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I dedicate this tale to the Light of my life.



"I am a spokesman for Uxaar, the Shadow God!" The intruder's voice pierces the cacophony of the crowd's cries. I've never encountered this man before. The man's brawny build towers high above the two guards beside him. His chaotic red curls, constructed into a bun, face me. Surely, I would have recognized him if I had seen him in the past. His outlandish accent also proves him a foreigner. "On a mission to retrieve Syann, the Goddess of Light! She's been discreetly living among you, but tonight, the stars will reveal her on this very stage, as the prophecy states! Syann is one of the women we display before you!"

My capture, along with that of these other women, quelled the fear that this attack was connected to Syann's prophecy. Athena revealed that the goddess was an eighteen-year-old female among us, and that her true identity would be unveiled tonight. I didn't want to believe her.

My broad eyes scan the crowd, searching for my family, Liam, or even Athena. However, the public rioting obstructs my view. The air storms with the clamor of protests for the women's freedom.

"Brenda!" Liam belts in anguish. He staggers as he cuts through the chaos. His father, Byron, precedes him to the barrier of armed intruders guarding the stage.

The intruder raises his voice, challenging the volume of the crowd. "We've taken every suspect captive, every eighteen-year-old female among you! Momentarily, we will watch as the stars reveal her identity!" Despite the power in his voice, he sounds as if he's reciting a rehearsed speech. His words are spaced out and stiff. Nevertheless, his message is empowering enough to send a shiver down my spine.

Byron is permitted to enter the stage and stomps his way up the steps. "I don't know who you think you are, but you are unwelcome here!" Unafraid, our governor barges toward the redhead, who is easily a foot taller than Byron and armed. If only I could say I was as fearless as Byron. "Not only have you interrupted our cherished festival, but worse, you have also assaulted our dear women! You and your men will leave Seren at once, or there will be hell to pay!"

The redhead hesitates, as if he's contemplating Byron's order. He's trembling and puffing for air, but why? "Get off this stage while you still can, Byron. Uxaar is not a god of mercy," he warns our leader.

"Spare me your absurdities! I'm not budging until you free our daughters and flee far away from here!" Byron demands through gritted teeth.

The intruder fidgets in place, his attention diverted from Byron. Someone else has captured it, yet his wavering eyes fail to meet anyone visible. It's as if he's watching a ghost. Whatever this phantom is, it instills terror in him.

The intruder retreats from Byron, but the guard behind lunges at him. A blade pierces Byron's chest, releasing an oozy red liquid that churns my stomach. I stare in horror, unable to look away. If I stare intently enough, will the atrocities cease? Will I awaken from this nightmare? Beads of sweat cascade down my face, yet

my mouth is as dry as a desert.

The redhead's body trembles violently. His wide eyes reflect a deep sense of dread. Is he equally horrified by Byron's lifeless body, slumped over and slain by the sword?

An unruly crowd stands before us. Liam struggles against the guards to reach his father before the townspeople drag him away. My father, as pale as a sheet, stands like a distant statue. The rest of my family must've fled home, like many others are now.

The redhead and his men approach me and the hostages. Are we next in line to die? Hot tears stream down my cheeks as I puff through the cloth swathing my mouth.

"Quiet!" Byron's murderer roars at the crowd, who hushes at once. Pleased, he chuckles as he pivots toward the hostages behind him. "Ladies, I am a spokesman for Uxaar the Shadow God. You may not be able to see him, but I promise he is as present here as I am! He sees all and has been pristinely observing each of you to prepare for your capture. There's no escape! Your options now are allying with Uxaar by the Shadow Incantation or matching your fate with your former, weak leader, Byron Asbury. So, who will be the first competent one to accept Uxaar's offer?"

No response follows.

Byron's assassin carries himself with pride on the stage, which I find much more intimidating than the impressive build of the redhead. I question why he wasn't the primary messenger to begin with, as well as his association with the redhead. Their accents aren't alike.

"No takers?" He clicks his tongue through an amused grin. "Well, then, Uxaar chooses you first, Brenda Fields."

My heart clenches at that name. My name.

"Uxaar has observed you, oh so closely. You're an intelligent, confident, and spirited woman. He has faith you have the intuition to heed my words." He removes the gag around my mouth, to allow me to speak.

"If Uxaar has watched my life closely as you say, he'd know

I'd never follow you!" I spit at his feet. "Especially for killing my future father-in-law, you monster!"

The guard finds my outburst amusing. His arched eyebrow rises as a challenged grin spreads on his narrow face. "Only to make an example, my dear. No one defies Uxaar without consequence. However, Uxaar understands humans withhold the compassion and soul that the Geron lacked. So, I will offer a deal to you, Brenda. If you say the Shadow Incantations, Uxaar will reverse the death of Byron and ensure no harm ensues upon Liam or your family."

"How should I know you have the ability to resurrect Byron?"

"Brenda, you have your heart closed off from the power of magic and have a foolish sense of denial! Do not doubt Uxaar or the power of the Underealm or Secreth, as you disregarded the warnings of Athena. This is no game. You either say the Incantations and Byron lives, or you refuse, and we kill you and all those you hold dear! Starting with her!" His blade points toward my cousin, and the guard behind her grabs her restraints and bears their sword up to her neck.

"No! Brenda, don't!" Sophie belts once her gag falls out of her mouth.

My cousin faces death's doorway. If I don't say the Incantations, we die. If I do say it, I might save Byron, but at what cost? My soul and the lives I'll endanger? All I can think to do is stall for time.

"What would I even say?" If I were to agree to say the Incantations, I'm unfamiliar with the words. I only know that if I say them, I'm selling myself away to a Geron. He would be able to take full control of me.

A different guard hands me a piece of writing carved into a deep purple crystal tablet. The tablet is as coarse and chilling as the murderer himself. Does this crystal possess magical properties? I'm certain these words audibly hiss in the air as I read them.

Set yourself free, take over me, Use me to make you higher, In me have your way, You get the say, Do with me as you desire.

"After you recite these words, you will enter a brief meditative out-of-body state. There, you will select which Geron you'll bond with. So, what will be your choice? I've given you more than enough time to decide."

Sentencing myself is one thing, but my family, my loved ones? I can't. If Uxaar is real, Syann must be, too. I'll have to say these Incantations, hoping she'll save me and this town.

"I'll do it! Let her go!"

"Say it first!" the intruder demands. "Then she'll be free!"

I can't bear to listen to Sophie cry anymore. The words of the Incantations spill from my mouth. The more I say, the faster the words expel. Slowing down is impossible. It's as if I'm vomiting uncontrollably.

As the spokesman described, my surroundings are no longer visible. A hazy light surrounds me instead. Within this light is an army of odd creatures. The Geron.

They're not human at all—neither is their appearance amusing, as was Jace's costume at Athena's play. These creatures are *demons*. They have charred bones for armor and two large angular eyes, which are traditionally discolored. The pupils glow white, the sclera is pitch-black, and their irises illuminate unique neon colors. Their lashes are long, white, and made of jagged skin. Their upper lips are large, gray, and sit above a row of fangs that outline their jaws. Two sets of rounded downward horns crown their heads. Their hair burns aflame, and this flame cascades into a great cape. They lack clothing, revealing their jagged rib cages like tree roots intertwined. Instead of entrails, there's nothing but

flame inside. This flame extends far below their rib cages, allowing them to levitate instead of walk. Each one says their name simultaneously, yet somehow, I can comprehend each name.

Uxaar's name is striking. His eyes and hair radiate an intense neon blue. His jawline and chin are the most elongated and robust I've ever seen. I must say one of their names, and it won't be his.

Something unexplainable in me tells me to say another's name. The urge is powerful and impossible to ignore, like the need to vomit. "Roe!"

Bright light swallows my surroundings, until it dims away and I'm back on the stage. To my horror, the ghosts the redhead was so scared of now surround me. My eyes are now open to a supernatural realm I couldn't previously envision. The intruders were repeating words that the crowd couldn't hear, being Uxaar's spokesmen as they claimed they were.

Ahead of me is a Geron with scarlet-flame hair and neongreen eyes. Glowing freckles make his cheeks appear like the night sky. This creature, Roe, forces a sensation like no other onto me. He crashes into me, and it stings as if I've face-planted into a lake. Instead of Roe bouncing off, he absorbs into me like I'm a body of water. The violating sensation thrusts a loud whimper from me.

On all fours, I dry heave profusely. The intruders are asking if it worked. The redhead says I'll be subject to the Geron's power once the stars fall.

Far out above the mountains, a bright light appears in the sky. Erupting from the light, smaller, glimmering stars pass through the atmosphere. These shooting stars crash onto the stage one after another, forming a circle of fading light around my body.

The women and the terrorists all lie unconscious in the wreckage. I'm unharmed by the flash of light, but my hands glow as brilliantly as starlight.

A radiant light that hovers over the mountain snags my eye. This star is more luminous than any star I've ever seen.

"Go and free Secreth, Syann," Roe says like a thought in my mind.





Little do I know that my pressing fear about the Festival of the Stars will pale in comparison to the reality that awaits me.

This morning, I overheard Liam asking my parents for their blessing to receive my hand in marriage. Since he has acquired my father's approval, he intends to propose to me under the falling stars.

The shooting stars that will alter life as I know it.

What on earth am I thinking? Any woman in Seren would rightly think I'm daft for doubting accepting his proposal. How could it be more perfect? The most handsome and eligible bachelor in Seren, kneeling before me as the stars race as fast as my heart? Any woman in my position wouldn't hesitate to give the obvious answer—yes.

This is the answer I plan to give Liam, regardless of my doubts.

I've regretfully come to terms with the fact that the boy who had captured my heart long ago is gone, and that my childish

dreams of reuniting with him are no longer feasible. In the end, Liam offers me exactly what I desire—a family of my own and a partner to share life with. While I may see him more as a friend than a lover, out of all the men in our small town, Seren, there is no one I would rather marry than Liam.

Why risk losing all I hope for, waiting for the one who will never return? No, I'll do everything in my power to avoid ending up alone at all costs.

I go on a walk to clear my mind. Perhaps I can find someone outside my family to confide in about the proposal. My parents can't know that I eavesdropped on their conversation with Liam. I have to play my part, to give everyone the element of anticipation they long for.

The cobble-stone streets are adorned with banners, wreaths, and lanterns, while everyone has dressed in their finest attire for the festival.

I'm no exception. A white silk dress drapes to my ankles. Over it, I wear a green corset adorned with gold embroidery on its cap sleeves. The corset has a skirt of the same color that splits in the front and only extends to knee length. I reserve this corset for special occasions such as festivals and weddings. To complement the dress, I braid my long hair into a half-up, half-down updo. Instead of wearing one of the flower crowns I'm distributing for the festival, I incorporate flowers into my braids.

I approach the town square, an ideal place to lighten my basket of flowers. There, a nearby shout demands attention. "Gather 'round everyone! In five minutes, our performance will begin!"

A wooden stage stands in the square. I've never seen a stage performance at the festivals before. A crowd gathers to listen to a middle-aged woman on the platform. She has a hefty build, dark skin, a wide-swooped nose, lively brown eyes, and coils of black hair tied back with a bandana. This woman, Athena, hosts the horse races at her stables annually. Interestingly, I never cross

paths with her except during the festival.

Behind the stage, two tents are set up, and people in costumes surround them. My curiosity lures me closer to the sight. Someone I never expected to see beside the tents, in costume, is Elouise, the town carpenter's granddaughter. He must enjoy spoiling her with fanciful wooden pendants, as one always dangles from the chain around her neck.

Elouise, my friend, is a rare sight. It's been months since we last spoke. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of her in town. Her older brother, Jace, the carpenter's apprentice, watches her like a hawk. Whenever I invite Elouise to my place, he turns down my invitations for her half the time, if she doesn't first. So, she's only visited my home twice in the three years I've known her. Both times, she appeared uneasy, as if she felt under surveillance. Consequently, I stopped inviting her. Like Athena, she's enigmatic and elusive. Despite this, she was the ideal person to confide in about my fears regarding Liam's proposal.

Elouise notices my approach and enthusiastically embraces me. I return the gesture the best I'm able while holding my basket.

Her floor-length lace gown, as light as her skin, has sleeves that extend to her fingertips. The trimming is gold, matching the costume tiara on her head.

"I've never seen a stage play at a festival before!" I say.

"Yes! We've been working on it for a while now. Oh!" she interjects with a wide smile. "And Jace is playing a part, too. His costume is hilarious! Come see!" Elouise takes my hand and leads me behind the stage, revealing Jace's costume.

She wasn't exaggerating about the humor in it. Blue-and-white face paint outlines his green eyes, while gray paint covers what would be his olive-toned skin. His long-sleeved shirt and cape, extending from his back, match the gray pigment. A brass necklace and bangles embrace his neck and wrists, while a leather belt cinches his waist, securing a long white—skirt? Fluffy fabric hangs to his ankles. It all seems bizarre with his tall and bulky

frame. I imagine he's aware of that.

"Oh my—Jace! What have they done to you?" I laugh.

"I can't fathom how I was talked into this." He rolls his eyes.

"Who are you playing?" I'm even more curious when other people in matching costumes exit the tent. The paint color around the eyes varies.

"Uxaar, the Shadow God," Jace replies begrudgingly. His answer confuses me. Elouise tries to clarify, but Athena summons her to the stage.

I make my way to the growing audience and find a seat on the stone wall that hems the square.

The play commences with Athena gracing the stage. Her expansive, gap-toothed smile remains steadfast as she extends a warm welcome and gratitude to the audience for their attendance. "Today, we share with you the tale of truth—the origins of humanity, our town under the stars we know as Seren, and a place that we don't know, Secreth—the realm of Light!"

The curtains part, revealing a painted backdrop of a radiant castle. On center stage stands a long, gold-painted crate. Elouise lies peacefully on the box, as if in a deep sleep. Behind her stands, in the shape of an arc around Elouise, several more people dressed in costumes similar to Jace's. "Long live Syann! Long live the Goddess of Light!" they chant.

"It all began with the power of Light, bringing our universe to be. It was once unrecognizable from the universe we know. No bad thing, evil, death, or pain existed. That was, until the power of Darkness came within the shadow of the Light. It swept through the universe and disrupted the peace. These two powers opposed a war over Earth that ended in a draw. It left a balance between the two powers within this world, known now as the Dusk realm. This balance created our way of life, day and night, warmth and cold, sickness and health, and birth and death. After death, spirits would drift into the Underealm, the realm of Darkness. Until one day, the first-ever spirit crossed into the realm

of Light instead, a baby girl who had never committed an act of Darkness. The power of Light enchanted the babe's spirit, choosing her to be its form. She was called Syann, the Goddess of Light!"

Elouise, a portrayal of grace, rises to her feet. "I am Syann, the Goddess of Light. My Light, which preceded me, created a kingdom within the Light realm called Secreth. A secret Earth far out of Darkness's reach. Secreth is a land of no death, evil, or exhaustion, but of peace, immortality, and joy. This is the life I intended for those on Earth to have before the Darkness came. I yearn to allow those beyond my realm to live here, where Darkness won't reach them. With the power of the Altar of Light, I can rid the nature of Darkness that is within them. So, I command the guardians of this land, the great and powerful Geron, to do the undone. To venture beyond the borders of Secreth to the outcasts of the Dusk realm and bring them into Secreth."

Athena recounts how Syann would say the sacred Incantations of Light while a human lay on the Altar of Light, purifying them from Darkness and elevating them to an immortal state akin to hers. Following their cleansing, they were granted the privilege of residing in Secreth. Over time, Secreth became a haven for a substantial population of humans, thanks to the benevolent Geron who facilitated their arrival. Secreth flourished, and a harmonious coexistence endured for centuries.

Elouise bids an audience with the lead guardian, Jace, accompanied by two more Geron actors beside him, and they arrive in Elouise's presence. "Uxaar, Captain of the Geron," Elouise speaks. "I request that you and your league depart beyond the border to bring in more outcast humans."

"With all due respect, my goddess—" Jace replies. "The population of humans in Secreth is already generous. If we persist in fetching more, the creatures of Secreth's kind will fear a takeover of Darkness in our land."

"I haven't heard of such concerns, Uxaar. Our land is at peace and will continue flourishing. Do I not have the power to surpass the Darkness, and to extend our borders? All will be at peace. Now send your league at once."

"It will be done as you commanded, oh goddess Syann." Jace bows his head, turning around to the Geron behind him. "You heard her, fellow Geron! Let us go at once!" Jace exits with the others through a sheet prop, representing a portal. Jace and his league gather in front of a forest backdrop. "My trusted allies. What will become of Secreth if we continue to fetch more humans? Another Earth, rich in Darkness and deceit from human nature? I won't have it!" Jace roars. "The goddess claims to be the incarnation of the power of Light. It can't be. She's a human! And as corrupt as the rest of them. Syann only cares for those beyond our borders when it should be the opposite. Therefore, we must free Secreth of humanity by conquering her!"

"How will we do this?" A Geron actor asks. "Syann is far mightier than us."

"We must prove to her the true hell that humans possess. Syann is the Goddess of Light. She will not be able to withstand the Darkness—Bring me two children! One male and female, and we will expose the secrets of their Darkness within. We will take them outside the borders of Secreth, in a den hidden in the Dawn realm. There I will uncover their mysteries."

"On a hunt for answers, Uxaar manipulated the children through spells, physical harm, and torture. Successfully, Uxaar seized the children's minds with these methods," Athena narrates. "In the process, Uxaar ventured depths no Geron had with their power, traversing the line between Light and Darkness. Parallel to when the pure human spirit passed from Darkness to Light and created Syann, Uxaar crossing the line from Light to Darkness made the Darkness consume Uxaar and their every intention of guarding the Light. Uxaar, with their new title, the Shadow God, had the authority to use the Shadow of the sacred Incantations.

Any human who recited these Incantations became Uxaar's Shadow, giving Uxaar the ability to possess their minds and use their power of destruction through their body. Uxaar granted all the Geron who followed him the ability to have Shadows of their own, as long as a human said the Shadow Incantations on his behalf. Many Geron succeeded, and as expected between the Dark Geron and their Shadows, the Great War broke out in Secreth. Numerous humans within Secreth were deceived into saying the Incantations and joining the Geron's forces, and one-third of the Geron forces joined Uxaar's side. Syann was his target, but with her power and the remaining loyal Geron, she made her way to the altar. There, she expelled the Darkness from Secreth by lying on it."

The wooden altar prop rolls onto the stage at the queue of Athena's words. Elouise lies on it and declares through the ruckus of war occurring on stage, "I release the power of Light from my form! For the good of Secreth! And the unraveling of Darkness!"

Jace and the other Geron performers plummet to the ground, their human counterparts freed. The curtain falls as Athena paces briskly to the center of the stage. "When Syann lay on the altar, she fell into stasis. This way, the power of Light diminished the Darkness from Secreth. The Light sealed the borders of Secreth away so Darkness could never lurk in again, and it exiled the Geron who betrayed Syann to the Underealm for a thousand years. After those years passed, the vile creatures crept into the Dusk and Dawn realm like shadows. Here, they were unnoticed as ghosts. While in the Dawn, the prevailing Light uncovered their presence. Syann knew they would escape in time, so she condemned them as powerless spirits. The only way the Geron could recover their lost power was for a human to recite the Shadow Incantations on their behalf. Then that human would become their vessel of power. So unsaid, the Incantations remained for over a millennium after the war. The humans who bonded to the Dark Geron were also exiled from Secreth, for Syann was not awake to cleanse them. So, the power of Light guided these humans in the form of a star, which led to our town, Seren. The Light created this town for us until Syann returns and left us with this prophetic message on a stone in this very square."

Elouise enters through the curtains beside Athena and speaks, "When the Darkness casts its Shadow on Earth, Syann will return in her earliest form through the stars to balance it. For eighteen years, the stars will mask Syann and the Shadow for the balance to remain. Once revealed, the two will wage the final war against Light and Darkness over Earth. In the end, Secreth's gates will open wide, and the Dusk realm will bleed into Night."

"This prophecy was etched here in the town square for over millennia. During the first shower, the engravings vanished along with everyone's memories of them through the power of Light. This protected Syann's identity from Uxaar and his Shadow when the stars first fell eighteen years ago. As the prophecy stated, Syann would return when the Shadow Incantations were said again. She returned through the falling stars, in her earliest form, a babe. These stars have protected us by disabling the Geron's use of power through their human Shadows until Syann is of age to fight for us. The last of the stars fall tonight! So, we must beware! If Uxaar attacks, do not sell your soul by saying the Incantations! Uxaar is coming with their Shadow with the intent to destroy us all. This I know! I own writings of this history, which have kept the memory alive in me," Athena claims. "According to the contents of the writings, tonight the prophecy will pass!"

Many murmurs rise within the crowd at these bold statements. People rightly question how Athena can recall Syann's prophecy while no one else can, or her assertion that the stars have only fallen eighteen times. Everyone has always claimed that they fall annually, and I've always believed them. Although I'm only eighteen years old, the claims from those I trust that the stars have always fallen are sufficient for me.

Angry explosions of voices challenge her words. The crowd

is right—how could she claim such things? If she had writings, wouldn't other people have them, too? And if they do exist, who's to say they are legitimate?

Seren has always been a haven, a small village in the middle of nowhere. Why would she dare disrupt our peace over controversial lore? Surely no real danger is headed toward us.

"Be aware! Please listen!" Athena begs throughout the commotion. "Syann could be any eighteen-year-old woman among us! She is in disguise! When Syann reveals herself, Uxaar and the Geron will bring the dangers the prophecy told us of. Again, I warn you now to stay strong and observant! Do not recite the Shadow Incantations or give in to the Geron's threats! Instead, prepare yourself for Syann's return and our welcoming to Secreth! Thank you!" Athena vanishes through the curtains, dodging the roaring crowd. It isn't long until a council member of the town scurries onto the stage and instructs people to calm down and go about their business.

I make my way backstage, catching Elouise before she goes into the tent. She turns toward me with a wary glint in her eyes.

"I'm supposed to hand out all these flower crowns before the feast starts. I want to gift these to the cast of the play." I offer her one out of the basket.

The glint in her eyes sparkles as she smiles. "Thank you, Brenda! That's so kind of you! The crowd's reaction wasn't what we were hoping for, so this means a lot to me." Elouise puts a flower crown on her head.

"I think some people just took it a little too seriously."

"And you don't? The story should be taken seriously! Have you never heard Syann's prophecy before?"

"I can't say I have. Even after hearing it, I'm unsure I believe it, to be frank with you. It was offensive to hear Athena suppose I could be a goddess in disguise, but you agree with her? It's a preposterous thought!"

"I believe Syann is here among us. She must be!" Elouise's

tone turns downcast again, as if something is eating her up inside.

"Is something the matter?"

She bites her lip as if to conceal her answer from me, but she nods. "If Syann isn't real, then there's no hope anymore. I need her—I need her to exist!" Her eyes cloud. "If she doesn't—my brother could die."

Perplexed, I furrow my brows. "Jace?"

She sighs heavily. "Brenda, I've been dishonest with you. And I want to start by apologizing."

"Dishonest about what?"

She scans around, as if she's making sure no one is spying, but Jace is walking our way. Elouise freezes until he approaches us.

"Elouise! It's ti-" He catches his tongue. "What's wrong?"

I observe her brother quickly. Jace doesn't seem ill—if anything, quite the opposite. His burly arms and legs implicate his strength, surely from his consistent labor with lumber. The eye contact with his sister casts out alertness and care. Is there something more I'm not seeing?

"Nothing. We need to go home now?" Elouise asks. She seems more drained than her brother is. The defense she displayed in our conversation has diminished into defeat against her older brother. Emotions are taking a toll on her, and thanks to Jace, I won't have a clue why.

"Yes, we can change out of our costumes there, all right? Mum is awaiting us," he says softly, before turning to me. "Brenda, my apologies for the interruption, but we must go. You have my gratitude for watching the play."

"You're welcome." I nod.

I shouldn't be surprised. Jace consistently interrupts our conversations, which is why Elouise and her family are such a riddle to me. Any time I think I'm going to learn something new about her, Jace swoops her away.

Whatever Elouise lied to me about, is Jace in on it? Is he really *dying*?

I'm not sure, but I have my own problems to deal with. Instead of seeking solace in someone else's opinion about Liam, I should confront the issue head-on.





It's no surprise I couldn't keep my breakfast down again. Should I consider it lunch since it was past noon when I ate it? Since it was my first meal after waking up, it's still breakfast, right? All I know is the familiar foul taste that glazes my tongue. Swishing a mouthful of water to rinse it away is futile.

Sitting in my lap is a bucket of vomit. I've got a bucket solely dedicated for me to vomit in since it's an unpleasantly common occurrence.

Shakily, I extend my free arm to grasp the carved wooden rod resting between my mattress and desk. I pin this crutch to the ground with my left arm and use it to efficiently incline onto my feet. If I rise too quickly, I'm certain I'll black out. The room is already whirling before my eyes. If only closing my eyes could stop the dizziness.

I trudge sluggishly enough through the house for my vision to remain. This effort turns fruitless once I step outside the back door. The afternoon sky is clear and bright, obscuring my vision with spots, like a partly cloudy night displaying the stars. These spots fade, exposing a woman clothed in a blue blouse and black skirt. She launders clothing by the creek with a washboard. Above her are clothes drying on twine hitched between two oak trees.

This woman is my mum. Even without seeing her face, her brunette locks bound in a bun make her identity clear. The only other female in the house is my sister, whose hair is black like mine.

She doesn't notice me hobbling toward her until my cough exposes me. "Oren?" Her closing footsteps shuffle through the green grass. Her eyes, the same color, dart toward my bucket, then spitefully toward me. Her delicate, thin brows furrow, revealing the light wrinkles on her olive skin. The nostrils of her thin, bridged nose flare until the tension in her face dissipates into a dissatisfied sigh. "Are you emptying the bucket again?"

I don't need to hear her tone or see her face to know she's irritated. She's instructed me countless times to ask her or my siblings to take the bucket out for me if I need help. I never listen.

"How often do I tell you to call for someone to help take it out for you?"

I've lost count. Mum knows this, too, so there's no point in answering her question. "I'm s'rry." I attempt to apologize. "Y-y-you weren't inside—I-I-I thought s-some fresh air w-w-would be good."

Her sigh harbors the same guilt I feel. "No, I'm sorry. The laundry doesn't do itself. You were asleep when I last checked on—never mind. I'll make you some tea... Would you like to stay out here? You mentioned needing fresh air."

I nod, signaling her to assist me in sitting against the oak tree. Unfortunately, I'm unable to reciprocate her help with the laundry, as she would refuse my assistance.

Mum rinses out the bucket downstream and trails into the house with it. The sight of her triggers a pang of self-contempt. She shouldn't have to deal with me this way. Even now, she's missing the Festival of the Stars to watch me, likewise with every

festival since our family moved here from my grandparents' farm. That was nearly five years ago.

Mum insists she doesn't mind missing the festival, but she always appears grief-stricken when facing me. Her mind is distant, stuck in the horrors of the past and the fate that awaits me. Her sunken eyes and trembling hands constantly expose her fear that her youngest son is on the brink of death. Despite all her efforts to help over the years—from physicians, healers, and medicines from apothecaries—her attempts have proven ineffective against my symptoms. Mum is convinced that she has failed me, and I can sense that pressure crushing her. That mutual guilt stifles talk between us.

She's right to distance herself, as I am with her. It's inevitable in my shape that I'll die prematurely. My mother had already lost my father long ago. I was too young to remember him as an infant when he passed away, and she refuses to speak about it. Instead, she built impenetrable walls that were too high to climb and too strong to break. After numerous failed attempts to ask about my father, I realized that she wouldn't let anyone pass through her defenses. So, I watched as those walls rose higher and higher, accepting that the loss of my father had shattered her heart beyond repair.

Can I blame her? Of course not. Loss has marked me, too. I grieve the life I lived with my grandparents, who I loved immensely. They raised me and were like parents to me. Losing them tossed me into a spiral. I've never been able to see straight since experiencing it. Is it because I'm still spinning, or is it unrelenting dizziness?

Since moving, I've succumbed to my illness and have never entered town. I've accepted towering walls of my own that are an incident away from collapsing on me. My body hurts to live in. My heart aches, my head aches, everything aches. I don't want to ache anymore.

I crave peace. Is death the path to achieve permanent oblivion

from pain? Death's hand has been persistently reaching out for me, and I've grown tired of resisting it. Would it be easier to take its hand and surrender? Or do I take the example from my family and keep fighting? I'm never certain.

Mum would never resort to cowardice. She endures her suffering, ensuring that my siblings and I are well cared for. If only I could reciprocate her kindness like my siblings do. Instead, I feel like a burden to her. She has always taken care of me, never the other way around. I suppose I would be doing my family a favor if I died, but there's one reason why I'd never willingly offer death my hand. That *reason* is walking through the back door now—my twin sister.

"Oren!" Elouise announces through a bubbly smile. A crown of flowers rests on her braided hair, which pairs nicely with her yellow dress.

Our brother Jace trails right behind Mum. Both my siblings seem surprised by my presence, which is understandable. I seldom venture out of my room, so it's a mutual surprise to see them here. On the festival day, Elouise and Jace are usually out all day. Why would they return so soon?

Jace approaches me, holding a steaming cup of mint tea. "Mum made you this. Be sure to thank her," he whispers with hostility.

"I w-w-will," I stutter defeatedly, not meeting his harsh eyes. However, I have a hard time ignoring the gray paint smudged over his skin. It must have been for the festival play.

Jace has loathed me for as long as I can remember, for reasons out of my control. Initially, he was jealous of my close bond with Elouise, while my siblings are borderline incompatible with each other. Then, when my accident impaired my ability to contribute with the farm, Jace lashed out at me for Grandpa overworking himself to death, and Grandma dying less than a week later. The loss of them hardened Jace, forcing him to assume the role of the man of the house. All his childlike qualities vanished. Sure, Jace is

twenty-three now and nowhere near a child, but he never felt like a brother. Instead, he's failing miserably at trying to be the father we never had. Only Grandpa was able to fill that void in my heart.

Jace approaches the creek to wash off the paint. Elouise takes his place in front of me, her full lips curling into a smile. "I missed you!" She kneels at my side, not hesitating to embrace me.

I grin back at her. "I m-m-missed y', too, Elly."

She's my light. I couldn't bear to subject her to more grief than she's already known. I know firsthand how debilitating grief is. It killed Grandma. She refused to eat or leave the house after Grandpa passed, and no one could coax her to smile before she died. Since then, I've never been able to eat well or escape the quarantined lifestyle I've made for myself. If I died, would it be the last straw for Elouise to become like me or Mum? Lost in grief, pondering the ghosts our family has become? Elouise's grief would haunt me in the afterlife, even if it were heaven.

"Are you feeling all right today? I haven't seen you out here in some time."

I shake my head. "D-d-do you really have t-t-to ask?"

She sighs sadly before her smile returns. "Well, tonight could be the night that changes! It's the eighteenth star-fall!"

I know exactly what she's referring to, and I dislike it. My sister is in denial, refusing to believe my illness will kill me. To such an extent, she believes in legends of supernatural powers that could come to my aid. Her best friend, Athena, has indoctrinated Elouise in the legend of a goddess named Syann, who is the whole reason the star shower in Seren supposedly happens. On the eighteenth shower, she is supposed to return, which would be tonight, according to Athena. Grandpa always told me the stars have fallen as long as he could remember. I believe my grandpa over Elouise claiming the star's magic has affected everyone's memories. Elouise is so desperate, thinking there's a chance Syann can heal me. I don't believe it.

It breaks my heart that Elouise seeks answers in the most

unexpected places. She feels obligated to provide me with a remedy, even though I never anticipated such a thing from her. Despite my repeated assurances that it's not her fault, she continues to blame herself for my plight. When we were twelve, she suggested we go climb trees in the apple orchard. Little did she know that I would fall and sustain severe injuries to my left leg and head, which resulted in my limp and stutter.

She'd be better off estranging herself from me as Mum and Jace do, but instead, she has dedicated her free time to searching for solutions for me.

"How was th-th-the play?" I ask her, itching to change the subject off Syann, though I'm failing. The play was about the legend of Syann after all, which Athena wrote. Elouise played the role of Syann in the performance.

"So many people showed up!" Her auburn eyes twinkle delightfully. "You wouldn't guess who was one of them! Brenda came to watch!"

The thought of Brenda pains me, a different kind of throbbing that's beyond my physical ailments. It's somehow worse. She's the subject of conversation with Elouise now and then, but I reminisce about Brenda much more often than that. Every day is exact. I even think of her now because of the flowers crowning my sister's head.

Brenda, the only person in town who makes me regret quarantining myself, was my best friend when I lived in the farm village. We met at the age of eight, when she arrived with Seren's importers. On her first day, she introduced herself and asked to play with me. I showed her around the farm stables, where she especially loved the birds. When she left, I longed to see her again. Soon after, we had numerous adventures on the farmland, many of them on horseback. By the age of twelve, I was in love with her, and I'm confident she returned the feeling. However, I fell ill after my accident, and my family relocated when my grandparents passed away. Amidst all these health issues, I never left the new

house or saw her again. Our sudden separation contributed to my depression.

Three years after relocating, Elouise mentioned meeting Brenda in town. A pang of longing stirred within me to inform Brenda I was still alive and I missed her. However, I knew it was best to let her go. My condition would only worry her, the same way it affects my family. Brenda was better off without me, and so was everyone else. Consequently, I made a conscious effort to conceal the truth about my disappearance and the fact that Elouise is my sister. I even told Elouise to ensure that Brenda never discovered her surname, Silvius.

Elouise was unaware of my past friendship with Brenda at the time because I never shared it with her. Elouise always did house chores with Mum during import hour at the farm village. I was concerned if Brenda and Elouise met that Brenda would be more interested in playing with another girl her age. I couldn't bear the thought of losing Brenda as a friend.

Elouise did discover our friendship on her own three years ago. Brenda mentioned me to Elouise, admitting she missed me dearly. If Brenda still longs for me now, it can't compare to how I ache for her. It's agonizing to know Brenda has found a significant other, Liam.

Elouise has told me a great deal about that man. Compared to me, he's the full package—tall, dark, handsome, and the governor's son. She's been smitten with him ever since our move. My sister even jokingly suggested that I should return to Brenda so she can be with Liam. My response to Elouise has always been to be happy for Brenda. It would never have worked out between us. If Brenda has moved on, so should I. It's easier said than done.

"I got you a gift from her!" I had already guessed the gift before Elouise revealed it. It was a flower crown from Brenda's family. Back then, Brenda had taught me how to make them using dandelions from the farmland. She also shared that her family had always made them for the Festival of the Stars. Brenda had a way of making the festival sound like an incredible time. She had always hoped I would attend one day, but I never did. My family used to celebrate the festival on the farmland. After moving, I either watched the shower from my window, the front yard, or not at all. Sometimes, I was too unwell to even get out of bed to watch.

Elouise knows the significance of flower crowns to me. She recounts how after the play, Brenda returned to the backstage and presented a basket of crowns to the cast. I'm incredibly grateful that she brought me one.

"Thanks." I'm beaming, the first time I've smiled today.

"You're welcome, Prince Oren of the Flower People," she jokes, and makes an elegant curtsy.

I chuckle as I notice the pastel shades of cream, pink, yellow, violet, and green woven together seamlessly in the crown. I place it on my head to please Elouise, but tonight, I'll remove it and do what I did with the last flower crown Elouise gave me. I'll press it to preserve it and use it as a bookmark in my journal, ensuring it stays with me forever.

"You fashion it better than Jace does," Elouise says. I chortle.

"It's that horrid costume from the play I had to wear—it threw my style," Jace grumbles as he hangs a shirt to dry.

"If only you had seen his costume, Oren! He wore a skirt!"

"Him seeing this paint on me was enough!" Jace rolls his eyes, redirecting his attention to Mum. "Mum? You still hoped to talk about tonight?"

"Yes. While we're *all* here as a family, we wanted to talk to you, Oren."

My eyebrows furrow as I glance at my mother with unease. They want to talk to me? What would make tonight special? Considering how sick I've been today, I doubt Mum would suggest we all go into town to watch the stars. So, what's the point of a discussion? I lower my head before taking a sip of my tea. "Elouise has been speaking to you about the prophecy of Syann,

right?"

You can't be serious?—that's how I should answer. If anyone were to believe these fairy tales, for Elouise it's logical, but Mum? No! I can hardly believe she has faith in legends. I nod, though; if I respond differently, it will only unnecessarily prolong this conversation.

"Then you understand how it's foretold on the eighteenth star-fall that Syann will be revealed, and according to writings, she is powerful. Her powers include healing and life, which you desperately need." The silence persists, as they patiently await my response. I won't! I refuse to endorse this or allow myself to raise my hopes for some unrealistic fairy tale. My hopes are already lifeless—it's a simpler way to live. Why risk everything now? Why would they attempt to shatter my heart more than it already is?

"Since you won't come to the festival," says Jace, arms crossed, "I'm going to seek out Syann tonight and convince her to heal you."

"I doubt she'll even need convincing!" Elouise adds. "Syann sympathizes with the well-being of humanity and will stop at nothing to rescue them from the Darkness. So why not you?"

The better question is, why me? If Syann were real, why would she go out of her way to break the curse on her land to help me? One person over the well-being of many? A nobody of a person, lacking any significance outside this house? It's a preposterous thought!

"It's not guaranteed, Oren," Mum remarks, which is the first thing said throughout this whole conversation that has made any sense to me. "But we want to put in the effort for you. We wish for you to have a good, fulfilling life."

I share that sentiment. It's a comforting notion that they still care, but their thoughts and hopes won't heal me; neither will Syann. A fulfilling and meaningful life simply isn't in the cards for me.

"What do you think, O?" Elouise asks.

Lily B. Art

I hesitantly answer, "I-I appreciate y' c-caring but mum's r-r-right, there's no-no guarant-t-tee."

"Even then, we're going to try."

I glance at Elouise, then toward my cup. My mind is made up—I'm not giving this even a speckle of hope.

Once my siblings return to the festival, I withdraw to my room. I take the flower crown from my head, picturing Brenda Fields in it. She wears this crown above her wild curls, which are the color of wheat shining in the sun. Her eyes are somehow the same color, which always fascinated me. I miss her more than words: her bright smile, her boisterous laugh, and her endless tales of her life back home. To think, she's out there!

What if Syann really exists and she does heal me? What if I could go out and see Brenda again?

My smile wanes as I reject the thought. It's hope that will lead to heartache, that I can't afford.

On the edge of my desk lies my journal. I reach for it and open it where my charcoal stick sits inside. The page is blank, so I begin to list my thoughts individually. Once I'm finished, I rest the flower crown inside, pressing it flat against the secret words.

The story continues...

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