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Spirit Shout

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Spirit Shout

The following excerpt constitutes the beginning of a novel. *Spirit Shout* is a fantasy narrative that follows a boy named Sulae as he grows and interacts with the diverse spirits and monsters that inhabit his world. He's adopted by an influential couple from a neighboring region and spends much of his younger years struggling to find a place in this community. Later, he travels to discover his origins and pursue his dreams of serving a god. From these adventures, he learns about the intricacies of identity, religion, family, and the supernatural.

It's one of my first misty memories, that terrible heat inside me. Something was trapped in my skin, restless in my body. The dull fire swam through my head and made me dizzy. When it sank down and whirled around my ribs, I struggled to breathe. It brushed my belly and I was nauseous, bothering my parents to no end with my incessant whining.

My short legs were useless when the heat swept to them, so Mama kept me in bed. I wanted to curl into myself and shrink until the fire couldn't find me, but Mama pushed me to lie flat on the quilts. She held a river-cold cloth to my face, my neck, my narrow chest. I whimpered. No matter how many times the rag passed over me, my skin was rough to the touch.

“It’ll pass, baby. It’s nothing but a fever.” Her voice was soft with breath. She dipped the cloth back into the water bowl and brought it, dripping, to my forehead. Small streams ran down into my eyes.

I blinked and squirmed on the damp sheets. “But they won’t leave me alone,” I said, whining. “They’re all looking at me.”

The Snicks on the floor stopped their puttering movement, watching me with hollow gazes. I named them so because they were slender like little twigs; I thought, if I ever snapped one in half, that’s the sound they’d made. Their bulbous heads tilted sideways, as if they understood when I mentioned them. They had skin like pale fire smoke; it swirled and stirred. I shivered as a drop of chilled water trailed down my neck. They had followed me for two days, huddled in the shadows ever since my skin turned hard and gritty. Most of the Snicks laid supine on the rug, clumping in the corners like piles of living sticks. Some wandered around my bedroom, switching between crawling and walking. One lifted his thin grey arms and stuck them to the wall, pulling himself up into a slow climb near my dresser. I looked back to Mama sitting beside me, feeling tears join the rag’s water on my face. She was near crying, too, though her kind smile persisted.

Mama stood and let the lukewarm rag slip back into the bowl, landing in the water with a slosh. “I’ll bring your drinking water. It should be warmed now.”

“No!” I made a fist in the dyed fabric of her skirts and squeezed. “Don’t leave me with them, Mama, you can’t!” The Snicks around the room watched us with eyes like sewing needles. “They’re gonna hurt me!”

“Nothing’s gonna get you, baby, just calm yourself.” Her voice hardened and her tears spilled over.

I brought my other hand around to grab at her, pulling myself closer. My jostling knocked the bowl she'd set on the bed beside me; it tipped too far and crashed to the ground, throwing water on us both. The Snicks flinched as one.

Mama cried out and yanked my small hands from her clothes. "I've had enough of this! I'm calling for your uncle." She spun and rushed from my room, wiping at her face. I knew I was in trouble.

She left the door parted when she went, and two more Snicks came slinking in through the crack. I watched them take measured, creeping steps to the nearest corner where about six of them sat clumped. They seemed to drift a bit between their steps, like they were scarcely heavier than the air; there was a small space after their pointed feet left the ground in which they hesitated, as if deciding whether to come back down or float off altogether. I observed them without power, without will. The aching heat inside me made its way up my left leg.

My Uncle Seddon arrived when the light from my window hit the short desk I used for my studies. Despite it all, I looked forward to his visit; I had so few opportunities to spend time with the Monk.

Uncle Seddon's mouth fell open at the sight of me painted with sweat, old and new. "Oh, Su..." He rushed to my side, anguish on his handsome face.

I tried to smile up at him, but it was lost in a grimace as the heat rolled to the sensitive muscles of my lower belly. I sucked cold air through my teeth.

"He's so much worse than before, brother. He needs help I can't give him." Mama shook her head and let the dark, wispy curls nearest her face get wet with her tears; they stuck to her face in loops and waves against her tan skin. I'd never seen her so disheveled.

Uncle Seddon pressed his broad palm to my forehead; his hand was big enough to cover my face entirely, with fingertips to spare. “The fever’s worse.”

Mama walked to sit on my bed and took my hand. “And it’s visions now, too. He’s been seeing all sorts of things, almost like...” She shook her head again and sniffed. The infestation of Snicks was invisible to her, but they felt too alive to be mere visions.

“That could just be the fever, Riva.” He reassured her with an uneasy smile. “I’ll lay another blessing on him.” His hands moved down until they rested on my bare chest. Seddon breathed deep for a long while, like he had to wait for some silent signal to begin his prayers. He hummed under his breath, then let his low voice into the air:

*Under all and below the deep,
We be the noise atop your head.
Sitting buried as we sleep,
The wind your song, the ground your bed.
Your spirit over-bright and true, This
keeping rises, softly goes.
A God most gentle of the few,
Imparting grace that steady flows.*

The prayer was sweet and light. He said it the old way, the way my Grandmama talked before she fell through to be with the Ghost. His speech was odd with unusual stresses and pauses that soothed me to hear, but my ears were the only part of me pleased. The prayer made the snarl of fire in me buzz and knock around, suddenly violent. It blazed hotter and tore through my organs, leaving a sharp and stinging trail. I was certain it made me a mess, reduced my insides to scrambled, red mush. I begged him to stop before he recited another verse, for the heat

was angry enough without his incantation. My veins were seared where the fire thrashed through me. I squealed and his hands fell away, displaced by my throes.

Uncle Seddon returned to his full height. His face and voice were full somber. “This is a sickness of the spirit,” he declared. He brought his fearful eyes to Mama. “If he won’t be healed with blessings, we can’t do much but let it pass.”

My panting came back down to short, shallow breaths. The heat went slow again and hovered over my heart.

Mama still held my hand, too tight; she made my bones grind against themselves. “Seddon, do you think...” She sniffed and rubbed her wet face hard. “Would they help us?” Her voice broke with a pitiful hiccup that hurt worse than anything to hear.

“Rival!” He admonished her with a hiss. “Be strong here. Those thoughts will breed.”
“I can be no stronger than I am!” Mama wept. She bowed her head in shame. “He’s my boy, Seddon. He’s the only child I’ll ever get. Have mercy...” She lost herself in her weeping and set her sparkling eyes on her older brother.

“Mama,” I croaked from cracked, salty lips. “Mama, don’t cry.” My throat was sore and swollen with tears.

Uncle Seddon looked to my eyes. The overwhelming sorrow in the room seemed too much for him, and he pulled Mama from the room with gentle hands. They stood far enough from the doorway that I heard only mumbling. My attention returned to the Snicks. I noticed the one scaling the wall had reached the ceiling. It crept until it reached the spot directly over my head, then turned its own to peer down at me. I whimpered and lifted my sore arms to cover my face. Being alone with them made the room stuffy with dread. After observing me for a time, the Snick let one of its twig-like arms dangle down. Some of its grey matter gathered at its hand like

rain at the tip of a leaf. The drop grew larger and heavier until it separated from the Snick. I flinched, expecting the drop to splatter on me like water would, but it just spun in the air for a while before drifting down, nearly weightless. When it was close enough, it danced on the soft puffs of my breathing. I scooted to the edge of the bed so the shapeless droplet would miss me. It splattered delicately on the quilt and sprouted two piercing eyes to watch me close.

The fear I felt that night turned the autumn air even colder. I stumbled through the forest on my own weak legs but clutched onto Mama hard; our fingers were numb and stiff inside our gloves. The full-drop moon was like a second sun, a broken one that burned cold instead of hot. It was bright, though, and lit our dangerous path with pale blue light.

“When we get to the Palling Tree, I’ll do all the speaking.” Mama seemed braver now that we had somewhere to go. She quit her crying right after their murmured conversation. “Your Uncle’s made all the arrangements. He’s seen them once before, you know. Told me they’re not so scary up close.”

When the bare trees thinned and Mama took slower steps, I knew we were close.

She looked down at me, her face buried in her hood. “We’re gonna get you right again, baby.” Her smokey breath billowed from the shadows obscuring her. She took a heavy hand and rubbed my stinging face. “My best boy...”

The waiting was hard. A fire swam in me while frigid wind made me shiver on the outside, turning my sweat like ice. Mama pulled me to stand in front of her and wrapped me in her cloak so only my head sat exposed. She kept the Palling Tree to our backs. The great maple looked haunted as ever, with bark like a dog’s bared teeth and branches like a dead thing that’s lost all its skin.

“Is this the boy?” A woman’s smiling voice came with a misplaced gust of wind. The words fell over us as a breeze, pouring over our forms.

Mama dug her fingers into my shoulders and drew me further into her. Our weak sight told us we were alone in the clearing. “Who speaks?” Mama’s voice sounded sharp as the cold.

Silence answered.

Mama covered me entirely with the wool of her cloak, turning me blind. Scared as I was, I struggled to free my unseeing eyes.

“You see us plain. Show yourself, witch!”

A different, deeper voice came from beside us, near enough to touch. “Caution alone keeps us to the shadows. Pray, be not slighted.” This voice came with a body. The tall man stood steady, as if he’d always been in our company, resting just beyond our view.

The moon’s pallid shine acted oddly on his skin; even in the cold and dark, he looked warm, like a hearth smoldered peacefully in his belly. If only my own fire were as benevolent as his. He wore a loose grey tunic and pants of similar fabric. His clothes, at least, behaved as they should; they whipped about in the wind and turned pale when the light hit them.

Mama shrieked and stumbled away from the sudden nearness of him. We scrambled together, tripping over our legs and the length of her cloak.

The steady man stepped close again. “Oh, have you no need of us any longer?” he reminded her of the cause for our meeting with a gentle tone. “Allow me...” His bare hands didn’t tremble as he reached for me.

Mama flinched but didn’t run as her instincts urged her to do. The witch peeled the cloak from my head and sighed with displeasure. Using the back of his unnaturally warm hand, he swiped fearful tears from my cheeks.

“What a lovely little boy you have!” The voice in the wind returned to brush over us once more, spilling shivers on Mama and me. The unseen woman sounded delighted when her gust blew over us.

The man didn't react to her voice. He frowned down at us and appraised our trembling, freezing, aching bodies. “We'll to the cabin. Rude weather a'night.”

A rough wind sent dead leaves into the air, bearing her words. “They're coming back with us?”

“Must be. I won't tell malady from madness as such.” The witch walked past us and mumbled, “Come behind. I have the way.”

Mama unwrapped me from her clothes so I could move freely, then took several uneven breaths and nudged me to walk. She whispered, on the last weak exhale, “Graces low, what have I done?”

“Can I come out now?” asked the girl in the wind.

The man spoke from ahead of us, without looking back. “If you will.”

She fell into step with us. It felt like remembering a familiar piece of knowledge that had escaped you for days, a revelation you’d known all along. Her sudden presence beside us was shocking to see, but not to feel. Her curly hair looked black in the light of the moon, but I couldn’t be certain. She grinned with a brilliance missing from the rest of this somber night.

“How are you called, lovely boy?” Her steps were so light she almost skipped. She seemed a playmate to the forest, the way she moved.

I peeked at Mama for permission before I spoke. “I’m Sulae.” My throat was dry from breathing the harsh air. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Rhya. Can we be friends?” Her smile turned sweet and shy on her young face. “Our friendship wouldn’t last forever, of course. Just tonight.”

I agreed, sensing no danger in her. She nodded, pleased. I took the time to see what little she wore; like the other witch, she wore one layer that would protect no one from the elements. Her dress caressed the ground with its hem and passed light through its diaphanous fabric. I slipped my short cloak from my shoulders.

“Is the fever bothering you?” Mama asked, concerned.

I shook my head and pressed the bundled brown coat to Rhee’s arm.

She laughed and accepted the gift. “Won’t the rest of your skin get cold?”

I shivered badly enough before losing the cloak, but I focused on the heat resting under my right knee and creeping up. “I’m alright. My insides are still hot.”

At this she crouched to scoop me into her arms, though I hadn’t been carried like that for years. She hugged me tight and I smelled her warm skin, like old flowers and crisp snow. “Oh, I’m so taken with you! Let’s be friends tomorrow, too.”

I smiled back at her and swung my feet. “Okay.”

Rhya carried me the rest of the way, with Mama watching close and ready to snatch me back. The cabin nestled itself in the dark forest like it didn’t want to be seen, sinking back into a veil of vines and willow branches. The little wooden house knew it was a secret. Fluffy moss grew between the thick logs and over the round front door. Inside, it was warm like it had soaked up all the heat in the forest. A fire already danced in a great iron stove surrounded by chopped wood waiting to burn. My own fire sat deep near my spine, churning there. Plants in glass bowls hung from the ceiling and stretched down, their leaves welcoming us by gliding over our heads. The rug was red as old blood; it was thin enough that I could feel the ridges of the uneven flooring once I took my boots off.

The witches went to the back of the house right away, leaving me and Mama alone in the main room. She simply drew me into her weary arms and sighed over my scalp. After she kissed my brow, we moved closer to the fire and warmed our thawing fingers and toes. Rhya returned first with a narrow bed roll and laid it flat in front of the flames. She tugged at my wrist and I stretched out on the stuffed mat. With my skin no longer stinging with cold, my wandering fire made itself known again. Mama and Rhya talked about something above me, but the burning took my mind.

The male witch emerged from the back rooms looking much more ordinary than he had moments ago. From my vantage on the mat, I noticed his movements were distracted and quiet. Mama didn't know he'd returned until he stood over her and I don't think he registered her shock.

"I'll tend him now," he said to Mama before sitting on the floor near me. He grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked, lifting my torso up. I straightened my arms on a bathtime reflex and he pulled it over my head. He removed my pants with the same brusqueness and let the fire warm me by pure touch. My young age allowed me to be stripped in the presence of strangers without any thought of preserving modesty. As long as Mama was there with me, I felt secure.

He began by poking around my belly, tickling me. "Will you tell us of the fire?" He pressed his ear to my chest and closed his eyes.

"It moves around a lot," I began.

"And where is it now?"

I lifted my right arm and pointed just below the wrist.

He took my arm and frowned, sniffed and rubbed the skin there. He brought the spot to his open lips and breathed over it for a while with glassy eyes. I looked up at Mama and Rhee, and they looked down at me.

He sat back with a huff and stared at my arm for a while longer. "And what of your visions?"

I told him about the Snicks in our home, the troublesome creatures made of fluid smoke that clung to me. The witch smiled reluctantly, the first I'd seen.

Rhee laughed aloud. "That's not far off, actually. Snicks, I like that."

“Saw you no spirits prior?” He asked, puzzled.
I shook my head. “Only with the fever.”

He reached in the air above my body and made a slow wrapping gesture with his fingers, as if he sought to grasp fluffy down feathers that would flee on the wind should he move too quickly. When he drew his hand back toward him, he dragged a glowing strip of light back with him; it was tangled in his knuckles, threaded through with a delicate weaving. He spread his fingers and let the shimestring fall loose to dangle above me.

“What see you?” he asked gravely.

I reached for the swaying light, hanging like a splinter of lightning. The brightness lit up the tips of my fingers when I got close. The touch of the shimestring struck the bones in my fingers and made the tiny muscles there twitch painfully. I yelped and cradled my spasming hand to my chest.

Mama and Rhya fell to the floor and put urgent hands on me.

“What the hell was that?” Mama shouted in rage.

“Cruel, Stana Auld.” Rhya said with a glare. They both placed fretful hands on my scratchy skin.

The man raised his brows in mild surprise, knowing he’d done no lasting harm. “You’ve my apology, Sulae.”

The buzzing began to calm the moment I pulled away from the strip of light; its leftover rattle turned subtle soon enough, leaking from my tender bones. I nodded in acceptance.

“Be you both unafraid. Tis an affliction most benign.” He patted the smoldering spot on my arm. “Rhya, what need we for a rhaneroot poultice?”

“I’ll fetch it all,” she said, rising to scurry out of sight.

He rose as well and glanced around the room in without direction. “I’ll to the study, then...” Bowing, he followed Rhya to the back.

The younger witch brought back with her several opaque jars and glass vials full of mystery, all carried in a large wooden bowl. Me and Mama watched her scoop golden honey, grind bitter rhaneroot, and peel pungent garlic. The brew was sticky in the bowl before she added a sweet-smelling oil to the mix. Rhee dug her fingers in the mess and squished the contents with gross, satisfying sounds. She enjoyed the work and hummed behind a grin.

When she finished, she smeared the stinking paste over my belly; it was cold and my sensitive skin jumped under her sloppy hands. She giggled and slapped another glob onto me.

“What on earth is that?” Mama asked, scrunching her nose.

Rhee answered while slicking my body down. “Auld thinks he must’ve come into contact with the wrong spirit on accident. It happens all the time, but some people are more sensitive than others. It’s just been messing with his body, that’s all.”

The poultice was vile on my skin; it caked and stuck to every bit of me. With that slimy layer, I couldn’t use my skin to feel the warm air of the room or the flickering of the fire. I was constricted, suffocated, and the burning in my body was slowly smothered like any fire would be without air. I felt its final stirrings beneath my belly button; it spiraled and sunk to my spine where it withered and died.

I was unsettled by the eerie wrongness of it. My body felt too... quiet. Like I’d suddenly lost trace of the threat I’d been marking. “Mama, it’s gone.” My high voice trembled. Mama gasped and covered her mouth with a shaking hand. Her eyes swam in violent relief.

Rhya paused her work and peered into my eyes. The rings of her long, brown hair brushed my arm and clumped with the sticky substance coating it. “What about the brightstring?”

I looked up to the empty air above me, straight through it to the cluttered wall of the cabin. “Gone.”

She laughed and clapped her sticky hands together. Mama whimpered and grabbed onto the cheerful witch, hugging her fiercely. Rhya returned the embrace with abandon and made Mama messy with the poultice. Neither noticed.

I didn't quite share their joy. My skin felt filthy and pinched as the paste began to dry where it was spread thin. “When can I wash it off?” I feared the poultice was intended to be permanent, perpetual protection from that aching heat.

“Right away, lovely boy!” Rhya answered, pulling back from Mama. She stood and helped me to my feet. Her grip was slippery and she giggled as she lost hold of me a few times. She led me to a large closet down the hall with a tin tub full of tepid water. “Don't worry, Mama,” she called, “When I get him cleaned up, he'll be soft as he should be.”

Rhya leaned down to rinse her hands in the tub, then lit a small lamp and set it high. “I'll heat the water for you first, that'll be nice.”

“Don't you need fire?” I whined a little, eager to scrub my skin clean as soon as possible.

She smiled and kneeled by the tub. “I have my own. Hop in.”

I stepped into the water and spread my toes. With her instruction I sat in the lukewarm water and waited. Rhya slipped a hand into the water, breathing heavy. Mama sniffled in the main room, still overcome with the abrupt end of her greatest fear. I heard her whispering prayers

between her punching, shaky breaths. She was there in the back of our moving and talking until I lost her completely. I heard her until I didn't. A hungry silence came and ate all the sounds she made, but left the rest of them intact; the stove still cracked the logs with its heat, the wind still beat against the cabin's walls, the water still splashed as it lapped at me. The silence only had a taste for Mama's prayers.

"It's sweet..." Rhya murmured beside me.

The water warmed around me like the tub sat atop a campfire. My bath crept up in temperature by slight turns until it surpassed the heat of my blood, going further and further.

I got nervous. "Okay, that's warm enough!" I remembered stories about witches eating children and realized there was nothing stopping her from boiling me like a potato.

She pulled her hands from the water and grabbed a cloth to sand my skin down. Mama's whimpering praises returned, fading back into my hearing. It felt good to place her within the cabin's mindless noises again.

When we padded back into the main room, I was fresh and raw. The absence of the burning felt like having one of my senses returned to me; I had my whole mind to spend on my surroundings again. Mama rocked slowly and continued her shaken worship. Rhya lead me to the warmth of the pit and sorted through the pile of rumped cloth there. As she helped me step into my soft pants, my eyes lowered to place my feet in a helpful way. A tugging at my awareness told me to keep my gaze low; a perceptive part of myself let the rest of me know that some hidden, important thing was lying in wait like a playful cat. I observed the witch's focused face, the small wrinkle between her neat brows and the long ringlet that escaped the confines of her ear and bounced its freedom in front of her grey eyes. I trailed down the line of her kneel,

following the greyish-blue fabric of her dress to the floor, where it pooled in a hoop around her. Connected to that, the dark outline of her huddled body on the rug. Her shadow moved along with her, mirroring her essence with precision just as it should against the light of the fire. In one place, though, I found a surprise in the shape; as I looked further away to the crest of her shadow, I saw two thick protrusions rising from her head. The horns curved back toward her skull and forward again, twisting around themselves like a ram's until they came to sharp, triumphant points on either side. I gasped and stared a while longer for the mistake in my vision to correct itself. When the horns maintained their place on the crown of the witch's shadow, I turned to find them on the woman before me. She'd stopped flipping the sleeves out of my shirt and let the article hang dead from her hands. She stared back at me with matched intensity. There were no horns on her head, as if something like that could go unnoticed. My eyes flicked from her warm, brown hair to the conflicting, monstrous shadow. I almost scrambled to Mama and out of the witch's reach, but she shared a bashful smile and disarmed me with her winsome eyes. She peeked over to Mama and brought a slender to her shy, pink grin. I nodded and she slipped my shirt over my head.

Rhya brought another roll from that closet and me and Mama slept by the stove; she made me sleep on the outside for fear I would roll and burn myself on the iron. We shared a blanket and snuggled close, holding tight to the gentle safety we found in each other. Though Mama's tears came to an end, she sniffled all night.

We didn't see the boy witch again. Rhya brought us to the Palling Tree in the morning. The air was dense and wet as she carried me one last time through the fog. She twisted her torso wide as she walked so I would swing and flop around. Her fingers jabbed my sides and made me yelp

and giggle. When I leaned back over the bar of her strong arm, she let me dangle there like my bones went soft.

I snapped up when I saw the inverse tree, its dark branches leaking into the upside down sky. “I love you.” I spoke into her auburn hair and hugged around her neck.

“And I you!” Her embrace grew warmer and tighter, coming to a bone-cracking climax before she set me on the ground. “I’ll see you again, for sure and certain. I feel it here.” She made a fist and pounded her chest, sending the beat deep. When she brought her soft, pink lips to my forehead, the whole world went quiet for a fragment of a second; the silence swept over us and passed just as swiftly. “Go marvelous well, lovely boy.”

Rhya waved wildly to us and hurried to her home. I wanted her to look back at me before I lost her to the trees, but she didn’t turn. Mama and I walked back to our house through the early, foggy air. Our breaths were plush like clouds in front of us and we held hands going homeward.

Daddy was waiting to jump on us. “Where the hell have you been, Riva? Graces low, you two know how to send me under.” He got us inside and fed the fire. “You’re cold as brooks, the both of you.”

We sat by the fire, but the smoke scratched Mama’s throat and choked her. Daddy moved away with her so lighter heat fell on them.

Once she found easy breathing again, Mama spoke. “Su’s all well now, Malon. He’s saved.” Her exaltation smoothed her face where she’d frowned before.

Daddy rubbed her back and looked at me sitting by the fire but I glanced to the flames and watched them fight each other in the red brick pit. I knew we had done a bad thing to call on the witches of the wood. Mama didn’t need to tell me to keep that secret. Daddy saw my bright eyes,

my fresh skin, my contented posture -- all so very different from what should've been. The room seemed to darken and fall with his expression.

Mama tried to catch it. She put a pleading hand on his strong arm. "They healed him, Mae. I know it's dark, but they set everything right again--".

"Enough. It's done, so be done with it now." He gathered Mama to lead her upstairs; she still trembled from a combination of cold and nerves. "Sulae, to bed."

I'd slept enough at the witching house but thought better of saying so. I shuffled up behind them and closed myself in my empty room. It was well and truly vacant; no Snicks whatsoever, seen or unseen. Only me. I had a hot bath that night, and Mama rubbed warm oil into my skin. She marveled at the glide she'd grieved; her hands slipped over my body and found no resistance. Smoothe as morning sun bleeding into the sky.

~

Mama took a cough back with her from the woods and it stuck to her like that smelly salve the witches used on me. It was a little thing at first, a catch in her throat and a few sniffles she blamed on the changing weather, but the cough deepened and would not be waved away; it became persistent and debilitating, a greedy illness that ate the life from her bones. She fell through inside a month.

We laid her low in a pretty basket of woven reeds and straw stained pink. She wore the scarf she liked best, the dark green one inlaid with shining silver flowers. Daddy got it for her on

a trip to Perrotin, before they found me. Sometimes, she would wrap me up in it so tight my arms fused to my sides and I could do nothing but waddle and bump into furniture as I chased her.

Sometimes she would drape it over the posts of my bed when I needed to feel small. I helped the Elder's wives weave her vessel together for something to do; they took care of me when Daddy left me alone, but they found no joy in it. Their sweet faces did not smile at me, and rotted away into scowls when I approached them or said anything at all. I was afforded no more kindness than necessary. They fed me, but with careless slamming of bowls and the cold dregs of the meal enjoyed by others. They bathed me, but with so much harsh yanking and painful scrubbing that my skin ached at night. Everyone was impatient with me, like my presence alone asked more of them than what could be reasonably expected, like I was lucky to live indoors at all.

The Elder's wives passed me around for weeks, enduring just long enough to teach me anew that I would find no welcome among Mama's old friends. They'd been my aunts before, perfectly content to spoil the unusual child come from Baynham. They'd thought it peculiar to adopt a baby with such clear differences, but their treatment never displayed any malice or suspicion while Mama lived. When she fell through, she took a lot of things with her. Miss Rhee pinched and yanked and shoved worse than any of the others, so I left the house after I hadn't heard anything for a while. They'd put me up in their mainroom while all the bedrooms were on the second floor, making my escape incredibly simple, almost like they set it up themselves and waited for me to get the hint. I rubbed my chin as I shuffled to Daddy's house in the dark. My tears washed over the stinging imprints of Miss Rhee's long fingernails; she'd dug them into my jaw to hold it still as she berated me for distracting her young daughter. Apparently stacking hollow wooden blocks took more concentration than I'd thought. My chest physically

ached with the loneliness I felt in those cold houses, made worse by knowing the only one with the power to make it right was never coming back for me.

The Elder's homes were separate from the rest of the village and difficult to discern at night. The nine tall houses sat in a loop facing each other, backs turned to the rest. I found the one I knew best and climbed the porch steps with weak legs. I hesitated there, torn to know I no longer belonged inside. I knocked timidly anyway, crying so hard my lungs sputtered and tripped in my chest. Where in the world could I go?

My apologetic taps to the painted pine shouldn't have been enough to rouse, especially if he were upstairs as anyone should be at this hour, so I stumbled back in shock when Daddy swung the door in. His fuzzy face was drawn in on itself, expressing his confusion and irritation. The sight of me cleared all that away in an instant. Horror, grief, sorrow; all these crashed over his puffy features and took rapid turns like eager, greedy children. I could do nothing but weep and shiver before him, beneath him. My wild wailing grew louder, beyond my reach; I couldn't pull it back or hide it. My grief was too great for my 6 or so years to handle; it pressed down on my heart and filled my belly with poison. I let my sorrow flow free from its inadequate caging and spill messy at Daddy's feet. He picked all of me up, the broken, rotten, ugly bits, and took me in.

I sobbed into him as he held me, rubbing my wet face on the familiar sweet-earth scent of him. He tried to set me down on the plush cushions in the mainroom, but I wailed louder and clawed at any part of him I could hold to. In the end he came down with me, sharing space on the floor. He tried to soothe me with the sound of heavy rain from his mouth, but the rainfall became inconsistent before it cleared up altogether. He held me tighter, spreading his palm against the back of my head and drawing me in.

“I’m sorry I killed Mama.” I sobbed and soaked his shirt with my sadness. “I wanna come home.”

“I shouldn’t have said what I did.” Daddy shook his head, dragging his coarse hair along my scalp. “You’re not cursed and you’re not evil. You’re just a boy, I know that.” He kissed my temple with the corner of his mouth. “I know you loved her well.”

He put me down that night with uncertain movements; he was not a tender man by nature and many of the intricacies of my bedtime ritual were unknown to him. He forgot to give me warm water, tucked my blanket too snug, and pat my back instead of rubbing sleepy circles there; I accepted his care zealously, mistakes and all.

The days following my homecoming felt like learning to talk again after all your milk teeth have wiggled out. My father was as familiar as the first words I uttered as a babe, but now we had to feel around our relationship blind. The shape of our home remained the same, but with inescapable gaps that we kept falling into. Daddy’s responsibilities as an Elder called on him just as frequently as they had before, and he had no desire to abandon his role and tend to me. The matters he dealt with carried consequences, matters of housing and trade and community finances. That work was distributed among the nine acting Elders, but they could do without him no longer.

Daddy decided I should begin my lessons in earnest, at the schoolhouse with the other Elder’s kids. I spent very little time on my own when Mama was around; she took me with her to the markets, to the shops, to spend time with her friends. At home, we played games and read stories and planted vegetables in her garden. I didn’t want to be alone there, in our quiet home brimming with soured memories, so I responded with tentative enthusiasm.

Daddy walked with me to the school house early the next morning. I hadn't been in town since we laid Mama low. The densest part of town had proper cobbled streets and buildings with lots of shiny glass. Most of these buildings still slept, dark and cold and empty inside until their owners came to wake them up. The Elder's Hall sat nestled somewhere near the heart of all these interconnected roads, crossing each other like threads of a knitted scarf. I'd been there exactly once with Mama to sit in on a court case I couldn't remember the details of. I wasn't old enough to attend councils, so Mama usually left me with whichever Elder's wife watched the children that week.

An Elder's work began early, so I came with Daddy while the sun was still getting settled in the sky. My weak nerves made my gut flutter; on instinct, I reached to hold Daddy's hand but changed my mind before I touched him.

We reached the schoolhouse before the Elder's Hall. The building was on a small plot of land with patches of grass growing out front. A hanging wooden sign told me this particular sleepy building was the *Province of Mappony's Schooling House for Elder's Sons & Daughters*. Another, larger schoolhouse educated all the other little boys and girls in Mappony. I hoped I would at least recognize a few faces once the doors opened.

"Do well today. I'll collect you at the end of classes." Daddy smiled down at me without any specific emotion and rubbed my head with an inorganic touch.

He walked away, down the street that would take him to his work. I watched him stride swiftly, his leather bag hanging off his shoulder, until he turned right and vanished. I had no conception of how long the other children would be, so I sat on the stone steps of the schoolhouse. As soon as the morning air eased the worst of my worries, I began to doze off

against the wooden columns framing the short staircase. As soon as I began to doze, the lead tutor was standing over me, kicking my boot.

“Ba’Malon’s boy. You’re early.” The teacher’s skin was paler than most, with cheeks humming pink from the slight chill in the air. His hair was short, neat, and shared its color with newly tilled soil. He stepped past me and opened the door to the house, which was unlocked, and gestured for me to follow him. “Come on. If you’re this early again, just let yourself in.” I helped the lead tutor, Marek Torin, get a fire going in the furnace and push the drapes back from all the windows. Students and tutors blew in as I assisted him with housekeeping tasks, chatting and finding seats at the small tables sitting in two rows.

I was the youngest by far. It should be said that Ba’Malon and his wife Riva were unlike their neighbors in that they never conceived naturally. Many looked favorably upon the choice to take in a stray child in such circumstances, but they waited until their hair sparkled gray and the walk into town took so much energy that they could only afford to make the trip a few times a week. Being that the Elders were close to each other in age, their children were 19 or 16 or 12 or gone, graduated to a position in town or abroad to further their studies.

There was very little play in Torin’s actions, but no cruelty either. He desired things be done in the most efficient way and had no patience for indecision, but he treated us just gently enough that we did not fear him. I did as I was instructed until enough students arrived to begin lessons. The team of instructors split the class into sections and taught varied subjects at varied levels of rigor.

Torin pulled me aside and asked me so many questions my mind clouded over. He tried to assess my knowledge of grammar, spelling, arithmetic, and general topics like categories of living creatures, the cycle of seasons, the order of months, and so on.

By the end, he couldn't ignore my mindless answering and conceded to the limits of my attention. "Go to the library and hand this parchment to the clerk." He gave me a folded piece of yellow paper he dug out from his bag.

I took the paper with both hands but didn't move. "I don't know the way."
He searched the room, then went upstairs. I heard his clunking steps above my head and listened to them over the three lessons in progress around me. Of course I recognized the other children; I had spent no shortage of time over their houses, nor they mine. The Elder's community was small and private, and the adults relied on one another to rear the children. I knew them, and they knew me, but we all pretended otherwise for reasons I didn't understand. Torin clomped down the stairs with his bounty in hand. "I suppose I could've drawn you a map in the time it took me to find this old thing." He chuckled and gave me another folded paper, this one bearing a tangle of black lines that showed the measured streets around us. He outlined my journey in thin gray pencil and told me to ask for help if I got confused.

I felt pride in reaching my destination on my own, with minimal trouble. The map was clear, as were the road signs, and I stood on the stairs of the library sooner than I expected. The steps stretched on and on, wide and grand as any tree the Ghost sent up from the ground. I only saw the front room, a simple antechamber to every secret thing the towering building contained. I gave the note to the clerk, who smiled and bent under her tall desk to retrieve two books.

“Aren’t you precious,” she said with a pout. She slid the two books to the edge of the desk where I could grab them. “You can tell Torin his Latchen copy will be here next week, just like I told him.” She chuckled.

I didn’t know what she meant but nodded anyway. I left before I wanted to, with two thin, cloth-bound books about the anatomy of a human heart and an annotated history of ox husbandry. I inverted the map and studied the backwards lines for a moment, standing still in the rustling streets.

Something hit me hard from the front like I’d walked into a tree. I fell back onto the cobblestones and scraped my hands against the rough rock as I tried to catch myself. A rush of warm liquid splashed on my belly, sticking my shirt to my chest and belly. It soaked to my skin and made me tremble. Through the ache in my bottom and the stinging in my palms, I looked up to the thing I collided with.

A little boy stood facing me, his pink lips trembling around phantom words. He held a small tin cup, now emptied of its contents. The mess he’d spilled on me smelled sweet with a hint of aromatic spice. The boy’s messy blond hair rushed forward into his eyes and he had to brush it back to see. He reached down to help me up; I dragged my sore palms over my legs to free the grit and accepted. Once standing, I pinched my shirt and peeled it from my body with a frown. Another boy came bounding around the corner of the apothecary like his friend had, this one with short, dark curls and tanner skin. He stopped right before he ran into the other boy’s back, throwing himself off balance to keep from knocking anyone over.

He held onto his clumsier friend, then took note of my soggy shirt. His light eyes widened. “Colley, what did you do?”

Colley shifted the empty cup in his hands. "I didn't see him."

The boy with curly hair apologized for his friend, then grabbed his wrist to take him away. "Will you be alright?" he asked, already looking back around the corner.

I looked and found Torin's map soiled on the ground, its markings confounded by road grit and milky tea. I lifted its corner, feeling fear shutter in my chest as I tried in vain to discern the path the man told me to follow. By graces low and true, the books were only dusted with dry dirt and a few scratches.

"You ruined his map?" The sensible boy accused his friend.

"Sorry," Colley mumbled to my feet.

"Where are you going?"

"The schoolhouse," I said, trying not to move my hands. "It's my first day."

"Ah," the tan boy said, midday sunlight slipping down his curls as he nodded. "We can take you to our caregiver. She'll know where it is." He waved me to him, then took hold of my wrist as he had Colley's and lead us both. "I'm Gage, what's your name?" he asked.

"Sulae."

Colley looked across Gage to address me, with no trace of his earlier remorse on his cheerful face. "Do you wanna play a game with us?"

We held contests for jumping, using the stones lining the ground to determine the winner. They taught me a new counting rhyme, one with dirty words replacing the usual script, and I sang them a song Mama made up about pulling me from the soil in her garden by a leafy radish top on my head. We took turns trying to make each other laugh in the quickest time we could,

creating faces and noises that sent us under with laughter. The eager friendship of young children covered us as we walked together, filling in the cracks of our novel relationship.

The Elders decided Colley would come to live at the orphanage when he was too young for remembering. Something wicked about the place he came from made them decide he'd be better off there. Gage, too, came to the orphanage as a baby, but he had a stronger idea of his origins. Gage's parents both lived in Perrotin, the province to the North. A discrepancy in class kept them from marrying each other, though she carried his child. Gage's parents were young and considered little beyond their passions, but the mother's parents bid the baby live far away, where it wouldn't interfere with their daughter's potential. Gage's parents planned sporadic, secretive visits and see their son, though they both had proper families of their own now.

Our games brought us to a court paved with neat stones forming a circular design; the colorful stones made a base of bright rings while smaller reflective stones swirled into leaves and trees and spring flowers. The Elder's Hall gripped my attention immediately; its arches bent and curled toward the sky, painted a watery blue that made me think of tears. Great wooden doors kept the world out, heavy and solid as a boulder.

A woman, pretty and not yet middle aged, spun in lazy circles with a child hanging from her hands; the boy's feet left the stones with her turning and he screeched in delight. When she went still, she was breathless and glowing with effortless joy. Her long, dark hair crashed into her face and she shook it over her shoulder.

The motion brought us into her sight and she scowled but didn't quite lose her smile. "I thought we agreed to meet by second shade," she said. "It's well past."

She had a chorus of kids around her, playing with their pictures on the surfaces of stones and eating sweets mostly. The youngest ones wore big roughspun shirts resembling grainsacks, regardless of gender. As their ages increased, I saw an assortment of pants and shirts in browns and reds and oranges and yellows, some rich and some faded. They wore no shoes on their grubby feet.

“We made a friend,” Colley said, providing an excuse for our harmless mischief. “His name is Sulae.”

I walked to the caregiver for a proper greeting. “I’m glad to see you, Miss Meia.” I placed my hands over the skin at the base of my throat and nodded slow.

A bemused smile bloomed on her face. “And where on earth did you come from?”

“I belong to Ba’Malon,” I said.

She looked to the large stone building, then back to me. “You’re the Elder’s boy from Baynham? I heard about you.” She stepped over to me and held my hands in soft, warm grips.

“I’m very glad to see you, too.”

I told her I needed to return to the schoolhouse and she agreed to alter their course and pass by. Colley looked sheepish when she asked about my damp, fragrant shirt but I kept the particulars out of my answer. A knowing glance to the blond boy told me she knew all she needed to. We were about ten of us as we traveled leisurely through the streets. Most of the children were older than us. Miss Meia asked us to watch over the toddlers, so I held hands with a very verbal little girl with bright red hair and stumbling legs. She told me a very engaging tale about a family of mice living in her ears. Gage carried her younger brother, identifiable by his own vibrant tresses, and Colley bore a rowdy boy on his back who kicked his legs when he wanted Colley to go faster. A clear “Lu Lay La Lo, Lydle Lydle Lo…” rung through the air,

signaling the start of the oldest song we had. We chanted the worn words of *In the Basket Low* with fervor, though many of the singers abandoned the melody entirely, preferring to shout and holler.

I didn't realize how sorely I missed pure and honest play; I thought that was just another thing Mama took with her when she fell through, but I still had it in me, simmering deep. Daddy waited with Torin outside the schoolhouse with a face I couldn't read well. I stopped singing and nodded to both of the men, then rushed to hand the books to Torin.

I apologized for taking so long, but he shrugged. "There was nothing else for today, anyway. We can begin proper lessons after Offering."

I peered inside the windows and saw plenty of students busy with writing and reading. "Are we leaving early?" I asked, looking up at my father.

He shook his head. "We called a recess and I wanted to see how you were faring. I won't be done for some time, I'm afraid." His eyes swept over the band of rugged orphans.

Miss Meia spoke with a tempered tone I didn't expect. "Ba'Malon, if you're in accord, Sulae could come back with us for the night. I know you're very busy and I would be happy to keep him." She cracked a charming smile.

The Elder frowned in a rare instance of uncertainty. "I'm grateful, of course, but... Well, with Offering tomorrow, I'm not sure it's wise."

Miss Meia smirked. "We hold Offering at the orphanage too, Elder."

"Right..." He nodded, considering the plausibility of the proposal. It was nowhere near decent for an Elder's son to cavort with such wild company but having me under another's care

would be terribly convenient. He slid his heavy gaze to me with a raised brow, curious as to my desires.

I nodded, giving my assent. I sensed a burden rising from his body, a reprieve from constant worry.

The walk to the orphanage was a tiresome one, but we sang songs and told stories to keep our young spirits high. The cobblestones dissolved back into packed dirt and we walked in our gang as the buildings and houses occurred less frequently, with long plots of undisturbed grass between them. As soon as the tip of the orphanage poked into view, several kids took off running. The grass looked like it went the whole world round, blanketing wide hills in every direction.

Though I yearned to see the insides of their collective home, I stayed toward the rear of our party with Gage and Colley. After scraping our soles on the homemade mat, we opened the door and walked into a wall of noise. Miss Meia became occupied with preparing evemeal for a dozen children, shouting at the ones committed to running through her kitchen. Their rain-patter footfall and shrieking laughs became loud, then soft, then loud again as they raced through rooms and hallways, up and down the stairs.

The main room was littered with the comforting evidence of happy, young children; wooden rattles soggy with spit and raggedy dolls made from scrap cloth dotted the soft rug, thick enough to roll and play on. The spacious room forming the foundational level was brimming over with sound, filled too full, volume and volume. I felt it ring through my bones and warm the sleeping places within myself.

I joined Gage and Colley in their scheduled cooking duties, and we argued amiably over the most desirable responsibilities. Meia set us on tasks appropriate for our limited abilities and

we worked alongside the caregiver for the better part of an hour. I fetched dried spices from the pantry and ground them on the pestle, once she showed me how. Colley and Gage knead dough for sweet buns. Together, we peeled garlic and crushed peppers for the stew. The scents swirled and hung in the air, aggravating our barren bellies. From the glass panes around the room, stripes of wilting sunlight gathered and made themselves at home indoors.

None could say with any certainty, but our ages were around six years; when left unrestricted, senseless play came to us like worrying to a new mother, some impulse waiting in the blood. Colley threw peas at me and Gage ruined my neat rows of chopped vegetables; I flicked water at Colley and hid Gage's mixing spoon. Meia swatted the three of us, grumbling about the nuisance with a grin in her voice. I ate so well that night I couldn't find anything empty or lacking in my whole body.

After we ate, we crowded on the rug in the main room, laying on large, overstuffed lambswool cushions. Miss Meia read a piece of a story they'd been making progress on for a few nights now. In it, an unlucky boy swam in a haunted lake before the sun rose and made it safe again. The boy transformed into a catfish and his journey back to humanity required many small quests from various water creatures.

Miss Meia's entire name was Meia Bronin Wayek and she'd never lived anywhere but that lively orphanage. She didn't see the need. A woman of uncertain origin herself, she played with simple dolls made of spare linen before she became the one sewing them together. A little wild and a little reckless, she didn't always have the full support of the Elders to keep the place running smooth, but she hadn't messed up badly enough yet to give them cause to act.

Miss Meia stopped reading after the boy successfully retrieved a slimy stalk of rare seaweed for a coy dragonfly. She bathed us perfunctorily, dunking us in hot water that stung my skin. I felt a little raw once I dried and dressed in a borrowed sleeping shirt.

My first night at the orphanage made my mind buzz with a contented mirth long after the other children slept soundly. I sat leaning against the wood of the wall to my left, kept awake by the peculiarity of spending the night in a strange place. I pressed my ear to sanded grain to hear the bones of the house. A single lamp sitting on an old bookcase sprayed calm, orange light over those near the door frame, the rest were assumed in the shadows. The bodies on the floor rose and fell with waves of breath passing over them. It was a sea of sorts; the snores flared up and washed away in bursts. At last, I slid under the waves myself, sinking into the shared sleeping bedroll and claiming a corner or the quilt.

Nights like this came more and more often, with my father asking fewer and fewer questions each time. He learned not to worry if he didn't see or hear me for a few days, and I learned not to expect him to.

I slept through Offering the next morning, as did most of the other children.

~

We were not ourselves in the forest that day. When the sun's light trickled down through the high branches, it dripped on little boys who wouldn't have answered to the names Sulae or Colley or Gage.

I was Spirit Turtle when I spoke; I had all his wisdom inside me. "The witch is in these woods. He's as hungry as a Ghost, too. That rock just told me."

Spirit Fox darted to the large stone I pointed to. It was shaped like a crumpled sheet of letter paper. He felt around it, sniffed its dark gray surface. His stubby fingers poked at the squishy moss growing in the rock's corners and crevices. "It smells like truth. Nothing grows on liar rocks."

"Ask it where the witch went." Spirit Bear said from a short distance away. His black curls were choppy and uneven from when he cut them that morning.

I asked the rock about the witch and listened for an answer. "It said the witch made it blind so it doesn't know. Rocks don't have good hearing."

Spirit Bear and I met Spirit Fox at the rock and placed our hands on the craggy landscape.

Spirit Bear spoke with all the solemnity and gravitas a five-year-old could manage. "When we find the Sayer, we'll get you your seeing back. We swear on everything that lives in the forest."

We all leaned down and kissed the rock, feeling it scratch our tender lips.

"Let's keep going," Spirit Fox said. His pale hair grew past his chin and tangled at the ends. "It's past my bedtime already. My Mom will nip me." Colley always gave himself parents when we played spirits.

We marched further on our path, an obvious trail we couldn't lose. Our interrogations of the forest's residents led us deep into the trees. We were right behind the witch. His footprints were visible in the perfectly innocent formations of fallen leaves and his presence was audible in the scratchings and shufflings of wild critters.

While pressing our ears to the air for clues, we heard something out of place. A thin, high whistle brought us suddenly still. The rushing awareness that we were not alone made the forest into an unsettling place, one no longer suited for play. We were ourselves all over again.

“Who is that?” Colley whispered. His russet eyes were wide. He whipped his head around at every sound, long blond hair fanning out.

We listened as the pitch of the whistle sagged down, then slid up without quite reaching the first note. It went on and on, far longer than a human could blow in one lungful.

Gage laughed as he came to his conclusion. “It’s probably the wind running through something, like the way a flute works.” He let his arms fall back to his sides where he’d clenched them together behind his back.

I liked his explanation. Colley laughed nervously, clinging to the reasonable answer. The trees weren’t so close together that we were hidden from the occasional breeze. In keeping with the spirit of adventure that brought us thus far, we followed the whistle off the trail, leaving torn pieces of bright flatbread on the ground to find our way back. The brush turned thick and grabby against our legs; we were forced to step around thorny saplings and brush errant branches aside. We found the source of the sound on the forest floor, ringing out from a stick of hazelwood. It was a baby branch, thin and forked, stripped of its rough outer layers. The whistling was no louder than it was when we first heard it, though we were so near. Our curiosity was greater than our fear.

Gage bumped it with a dirty toe before crouching to poke it. “It’s singing.”

Colley picked it up, no longer jumpy. “I’ve never met a stick with a voice before.”

He gave the stick to Gage, who turned it over in his small hands, investigating. The whistle was flying about without any discernible melody, slipping around a chaotic song. After checking it out, Gage handed the tiny branch to me. The whistling died the instant wood touched my skin, leaving us disoriented in the wide absence of sound.

“It feels magic, right?” Gage said, frowning.

“Maybe it’s to help us find the Sayer!” Colley squeaked. “The Ghost gave it to us!” He snatched the whistletick from my hand and held it to his mouth. “Which way’s the witch?” he whispered, grinning.

Gage giggled and took the stick, pressing it to his smile. “Which way’s the witch?” He whispered, too, sinking back into the game.

I accepted the stick and spoke into it, my lips brushing over the smooth, light wood. I hissed, “Which way’s the witch?”

We took turns using the hazelwood to guide our steps. Those steps happened to run parallel to our original path, as none of us was eager to be lost. I held the forked ends gingerly, with a grip so gentle the stick slid from my fingers a few times. The long end tilted and leaned with a force I wasn’t sure I imagined, and we followed its slight pull to a familiar clearing. There was a thick, gnarled stump here, one we loved to scramble on top of and slash at with switch swords. Today, the stump was a witch that had been plaguing the forest with his evil intent, stealing the senses of harmless creatures that make their homes in the trees. Along the way we’d met many a voiceless tree, a sightless stone, a creek gone deaf; this only encouraged our righteous contempt for the witch we hunted. We found him hiding in the wood of the stump, refusing to face his crimes. Though we threw stones and knocked with special rhythms and

feigned kindness, the wicked Sayer would not be coaxed from the wood. Even the Ghostgift was useless. Unless...

An idea rushed my mind. "I think we need to break the stick." As I spoke the words, I became wholly convicted of their truth. "The magic's trapped inside."

Gage stared at the stick in his hand with an intense curiosity, trying to see what I saw.

Colley gasped in disbelief. "Are you cracked? We can't break it; it's too important. The Ghost gave it to us. What if we need it again?"

I knew I was right. It felt as if the idea had been in my head this whole time, waiting for me to notice it. "Trust in the Spirit Turtle's knowing. What I say is only true."

Colley still frowned his dissent; it wasn't often that genuine magic found its way into our make believe. He took the stick from Gage's hands with a pout.

I stepped to him and rested my hand over his where he held the stick in a fond grip. "I think this is what she wants us to do. It's alright." I smiled to reassure him.

Colley conceded. His frown eased from his features as he sighed. "Fine, but I get to snap it!"

Gage and I giggled and followed him to the stump. Colley gave the witch one final chance to unseal himself from the stump before the Ghost's gifted magic turned him back to dust. Then, he laid the stick over the hardest point of his knee and added pressure. Nothing happened. He grunted and grimaced, pressing down until the branch bit into his palms. It would not be broken. The branch was thin, no bigger than one of our fingers. We forgot about the pretend Sayer hiding in the stump and confronted this very real mystery. I tried holding the stick horizontally with my hands on either side and stomping down on its middle. Gage laid it flat on

the ground and stood on one half, pulling up on the other end with straining arms. The whistlestick remained stubbornly whole. We were certain of its magic then, and carried our treasure home with a newfound reverence.

The solution to the puzzle didn't present itself until we'd experimented for an hour. Our minds were united toward the task of breaking something divine, a new game. We sat behind the orphanage with our backs to the grassy fields. The air was pierced through with shrieking laughter from far off; the sun felt warm on our heads and many of the children entertained themselves out of doors. The whistlestick never sang for us again. At the urging of my friends, primarily Colley, I toed into the house. I saw Miss Meia cleaning up from noonmeal with the help of a few agreeable kids. She led the little ones in a working song with simple, silly lyrics as they scrubbed out a dozen or so wooden bowls. A child upstairs screamed and then went quiet, trapped in that panicked gap before another wailing breath could be taken. The baby was hurt, or scared, so Meia wiped her soggy hands on her apron and rushed after the noise. When she left, I stepped into the busy kitchen with feigned innocence, as if I genuinely considered rolling up my sleeves and joining the other kids in their cleaning. I got close enough to swipe a knife coated in mashed carrots and tuck it away under my shirt. My heart raged against the bars of its cage as I scampered back to my friends.

They raised their eyebrows in surprise to see me succeed. I thought they assigned me today's thief because they trusted me, but I supposed they weren't expecting any feats of bravery from me yet. They were kind and generous with their joy, so much that I often forgot we were made of different stuff. I hoped, eventually, I could make them forget too.

We moved from the back of the house to the lip of the forest, going just deep enough for the trees to keep us safe from curious eyes.

I picked a thick, shiny leaf from a tree and wiped the knife clean of remaining food. “Do you have the stick?” I asked them.

Gage pulled the hazel branch from his pockets and set it on the ground. We crouched around it and got to work. The knife had a brittle blade about the length of my small hand, fingertip to wrist, and it wasn’t terribly sharp. The light wood of the handle had stains from countless meals passed, and I held it so tight my knuckles cracked. I pressed down with all my strength, and then with all the weight my young body could lend, in my effort to saw the Ghostgift in half. The tip of the blade kept rolling away from the stick’s rounded surface.

“Hold it still,” I said, my arms growing weary.

Gage and Colley both grabbed an end of the stick so I could saw against something solid. I varied the angle and the pressure, wishing at least to mark the branch’s infallible skin.

I gave up with a huff and thrust the useless knife in the air. “One of you try.”

Colley was not a gentle child; when he took something, he snatched it. He brought the blade to the branch before I could hold the other end steady. I reached to take his place on the forked side of the stick. The blade wobbled in his wild hands and slid along the length freely, lodging its point into the back of my moving hand with all the force he brought to bear. The blade didn’t have far to go before it collided with the thin bones living under my fragile flesh. We panicked and pulled away at once, me dragging more of my hand along the blade’s edge, him slicing in the opposite direction. The gash grew and spread, snaking over my pale tendons and blue veins to meet my knuckles.

Colley threw the knife far into the bushes, like it was going to bite him next. He screamed in horror and covered his eyes. “I didn’t do it! It wasn’t my fault!”

Gage left his wide eyes exposed. His hands shook as they crept to his face and rested over his parted lips. “Sulae, your hand...”

I couldn't believe how bright my blood was against the deep tone of my skin; it was fire made liquid. It burned like fire. That slit oozed vivid blood like glowing ore leaking from a cracked crucible. I watched it bubble up and spill over onto the forest floor. It streamed from me, streaking my brown skin with rich red and running between my fingers.

Gage took his shirt off and covered the messy wound, tying the sleeves to make it stay. The cut stung more when he pressed against it and I yelped, coming back to myself. I was quietly grateful that it was Gage's shirt, as the boy tended to wash his clothes himself and more often than Meia saw to the others'. Colley wept into his arms as Gage fiddled with his improvised bandage, muttering mindless placations. I began to whine from pain and fear.

A loud crack struck our ears and shut our mouths. I felt the sound inside me, like the deep, wet snap of bones breaking or the heavy, resonant clap of thunder exploding across the sky. The crack came from the whistletick at my feet. We jumped and shielded our ears from the sharp bang, then peeked down at the ground. The stick was shattered, as if every futile effort we'd undertaken to break it became effective at once. The damage from all our bending and stomping and sawing had been stored up like rain in barrels until it met some unknown threshold and turned the stick to splinters. Beside the hazelwood chips, my bright blood pooled in the dips and curves of dead leaves; they caught the spattering drops and held them, but the splinters drank my blood with a desperate thirst, just as parched as Mama's crunchy plants with no one left to feed them water. Scarlet soaked into dusty yellow and dyed some of the scattered pieces.

When the jarring crack dissipated, it left a pulsing ring in our ears. The deafening pitch made me dizzy and I closed my eyes to fight the tilt that pulled me off balance. Tears were forced from my eyes as I clenched them shut. I wanted to go home.

Something rubbed the skin over my ankle and startled me. A naked boy with dark skin like mine squirmed on the ground, rustling the dirt and brushing bloody leaves around. His breathing made his bare belly swell grotesquely; his lungs rattled like Mama's before she fell through. He was skinny, with long bones punctuating his trembling body. Like the pieces of the shattered whistlestick, he wore vivid drops of my blood all over him. The boy clutched at handfuls of dirt, his own body, my legs, grabbing anything he could graze with his pointed fingers.

"Guys..." I took one hesitant step back from the writhing boy. My friends opened their eyes to stare at him. He grunted on the ground and flipped onto his belly. With heaving breaths, he cast his thin arms in front of him and dragged himself toward me. Leaves crackled under him and went sailing as he panted into them. I stepped farther back, and he shambled after me. He was slow and used a tremendous amount of energy just to keep up with my unhurried shuffling. He began to sweat and groan from hauling the weight of his slight form, but continued toward me with an adamant strength of will, like he feared what would happen when he stopped moving. After each slow step away, I watched him struggle and battle to make up for the space I put between us; I knew I was being cruel.

I didn't take another step after that. I let him crawl to me with trembling, overworked muscles and a face rubbed with soil and blood.

Gage warned me from a bit away. "Don't let him touch you. We don't know what he is."

I considered running to join the safety of my friends, beyond the distance that this weak boy could chase me, tired as he was. He got close enough for me to see how dirty blood flecked and caked in the fine lines of his searching hands. In no small feat of determination, his neck lifted his head to look up at me. His black eyes gleamed with all-consuming fear and glossy tears welled over the rim of his lids. He opened his mouth, but I only heard the pitiful sound of his pained breathing. As I held his plaintive, pleading gaze, the terror I felt was replaced with heartrending sympathy.

The tabby in the church's attic brought a litter of kits into the world at the start of spring season. They overlapped and tucked themselves into warm, downy balls of breath. The babies peeped and mewled constantly before their gummy eyelids could come apart. When I asked why, Mama told me they were scared to be left alone.

I didn't pull away when he grabbed at my legs, his fingers scraping at my shins below the rolled cuffs of my thin pants. Gage hissed at me to get back, but I ignored him. Crouching down, I placed my face near his. He exhaled in relief once he knew I was done running from him and relaxed his weary muscles. His face hit the ground hard and he shifted his head to the side with a whine. The last of his strength, it seemed, rested with his long, bony hands; he wrapped his fingers around my legs and held tight, shaking.

"All's well," I murmured, soft as a hum. My intact hand ran over the coarse, short hair on his head with a soothing pattern. I stroked his scalp, neck, shoulders, and felt his breathing relax. A languid version of *In the Basket Low* eased from my open lips and he sunk into the unyielding ground even further. His grips on my ankles fell slack.

"I think he's sleeping." I whispered to Gage and Colley, who observed from afar.

They walked gently to avoid waking him. Colley wiped his damp face with rough passes of his hands and followed Gage to my side.

“What’s wrong with him?” Colley asked, keeping Gage between himself and the slumbering boy.

“Where did he come from?” Gage mused, his eyes trailing a path of disturbed leaves to the place we’d first seen him.

I saw the answer to his question in the mess of hazelwood slivers. “He was just born.”

“But he looks as old as us,” Gage said with a frown.

“He’s not a baby, he’s just fresh like one. No one taught him how to walk right or say words.” I stood and let my hand disconnect from his skin. “We should help him.”

There was no such thing as privacy in the orphanage, so we managed the boy’s limp body onto my back and set off into deeper woods. Gage walked behind me with cautious arms raised incase the stranger’s weight pulled him too far away from me. The boy’s body felt hollow, like he only had an inch or two of flesh and muscle wrapped around an empty core; he felt like the idea of a boy rather than a real one, a drawing not yet colored in.

We adhered to the path we knew best and set him down against the stump of oak that was often subject to any playful projections we conjured during our games. The boy slumped like his spine was still soft but stayed upright. His powerful eyes were active and flicking around; no one could be certain how long ago he woke. Colley, Gage, and I sat facing him in a curious curve, with heads inclined and brows furrowed. The boy just stared back.

I decided to begin the same way I would with anyone else. “My name is Sulae.” I pushed my bandaged palm gently into my chest, with plenty of layers separating my broken skin from the pressure. “This is Colley, this is Gage. They’re my friends.”

They nodded obediently when they heard their names.

One of the boy’s arms twitched at his side, making Colley flinch. He brought the skinny limb to his chest and let his head dip forward before catching it and returning to his original position. He mimicked us. I smiled at him and, after a beat, he matched it. His black eyes glinted with an unexpected brightness; a curl in his grin made me think he was smarter than I’d assumed. I asked him if he had a name and he answered with observant silence.

“Maybe he’s mute. That means he can’t talk.” Gage offered. He ran his hands up and down his bare arms, probably wishing he could have his shirt back.

“Did you forget it?” I asked quietly. Despite his underdeveloped frame, he looked no younger than we were; he was too old to never have had a name.

Colley hummed in understanding. “You can get Miss Meia to give you one. That’s what she had to do with Tora and Aflin.”

“Saril, too,” Gage said. “They were babes when they got here and their parents didn’t leave names with them. That happens sometimes.”

At this, the naked boy stirred and scowled. He opened his mouth slightly and sort of wheezed. Then he took a deep breath and tried again. This time, rough words welled up and spilled out of his mouth. “...Not nameless...She will not name me.” His voice scratched its way out of his throat.

I knew at once that our speech was not a natural thing for him. When he formed words, he did so with no help from his lips or tongue or teeth. They tumbled out from somewhere deeper inside him, fully formed, and his mouth had no cause to move with them.

I shivered. Colley whined and moved closer to Gage, who locked up in alarm.

The boy stared at me with dark, heavy eyes. “Sulae... I am Tarsakatanem.” He spoke through an open, gracious smile, as if he’d given me a gift.

I tried and failed to recreate the long string of syllables. “Tarsa... Is Tarsa alright?” I’d never heard a name like that before.

He laughed, a rhythmless huffing that resembled a suppressed cough. “As you will.”

I nodded, harboring a persistent curiosity on the back of my tongue. “Were you really living in the whistlestick?”

“You’re the first thing I remember.” The words tumbled from his mouth and landed hard; he meant them, or at least needed us to believe so.

It didn’t matter much to me. “Do you want to come home with us?” I chirped. Gage and Colley threw surprised looks my way, but I pushed on. “Miss Meia takes us all in, just tell her you need a place to stay.”

“Feed me first. Feed me and I will do this thing. I will go to your Meia and say your words.”

We scrambled to empty our pockets of the food we’d brought on our expedition: honeyed oats, a handful of dates, and chunks of dense flatbread baked that morning, anything we had tucked away in waistlines and knapsacks. We offered it all to Tarsa and he took it in his mouth like air. He gained buoyancy right away, the rest of him finally matching the agility of his gaze; his body wasn’t too heavy for him anymore.

Tarsa stood and swept dirt and grit from his legs and face. My blood crusted on his puffy cheeks, so I spit on a frayed corner of Gage's shirt and smudged it away. Tarsa stood passively. Upon remembering he was all bare, I began to lift my shirt over my head. I danced and twisted to get it off with only one hand, then offered it to Tarsa. He accepted the dingy homespun with a vacant look, as if he wondered what was expected of him.

I used my good hand to flip the cloth around in search of the right openings but gave up quickly. I had only recently begun dressing myself; with the added elements of one functioning hand and the task of dressing another, I had no hope. "Gage, can you help him?"

Gage was slow to approach Tarsa and grabbed the shirt gingerly, afraid to touch his skin. Gage murmured for Tarsa to lift his arms and shimmied the rough material over Tarsa's narrow shoulders. The shirt billowed around his torso like a sail but left his bottom half uncovered.

"Colley, give him your pants," I said.

Colley frowned, his ruddy eyes going hard. "Why do I have to?"

"Because I already gave him my shirt and Gage's is keeping my blood in." I lifted my hand, still smoldering bright under the makeshift dressing.

His face fell to a pout when he remembered what the knife had done as he held it; his guilt turned him sullen and docile. He sighed slipped his pants down, then handed them to me. I handed them to Gage, who held them low for Tarsa to step in. He flinched when Tarsa gripped the back of his neck for balance but kept still until the boy was fully clothed. The borrowed articles were ill-fitting, but the clothes fit us just as poorly and they were intended for our bodies. Miss Meia was no great seamstress, though she did as best she could. We rolled his sleeves and cuffed his pants as we did for ourselves.

Tarsa taught himself to shape his speech the way we did, not just reproduce the sounds alone. I caught him mouthing words after we spoke, studying our sentences silently. He stepped as if discovering the strength in his legs with every fall of his foot, careful not to overextend. Tarsa trusted his thin legs more the farther they carried him and walked with increasing confidence as we moved on the homeward trail.

A natural divide developed between my two friends and Tarsa and I, a small gap caused by my rushed acceptance of such an unknown creature. They walked ahead of us by a small but noticeable margin, no doubt expressing their concerns to each other. When I looked at the boy beside me, I saw such focused attention on the rustling canopy above us and every piece of the forest that met the soles of his feet. He flexed his arms and hands every now and then, making odd formations with his stiff fingers and then relaxing them. If he sensed my staring, he met my eyes and shared with me a smile so kind and honest I could only think of happy things. I watched him meet the world on that walk home and I didn't feel cursed at all.

Our route brought us past the site of the cracking; the debris of hazelwood and blood spatter marked the place where we found Tarsa, crying and shaking and clawing at the dirt. He switched to be on the opposite side of the path and kept his eyes firmly on the ground in front of him.

When that place was behind us, I asked him a timid question. "Are you magic?" I whispered. I thought he was, and I wanted him to be.

He fixed me with an appraising stare and a small smile that felt slightly mocking in its nonchalance. "Are you?"

If I had any magic in me, it was the bad kind. I shook my head and, after a contemplative moment, shrugged. I thought of the witches' hands on my body, their fragrant medicine and

enchanted water soaking into me. Along with the burning that lied dormant somewhere unknown, residual magic was entirely possible.

We arrived at the orphanage with one more kid than we left with and no real plan to explain this anomaly to Miss Meia. She tended to the smallest children outside, laughing as babies climbed over her and squealed from her quick fingers against their ticklish parts. They sat on the grass behind the house, so we had no chance of sliding by unseen.

Miss Meia lifted her head and left her dark hair to dangle over the baby in her lap, a little bald girl not yet a year. The baby lifted a fat fist and grabbed the hair above her face, pulling with irregular jerks of her ill-controlled muscles. Meia let out a startled “Ooh!” and grabbed her hair above the girl’s grip to save her scalp from the worst of the tugging. She saw us trailing home, looking rougher than usual. “Look at the state of you! Colley, where the hell are your pants?” Her puzzlement swirled with humor until her eyes stuck to the sloppy bundle of cloth tied to my hand; there was not a hint of play in her eyes then. “What’s that about?”

The stinging across my skin throbbed back to life, thriving under the attention. I stuttered. “I... we were climbing...” I looked down to Gage’s soiled shirt, then to my friends. Miss Meia huffed and moved the baby to her waist, standing. With her free hand, she grabbed my wrist and dragged me in the house. My friends followed silently.

Miss Meia sat me on a stool, then went to the kitchen rooting around for a glass bottle of water from the brook and a small basket filled with gauze and ointments. She poured the water in a shallow pot and placed it in the stone oven’s opening. My friends and I shared helpless expressions with one another as she worked. She placed the baby on a quilt on the main room where she flung her chubby legs about and failed to flip herself over onto her belly.

Miss Meia returned with an irritated set to her jaw and unwrapped my hand with careful touches. As the shirt's layers came undone, more and more blood became visible through the fabric. She inhaled when the final bit of sleeve was peeled away. The dried blood clung to the material and I winced as the tug agitated the wound.

She groaned in relief and loosed her anxious breath. "Graces low, I thought you'd lost a damn finger with all that blood." She fetched the warm water and soaked a clean cloth, then held it to my skin to unsettle the black crust around the wound. "Your Daddy'll have me strung up if anything happens to you."

She tucked her long, dark hair behind her ears and set to work. I was shocked to see the cut didn't look all that scary or dire in the kitchen's familiar light. Miss Meia sat opposite me on a stool of her own and cradled my hand in her lap. On the table, she swirled together a plaster of red clay, yellow spices, sharp ginger, and powdered cloves. She spread a glob of the mixture on fine, white gauze and evened it out with smooth, deliberate swipes of a spoon. I held my hand steady as she bound the wound tightly, going 'round and 'round until my hand was nearly twice its original size.

She topped it off with a neat bow, then kissed the top of the bandage. "Don't get it wet. And, if it's all the same to you, how about you stay over a few more days? I don't want Ba'Malon seeing it like this." She spoke with an embarrassed smile that made her look as young as she was.

She held my hand in two of hers and looked over the rest of my company with a smirk. "Any more maimings I should know about?"

We shook our heads. I thought we'd be able to slip upstairs then, but her eyes snagged onto Tarsa at the last second. He didn't hide behind any of us or shrink away with an unassuming posture; he stood like he had as much right to be there as any of us, even standing close to watch her treat me. Miss Meia gasped and looked at the little stranger closely. He stood near to her, watching her treat me with wonder on his open face.

"Who are you?" Miss Meia asked, bewildered.

Tarsa leaned back from staring at my hand and looked around, perhaps surprised by his own presence as well. He nodded to Miss Meia. "My name is... Tarsa. I need a place to stay." She laughed once, a high-pitched exhale from the absurdity. Children came to the orphanage by placement of the Elders or anonymously on the backs of trading carts or, sometimes, with their own parents when times got tough. They didn't come here of their own will, with manners and friends and an adorable bucktooth smile.

"Who are your people?" She took in the tone of his smooth skin. "You didn't come all the way from Baynham, did you?"

"I was born here," he said simply. His smile got sweeter, his eyes rounder as he blinked.

Miss Meia laughed and shrugged. "Well, Tarsa, I'm Miss Meia. Looks like you've met this lot already. They can show you around." She stood and gathered the ingredients to be put away. "I guess if anyone's looking for you, they'll be able to find you here easy enough." She winked at Tarsa, who winked back.

We ran upstairs, floating on the high of tiptoeing around punishment, and taught Tarsa how to play spirits.

