

???

Snowfall, night. You trek barefoot through the drifts, maps tucked under your arm, your toes numb with cold. The skirt of your green dress catches on the underbrush. You yank it free and shake it out, frowning at the soaked hem. This part of the Dream is an awful place to visit.

Always dark, always freezing.

Barking draws your attention away from your wet dress. Through the trees, comes a dog, fiercely built and scarred. It stops before you and gently licks your chilled hand.

"Hello, Rafa," you say, petting his wide head. You take extra care to avoid sticking your fingers in the bullet wound ventilating his skull. "I mustn't be that far if you're

here."

Together you walk further into the snowy wood, your limbs weakening in the cold. Rafa bunts your side when you slow, whining, and you stroke his nubby ear to reassure him.

The cabin is close, you see the lights. Not far now.

Tsukiko greets you in the yard as you break through the trees. Beyond her stands her cabin, her Dream home, made from cut logs and wrought iron. Snow blankets the sloping roof.

A cat peers at you from the window.

"You get the maps?" Tsukiko asks.

"I got them," you say.

"Then come in, I'll make you something to eat."

Inside, you huddle with Rafa by the fireplace. Kittens gambol about, batting each other, tumbling and rolling. Tsukiko mixes flour with shortening in the open kitchen. "My foster mother taught me how to make

tortillas with both flour and masa," she says unprompted. "Both are good, but I prefer the flour ones."

Rafa licks your hands. Blood crusts the lines of your palms, the final remnants of that poor chick. You failed to scrub it all away. You hide your tears in Rafa's shoulder.

"Hazel preferred masa." Tsukiko flips the tortillas with her fingers, undeterred by the cast iron pan's biting heat. "Once I taught her how to make them, she stopped eating mine. I regret teaching her."

Mada taught you things. Do they regret those lessons?

Tsukiko brings you a warm tortilla, fresh off the stove. You press it flat between your thawing palms, more hungry for its warmth than any possible nourishment it may provide. Rafa places a single paw on your lap. He ruffs.

"Here." Tsukiko slits her scar. "Rafa, here."

The dog, obedient, laps at the blood flowing free from Tsukiko's wrist. Any drops he misses are licked up off the floor by the kittens and their mother. They purr, satisfied, their pink tongues dyed red. You heave.

"Poor things," Tsukiko says. "It's my fault they're infected. It's my fault they're here."

She holds her slashed wrist out to you. The sight, the smell, you swipe over the wound, mending it. Thanking you, she walks back to the kitchen to peel potatoes. You give your hand to Rafa

to lave clean.

"But we're going to fix that, fix all of this," Tsukiko says.

You bite into the tortilla. You think of flour, then flowers. The primrose Emile gave to you, the taste of it still lingers. You giggle, suddenly warm.

"Are you paying attention?"

"Think Emile is okay?"

You pocket the rest of the tortilla in your cheek and stand. Chewing, you undress and hang your green dress over the back of a chair to dry. Tsukiko cubes potatoes. The repeating thunk of her knife weighs heavy with her disapproval.

"Why do you ask?"

You bundle up in the fleece throw strewn over Tsukiko's sofa. You swallow. "I like him," you say. "He's nice."

Tsukiko breaks an egg on the side of a mixing bowl, and then another, the crack of their shells loud as a whip's. Her fork scrapes the ceramic as she whisks.

"You like him."

"Can I have just the tortillas and the papas? I don't want eggs." You pull at your ring finger. "And some hot chocolate?"

Tsukiko's face goes flat. Then, a sigh. "I can do that. Lay the big map out while I get this all ready."

You kneel on the floor, the fleece pulled around you, its embrace fragrant with pine smoke, and unfold the map. You stretch it across the table and pin it down by placing random objects at each corner. The United States of America lays before you, veined with blue highways. You

poke the map, it has give. It has warmth.

"That boy was a disappointment." Tsukiko places a plate of tortillas and potatoes down by you, and a mug of hot chocolate. Without asking, she leaves and returns with a whole, fresh jalapeno. She adds it to your plate. "I was hoping he

would--I don't know."

Tsukiko chokes and gags behind her hand. She did know, she does know. She refuses to say it.

You fear the consequences of lying, the choking, the limb loss, the slicing pain. A Rabbit lost her antlers for lying.

Tsukiko embraces pain.

"Here, Rafa." She gives him a bowl of scrambled eggs. "I'm going to get the pins and something for you to wear. I'll be right back."

You bite off the end of the jalapeno, nodding. Tsukiko heads upstairs.

You wait for the click of a lock, the twist of a knob, and the shushing whisper of a door closing before you go explore. By your nature, you are a curious thing and a cautious thing. You need to be secure in your surroundings. You crave to learn.

You walk around the cabin, the fleece hanging around your shoulders. It drags across the floor behind you. You nibble at the pepper as you run your fingers along book spines and old shelves. Tsukiko keeps a cluttered home, books, boxes, CDs,

greeting cards, letters, photographs in smudged glass frames, VHS tapes, and large, plastic flat squares Tsukiko called video discs. You pick up one of the discs and, with its edge propped against your belly, go to check on the mama cat.

She sits by the window, tail curled at her hip, and watches the falling snow. She trills when she notices you and stretches out her claws. You sit down beside her. You are ambivalent about cats. The ones from the Waking World, the Real World, are cute and fluffy, playful. The

Cats of the Dream lopped off your beautiful, long tail with a knife.

You bite the jalapeno in half. Its frustration burns your tongue and brings tears to your eyes. Years, it sneers, exhausted, years and years of change to protect me from being eaten. And still, still! I am

consumed. How stupid am I to try?

You pop the rest of it in your mouth and chew. You sniff. A drop of liquid runs down your cheek and drips off your chin. Tears or meltwater, do you care to check?

"Rabbit," calls Tsukiko.

You lift the disc high above your head and hurl it, full force, at the floor. White plastic and black vinyl crack and scatter in reflective pieces. The cats flee in different directions. Rafa barks. You scream, unsatisfied, and attack a nearby shelf, sweeping off the books.

Tsukiko shouts, "Rabbit!"

That is not your name, it is a placeholder. You are but a copy of the real Rabbit. You are an apple scion, the arm of a starfish. You are a clone, all of you are clones made of flesh too stubborn to die. Real things die. You are not real.

You step over spines and exposed pages, your rampage continuing. You break statuettes. You toss boardgames and stomp the boxes. There is a copy of Operation on the shelf, you lunge for it.

"Enough of that."

Tsukiko lifts you from behind, her arms locked tight around you in a hug. Caught, you kick, you thrash, you shriek. You bury your fingers into her flesh and try to pry it apart at the atoms. Her body resists you, just barely.

"Enough." Tsukiko crushes you closer to her chest. "Enough, mija. Enough."

In spite of all your abilities, you are still trapped.

You go limp in surrender.

She dresses you in a sweater that buttons in the back and a pair of jeans meant for legs longer than yours. You sit on her sofa, face burning, as she rolls up the cuffs past your ankles. "I want to die," you say.

"I know you do, Rabbit," Tsukiko says.

The other Rabbits have names, Clover, Inlé, Primrose. You wipe snot off on your sleeve. "It's not fair."

"You're right, none of this is fair. That's why we're ending it." She offers you your plate. "Now eat." Her expression softens. "Please."

You take the plate and eat. Eat potatoes, drink chocolate, and sniffle, sometimes using your sleeve for a napkin. Tsukiko, tutting, wipes your messy face clean with a warm washcloth. She then, wearing a genuine smile, starts to circle the map.

"Warren, by Sandleford."

Tsukiko stabs the location with a long pin. Cold Iron, the scent turns your stomach, and you cough into your elbow. The map squeals. Its skin sizzles.

"Clowslip."

She wiggles a new pin into the map.

"What are you doing?" you ask.

You wince in sympathy with the map as Tsukiko drives a fresh pin through its skin. The roads around the wound blacken, the flesh bruises. You rub at your throat.

"Do you see these cities?" Tsukiko rubs a bump on the map. "They're scars in the membrane."

The membrane that Mada sleeps upon. The membrane between worlds. You healed a tear in it not that long ago when you delivered the box to Clover. You're dead, so you cannot cross into the Waking World as living Rabbits can, but you can steal an occasional glance

through the dreams of living creatures.

"You're hurting it."

"I'm killing it," Tsukiko says. "It's already hurting."

One part of the map is already injured, inflamed, skin raised. Maine. Tsukiko traces the pin around the lump. Maine is where your heart fled after

Mada let your thousand siblings tear you apart for the crime of wanting to be real.

You hate Maine.

"If you kill it, there will be nothing to keep Mada out of the Waking World."

Tsukiko pricks the cystic state. Gray pus, thick as pudding, erupts from the hole and oozes. The reek of dead, digested skin and centuries of old blood sprays into the air. You inhale through your mouth. Tsukiko stabs a second pin into the mound.

"I know," she says, her smile benevolent, motherly. "That's the point. Even Dreams need to wake up eventually."

CHOOSE: CLOVER OR INLÉ?

INLÉ

Holly pins you by the back of your knees, his grip sure, his hands strong. The faint points of claws poke from under his nailbeds. Positioned in this way, bent in half, bottom up in the air, you let him taste of you. He nuzzles his stubbled cheek against your inner thigh and

kisses your cunt. He gives grace before he parts the seam with his nose, and then his tongue.

It has grown--Holly's tongue. You become aware of this fact when it plunges inside you and curls. He growls nonstop. You clench out of reflex and he moans, "You taste like cream."

Inside you, a door creaks open. You try to shut it, your hand presses to the wood panel, but more swing open. Their hinges sing.

You buck your hips.

Sticky heat spreads through your belly. You open your eyes to find Holly staring down at you. His lashes flutter. Slower, slower, he blinks until his lids shut, and he sucks your clit with renewed hunger.

Men hate pussy, Lucy said once. Her voice drifts in through one of the open doors like a foul breeze. They want it, they fucking crave it, and that's why they hate it.

Pussy is disgusting, I admit. Blood, babies, chunky, yeasty gunk, nothing good comes out of it.

Holly rolls his tongue against you, his mouth and nose joining in the motion. He

spreads you with his fingers and smacks his swollen lips, slick with his blood and you. He smears his face with you. This man does not hate what he is doing.

He isn't a man, Lucy corrects you. He is a Dog, a Wolf. A beast. One of the Thousand.

You slam the door on her and her stench. There are more interesting rooms being opened. You do not need to air out this one.

You pull at Holly's curls and urge him to continue. Eat me deliciously, you plead without words, your legs strained and quaking. The sticky heat builds. It runs over the open thresholds in waves of gold and white and pools from under the bottom rails. Milk and honey. You wade

through it, enraptured. If you had known what you had locked away in these rooms, you--

There stands a door at the end of the hall. Black, broken antlers hang above it. Your antlers. You stroke your forehead.

You open the door.

Woundwort waits kneeling on a bloodied kitchen floor, a prone Rabbit child wilting in his grasp. Her face is ashen. Her lips glow with a splash of red gold. She chokes with each pull of air. She holds a toy strawberry to the inflamed lump on her chest.

That child is you.

"Who did this to you?" Woundwort asks; strings of mucus hang from his plastic bunny nose. He rips off the mascot head. The father you knew, the one that claims to love you, wails in grief as you spit up tainted bile.

Cold iron poisoning, you know the smell. Metallic, festering, cold. The child that once was you dissolves from the inside, and unless the source of the poison is found, she will die. You would die.

You, the adult you, vibrate with terror. When did this happen? Why are you scared, the dead and dying should fear nothing. Your mother told you as such.

Your mother told you? When?

Woundwort places you on the floor, right beside other bodies, a teenaged Rabbit, a teenaged boy with a slashed face, both shot. He draws a switchblade from the pants of his white uniform. Behind him, the body of Lucy, shot in the thigh, bloats in the stomach as if pregnant.

"Who did this to you?" Woundwort slices open the cyst on your chest. Effluence of many colors, a dull rainbow of rot, spurts over his gloves and sleeves. "Where is your mother, Hrairoo? Where is your sister? What happened to them? Who did this to you?"

Little you, in a voice made of rust, speaks.

Little you, grasping life with the same tenacity with which she grasps at the toy berry, answers.

Little you tells a lie.

A deluge of milk and honey floods the hall, smashing the doors, cracking the walls. It crushes down you from all sides. It drags you under and sweeps you away from the black antlered door.

You cum.

Holly rises upon his knees, lifting you up until only your head and shoulders brush the mattress. You arch, one of your legs sticking up in the air, your toes going point. You drown, and drown, and drown, and you almost forget while you sink into the honeyed depths.

You lied as a child.

Holly lowers you, kisses your throat, licks the scar. His erection nudges insistent at your cunt. "I want to protect you," he says. "I want to serve you." Your scent colors his moist breath. "Let me be your Dog."

You stroke his jaw as you float in the warm haze of afterglow. The scene from the Antlered Room surfaces and bobs at the fringe of your thoughts--you lied. Lying comes at a great cost for a Rabbit. Great consequence. Yours must have been your antlers.

Holly kisses your antler spots and you shudder with soundless laughter. He wants to be a liar's Dog.

"Still here with me?" he asks.

Words, can you trust them? You ruined your body with words. You do not need them when you have your hands and your body. Those do not lie.

You shove at him, push, pull, arrange limbs until he spoons you. He says, "Bossy." And you nod in reply and nip his chin. "I like bossy girls."

You fit your bodies together and push down. He thrusts up the rest of the way, buries his cock in you. Fills you. You bite his thumb.

The moment takes and keeps you. There is no return trip to the hall of doors or the Antlered Room, there is only you, only Holly. He squeezes your scarred breast and you hold his hand there, press it flat to your flesh. "Your heart's racing," he says, and it is.

You will tell him why later when you have the time to process what you have learned. Until then, you want him. You want to float in gold.

Holly pulls out, howling. His cock jerks, slippery, against your thigh as he cums.

The two of you lie nestled on the bed, panting. Holly bumps his forehead to yours.

You stay in his arms, warm, the glow ebbing into comfortable static. You steal a kiss from his bitten lips, along with a taste of blood.

He cups your vulva, holds you. "This might not be the best time to ask this," he says, "but was this a one night only performance? Or is this show going to run for the season?"

You squint at him.

"Is this a one night stand?"

A one night stand, you fumble for an answer. Do you want more of him, do you want a Dog? The responsibility of a relationship might prove too much but the weight of disappointing him will shatter you. You cannot trust yourself to give the perfect answer. What if you lie?

You rush to the bathroom. Needing time to think, to process this and the things you saw in the Antlered Room, you shut the door.

Holly calls after you. You hear him pull up his pants and buckle his belt as he approaches the bathroom. "Hey, you okay?"

He rattles the knob. The door is unlocked. But he does not open it, he stays outside. He respects your need for space.

"I stepped over the line. I get it."

A full-length mirror hangs on the bathroom door. Your reflection flinches at the sight of you painted with red kisses, saliva, and ejaculate. Secretions on your thighs. You flinch again, but this time with the aftershocks of your orgasm.

"Inlé?"

You sit on the toilet.

Holly lingers outside of the bathroom. You listen to the wall groan from his weight, the tap-tap-tap of his toe rapping against the floor, and the beautiful, rhythmic susurrant of his circulation system. You wipe away the sweat-thinned blood smudged on your breast and suck your

fingers clean. He cares about you. He barely knows you, and he cares. His blood is laced rich with his feelings.

You grab a washcloth from the shower, wet it, and go open the bathroom door. Holly strokes your arm. He points at you, "You--" He forms an okay sign, "Alright?"

"I saw something."

"What'd you see?"

Speaking about the Antlered Room strains your already hoarse voice. You tell him,

washing your skin clean of blood and sex. Holly, using the corner of a towel, dabs at the bites you left on his body. They have mostly healed.

"Your lost your antlers for lying?" he asks.

"Yes." You taste from the semen on your thigh. A thoughtless act of curiosity.

"Rabbits can't lie without great consequence."

Holly clenches his jaw. "That's not fair to you."

"There is very little fair about being a Rabbit."

"I saw something, too."

"What did you see?"

You toss the rag in the trash. Holly throws his towel in with yours and brushes away the last few remaining motes of dead scabs still clinging to his chest. His healed flesh shines like flecks of polished sandstone. You kiss one of the marks.

"Tell me?" you ask.

"There was a tear in the sky," Holly says. "Red clouds were spilling from it and spreading across a forest." He scrutinizes you, checks you over from head to bare toe. You gaze up at him. Even as he takes you by the hips and drags his thumbs over

the faint suggestion of your bones, you maintain eye contact. "Something was being born."

"What was being born?"

He chuckles, his smile grim. "The end of the world."

Holly's kiss steals your next question. He leaves you behind, stunned, your lips warm. Muttering, "Going to check if our ride's here," as he grabs his white tee and pulls it on. He leaves his uniform shirt and badge in the trash.

It is only after he leaves the room that you remember to get dressed.

HAZEL

The pines rise in the distance in a wall of verdant flame. They burn against the grey sky, horrible in their size, in their sharp peaks and jagged boughs. Jay and Cody and Campion and you, tired, swollen you, cower in your seats as you drive nearer. "Is this Maine?" you ask.

"Yeah," Cody says. "We're getting close."

"I don't like this." Campion shoves a candy in his mouth. Sugar drop of courage, you wish you could have one.

Clouds roll in and with them, snow. A dense swarm of white, it hurls itself at the windshield. Jay hits the breaks.

You kick the underside of his seat.

"What?" Jay messes with the heat settings and flips on the windshield wipers. "You see this? You see all this snow?"

"I see it," you say. "That's snow."

"It's a blizzard."

"It's a nor'easter." Cody fixes the heat once Jay gives up on it. The hot circulating air stirs up old odors, cigarettes, cologne, and Dog. Cempasúchil and applewood. Cody scents.

"What's that?" Campion asks in his loud, froggy way.

"It's a blizzard's bigger, meaner brother."

Cody cracks open the passenger door, breaking the seal protecting you from the arctic cold. Snow blasts in through the portal. He grunts and, arm shielding his eyes, climbs out into the storm. The wind tears at his jacket and bare, narrow waist.

"What are you doing, you maniac?" Jay shouts after him. "Get back in here!"

You lean between the seats and try to grab at Cody. Jeans, jacket, anything, whatever you can catch. "You're going to freeze to death," you say.

"We're not going to be able to continue through the Dream." Cody's voice cuts through the howl and patter of wind and snow. "We gotta cut through the membrane and continue on the other side."

Jay shakes his head. "No, nope, we can't do that. I don't want to be a bunny rabbit."

"What about Campion?" you ask.

"There's enough food in the car for him," Cody says. "If things go south, I've got drinks in my inventory."

You ask, "And when that runs out?" The howl of the wind drowns you out, so you shout, "And when that runs out, Cody? What do we do then?"

He wiggles his fingers at you. "I start chopping off these."

"I could breastfeed him." The concept, the mere thought of it, taps a fresh vein of anxiety. You choke suggesting it. But what else can you do, Cody is a gunman, he needs his hands.

"Honey--" Great, a new pet name. You miss Cody calling you Slim and Chick. "--no. We're not going Grapes of Wrath here."

Jay snaps the high beams on and off, flick, flick, flick. He breathes heavy, sour. He fogs up the windows around him. "I can drive this," he says.

You doubt that.

"Let's cross over."

Jay thins his lips down to a white crease. No need to repeat yourself for Cody; he hears you. "I'll drive," he says and shuts the door. He cuts a slow path around to the front of the car. Champion bounces beside you, sucking away at his drop of courage.

"We don't need to cross back over." The fog has grown dense around Jay. He rubs down the steering wheel. "I can drive this. I can drive this."

"Jay, no. We're not going to drive through this shit."

You are a casual acquaintance to snow. Texas had it on a rare occasion. Wisconsin sure as hell had it, but you did not get to see it. Not like this. It never seemed to pass the Clinic windows and you were not allowed outside. Too dangerous, Adams said.

Mom, she smelled of snow.

"You hate me," Jay says. "I say the wrongs things and you want to punish me. You want me to go back to being a rabbit so I can't talk."

Gales of wind rock the car. Outside, Cody halts, leaning against the blast. The white and the lights render him a shadow before the hood. How is his skinny ass withstanding the onslaught?

"You know time doesn't work the same here, right?"

Jay vibrates with tension. You straighten with a growing sense of alarm.

"Hey," you say.

"Don't hey me. You listen. Time works differently here. I've been living here since you fucked up with Woundwort." His eyes bug out from the sockets, one bloodshot and blue, the other black and oozing. "While you were slutting around with him, I watched."

"Don't call my mama a slut." Champion yanks at his seatbelt. It sticks.

"Your sister brought me back." Spit sprays from Jay's mouth. "She wanted me to find you and Cody. I was dead, she brought me back. I didn't want to come back, but she did it."

Sister brought him back, the dead one or the Rabbit one? You do not bother to ask. Fear forms a bubble behind your sternum. "Cut it out," you hiss. "You want Cody to fuck you up again? I won't stop him this time if he does."

Jay rambles on, deaf to your threat. "I wasn't a bad guy before I died. I wasn't much, I

know that now. I worked at a gas station and rubbed my mom's feet every weekend."

You cannot see Cody through the steam on the windshield. You yank at your seatbelt. Like Champion's, the

latch sticks.

"What kind of loser does that? I was a loser there. Then a stupid ass bunny. I don't want that again."

"Jay, you're panicking. You need to chill."

Laughing, cackling a screechy, "No!" Jay guns the engine and the car blasts forward. There is a thump. A body, a tall, thin body rolls up onto the hood and over the roof.

Cody.

"Oops!" Jay laughs. He switches to reverse. Tha-thump-bump. The tires crunch through snow. They run

over the body. "Oops!"

Cody dies again.

"You got any more threats, you dumb bitch?"

Gear shift. Bump forward. The tires crunch snow. They crunch bones. Champion hurls every insult, every ugly cuss he has collected during his short life at Jay, and tears at his seatbelt. You stare at the fogged windshield.

"Suck a dick, kid. You should try asking Hazel for pointers, she's really good at it."

There is a crack in the glass where Cody hit - his elbow, maybe his knee? White, grey, your head fills with static. Snow. You get lost in the storm.

When Cody killed Jay, days, years, forever ago, you fainted. You wait for the safe, fathomless black to sweep through you and save you once again from the moment. What comes for you is a fading hallway.

"I watched you for the decades we've been here," Jay echoes. "I wanted to help you, I did. Inlé dragged me from death to help you."

The hallway in Clover's cabin. You are not here, you are in a car, being screamed at by another good thing gone bad. Spoiled somehow.

"Then I saw you - I saw you fuck that old man. I saw you loving it."

Did Jay see Woundwort beat you? Did he see him smack the boys? You buckle from the impact of a phantom fist. The memory of a cold iron hilt stings your palm. You are at the end of the hall, you closed the door.

"Then I looked in me - she's in me. Her fingers are in me. I looked at her memories of

the old man. Little whore loved fucking him, too."

No one loves sex with Wondwort. You have no choice. You are the mermaid, he is the octopus. He is made to eat and you to be eaten.

You are the end of the hall, you closed the door to save Inlé and Clover.

Cody wanted to help you. He carried you. He agonized over the bad things he did to you and he apologized for what he did to Jay.

Jay killed him.

Ran him over like a dog.

"I wanted to leave you to him, but she's in my fucking head. I had to do it. Which is bullshit, if you ask me."

Quintana is trapped in Lucy. You were trapped by Woundwort. You were trapped by Mom. Jay has you trapped in the car. And you trapped yourself in this hallway.

"Cunts. Cunts. You're all a bunch of daddy fucking cunts and I hate you. I was trying to help you and you called me racist."

Jay sobs. His voice is a constipated grunt of snot and tears. You grope for the door, slap at the knob, numb. This ugly fucker, how dare he fucking cry?

tw// racism

A beat passed while he sucks back mucous.

"I should drag both of you wetback bitches home to him and let him rape you. You and Inlé. I can't believe you called me racist!"

You open the door.

The moment greets you with Jay's red, teary face. He is inches from you. Yelling. Dribbles of snot, like slug trails, run from his nose to his chin. You grab him by the lower jaw. The tips of your fingers bite into the slimy flesh under his tongue. You slide the thumb of your other hand behind his perfect front teeth.

Whenever your grandfather came to visit, your mom had you break down a chicken for flautas. You picked the meat. Rafa sat beside you, tail thumping the floor. He always perked when you

got to the legs. You loved popping the joint from the hip socket. The act, the pulling, the twisting, and the sound, soft and wet, satisfied you both.

Ripping Jay's jaw from his face gives you the same kind of satisfaction.

Jay flees the car, tongue flapping from his throat as he gargles and screams. The storm, uncaring, blasts him. You, uncaring, open your seatbelt and follow him into

the snow. The heat of his blood, splashed across your face and breast, insulates you from the cold.

You do not have to stalk him far, he falls a few feet away and bleches up black and yellow. Steam rises from him, and from you. You shove his face down into a drift with your foot. Crunch of snow. Crunch of bone. You stomp and stomp and stomp.

"Hazel!" Champion runs up to you.

You stop.

Champion wraps his arms around your pregnant middle. He calls you by your name.

You start to cry.

Jay's head, how do you start? Fragments of his skull are buried in the sole of your foot. His brains stain the snow pink curdled with black and red. He looks like a smashed pumpkin.

Wiggling in the matter is a brown finger. Champion picks it up.

"Put that down," you say.

Blankly, Champion blinks up at you. He eats the finger in one big gulp. "There," he says. "Now I won't have to eat Cody's fingers. That's good, right?"

"Holy fuck." You drop to your knees.

You just killed a man and Champion ate what was inside of him. You cry harder. Champion plops down beside you and gives you another hug.

You killed someone, just like your mom.

The chill threatens to seep in through the weave of your nightgown. You move. The wind pushes at your side, forcing you to walk at a lean as you blaze a trail to Cody's body. He lies prone, broken, squashed flat in places, iron bones jutting from tears.

One theory you had for Rafa's fate is he had been run over while you were out and your mom buried the body without telling you. Didn't explain what happened to the cat. Maybe it's better not to know.

"I'm so sorry," you say.

Champion helps you haul Cody back to the car. Together you move the food to the front and load Cody into the backseat. You arrange him in what you hope is a comfortable position. His long limbs crinkle. Bags of meat and chipped stone.

Your baby hums. She shimmers. You want to see her. Even if it's only for a second, even if she chides you for being an idiot, you long to visit her in a Dream.

You push the seat back and sit behind the wheel. Shutting the door mutes the storm. You rest your hands on the vents. The heat does not warm you.

"Is Cody going to wake up soon?" Champion balls up in the passenger seat.

"Eventually," you say.

"He's not going to 'member us."

"Probably not."

"I hate Jay." Champion rocks in place. To keep from crying? To keep from losing it?

"I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad you killed him."

If Tsukiko knew her mom, would she have taught you anything about her? Would she pass that knowledge on to Inlé and your nameless sister? Seems to you, as you watch the nor'easter tuck Jay under a sheet of snow, that Tsukiko has taught you enough.

???

Tsukiko asked you to clean up the living room while she pins the map. You picked it up, books, games, cards, disc, tapes, etc, and returned them to their shelves. Rafa helped by headbutting you whenever you began the lag.

Cleaning done, Tsukiko seats you before her old television and hands you the remote. She kisses the top of your head. "Be good," she says and then back to the map. Back to her work.

You flip channels.

Clover packs the old Playstation in its box with the aid of Lori and Lori's girlfriend, Rachel. Clover's nose wiggles, stuffed and pink. What a cry baby. She thinks she is special since she is an albino.

You boo as Lori gives Clover a comforting hug. You deserve hugs. You deserve a new mama, not Clover. Never Clover.

Next, there is Inlé, dressed in something other than a copy of Tsukiko's leathers. Does Inlé know that her standard black outfit is an imitation of her surrogate's? Did Lousy Lucy ever tell her?

Inlé picks up Hazel's book and a revolver, Holly the Wolf's revolver. He gifted it to her back in the Dream. She checks down the sight.

The nubby scar where she lost her left pinky bleeds.

On Channel 8, Holly speaks to a Black man in an SUV - a new character for the show. Big belly, big beard, big, friendly voice, he must be a papa. You will die from jealousy if he hugs the other Rabbits.

Sunglasses hide Holly's golden eyes. He stands, arms crossed. Attentive.

"That guy isn't coming is he?" The papa in the SUV asks when he sees Blackavar. Blackavar, funny little Englishman. He used to be a beautiful prince, Prim said as such. What happened?

"He's part of the group," Holly says. "For better or for worse."

Blackavar slathers on his most unctuous smile. "That's correct, Officer Holly," he says. "For better or for worse, I'm here."

Papa does not look amused.

You press for the next channel, 51. Primrose mends Woundwort's fake bunny head. Woundwort doles out chores to his boys to preoccupy them while she works. Gather firewood, feed the cows, sweep, wash, dry. The boys rush to do as they are told.

The oldest boy, or at least the biggest, meanest-looking one of the bunch, picks up a glove from Prim's table. "You give Strawberry a pair?" he asks Prim.

She sets down Woundwort's head.

"I want a pair," the boy says.

That boy, you encountered him once outside of Woundwort's Dream. His name is Vervain. He grabbed you.

Suddenly queasy, you hunt for a station that has Emile on it. You find him on channel 11. He wears green.

"He has my color!" you squeal.

"Enough of that for now." Tsukiko takes the remote from you. She shuts off the television. "Let's watch a movie instead."

END PART SIXTEEN

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