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The Ruins of Memory: A Dream of Grief

Alex Huber

Holly Meadowlark, a map-maker in the city of Dove's Roost, is many things. He's timid and quiet, afraid to make waves, terrified of large crowds; he's gentle and sweet, though he doesn't like it when others call him that; most of all, though, he is a dreamer.

That was the word his older sister, Clove, used when he was young and his mind would wander in circles until he was lost in the spinning clouds. A dreamer.

"You're such a dreamer!" she would tell him, laughter making her voice light as birdsong as she teasingly flicked his ears. "You have to come down from the clouds someday and join the rest of us in the real world."

For all her teasing, though, Clove was always patient with him, and he never had the sense that she was looking down on him. He was a dreamer who struggled to focus on the present, but she never seemed to truly mind. She indulged his childish whims, and even after they grew into adults and the rest of their family rejected Holly, she remained by his side.

Clove was his best friend, and with her support, his dreams were able to flourish.

Now, though, Holly has no more room in his heart for dreams. Instead, a shadow hangs over him, weighing down his bony shoulders and tired eyes. The dreamer has come down from the clouds, and he feels all the worse for it.

Clove is gone now, and she's never coming back.

--

Clove Meadowlark's funeral is a quiet affair, a far cry from the boisterous and loud person she was in life. It's practically the social event of the year, with people from all around Cerulea coming to pay their respects. Holly didn't even realize that Clove had so many friends, though he'd always known she was outgoing.

The crowd gathered in the Church of Reverie at the heart of Cerulea is full of people that Holly doesn't know. Men, women, and others all stand together, dressed in formal attire and holding back tears.

Holly only vaguely recognizes most of the people here, but they're all unfamiliar to him besides that. As such, he hangs back at the edge of the gathering. He's never been one for large groups of people like this, even if they're all ostensibly gathered to celebrate the memory of someone important to him.

He's nothing like his mother, who is at the heart of the crowd of mourners, dramatically crying out to all who listen. Holly is trying not to listen too closely to her words, but they wash over him nonetheless.

“Clove was the greatest daughter I could’ve asked for,” she sniffles as she hangs on the arm of her new husband, Holly’s stepfather. “The world is darker now—I’ve lost the brightest light I ever had.” She makes a sound like a hitching sob in the back of her throat and dabs her face dramatically with a white handkerchief, looking out at the gathering as if gauging their reactions. As she does, her eyes meet Holly’s for a moment, and he sees a flicker of an indescribable sort of emotion there before she looks away and continues to wail.

Holly’s stomach churns and he looks away, his hands beginning to shake. He feels a gentle hand on his shoulder, and he can’t help but flinch as he turns his head to look behind him. The stranger behind him is a dark-haired man, a little shorter than he is, with a concerned furrow in his brow and a gentle frown on his face.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine,” Holly says automatically in a voice he doesn’t recognize, thick with unshed tears. A long, awkward silence passes, and the man speaks again.

“Were you close with the deceased?” the man asks, obviously trying his best to be polite.

Holly has to stop himself from bristling at the words, knowing that it’s a lot to expect anyone to remember him. It’s been years since he returned to his hometown, and his appearance has changed since he began his hormone treatments. A small, nearly delirious part of him realizes that, to the other funeral guests, he might as well be a stranger.

He takes a deep breath and turns, facing away from his mother as she lets out a particularly loud, heartfelt cry.

“She was my sister,” he tells the man. Holly expects the man to wince, to apologize, to tell Holly that he’s so sorry for his loss. What he doesn’t expect are the words that come out of the man’s mouth next.

“Oh. I’m sorry; I didn’t know she had a brother.” He sounds genuinely confused, and when Holly glances at him out of the corner of his eye, he sees this reflected in the man’s expression.

There are a lot of things the man doesn’t know about Clove.

A sharp, angry stab of bitterness strikes Holly in his stomach and he takes another deep breath, exhaling slowly through his nose. He takes a few more, and slowly the sharp pang goes away.

“We’re twins,” Holly adds. He’s not sure why he’s still having this conversation, but his mother hasn’t looked at him for more than a few seconds since the event started, and he just wants someone to acknowledge his grief, too.

This only seems to make the man more confused. “But... I thought her twin was a girl.”

Holly doesn't say anything, but he turns his head to look fully at the man. He keeps his expression carefully blank, waiting for the moment that the man catches on. A small, vicious part of him hopes he feels bad about it, even though this is an honest mistake.

Now that he's looking at him properly, the man does look familiar, in a distant sort of way. Maybe they went to school together. Holly files that away for later.

Understanding dawns on the man's face, then, and he grimaces as he realizes his social blunder. His pale face reddens and he reaches up with one hand to straighten his tie.

"I apologize," he says, "I-I didn't-"

"It's fine," Holly says, quickly cutting the man off. "You didn't know; nothing to be sorry for." Any fleeting pleasure he might have felt at watching the man squirm uncomfortably is gone now, and he just wants this interaction to be over.

The man looks like he wants to say something else, but before he can, Holly hears his mother's sobs grow louder, and he realizes that he can't stand to be here any longer. As politely as he can, he offers the man a strained, thin-lipped smile.

"I think I need some air," he says. "I'll see you around." Holly realizes then that he doesn't know the man's name, but he doesn't want to stick around and find out if it means he has to be around his mother any longer.

The man nods, and once again he goes to say something, but he doesn't get the chance. Before the man can speak, Holly quickly excuses himself, keeping his head down. He feels like he's trembling all over, and the tears that had been threatening to spill over since this event began are beading at the corners of his eyes.

Holly has dozens of thoughts running through his mind now, but only one of them rings true.

None of this is what Clove would've wanted.

--

The funeral lasts long into the day, only coming to a close when the sun begins to set. Holly, as he expects, is tacitly not invited to lay Clove to rest with their parents. He knew it was coming, and it doesn't hurt as badly as it would if it'd come by surprise.

It does still sting, but he does his best to ignore it. He knows that, to his mother and her new husband, he isn't truly a member of the family anymore. Not like Clove was.

So, when the time comes and Clove Meadowlark's ashes are scattered in her favorite field of flowers, Holly isn't there to see her off. Instead, he's at the local tavern, an aging establishment that's been around since long before his birth and will likely continue long after his death.

There's a band playing a song he doesn't recognize as he sits at one of the booths, hunched over with his head resting on his arms. He hasn't had a drop of ale, as he's not one for alcohol, but he knows he must look a miserable sight nonetheless. More than once, he's caught the barkeep, an older woman named Cherry Greenwood, shooting him sympathetic glances as she goes about her duties.

He tries his best to ignore her.

Holly hasn't been back to Cerulea since he left town when he was younger, seeking greener pastures in the northern city of Dove's Roost. Not much has changed since he left, but he supposes that's to be expected. Cerulea has never been one for evolution, remaining stagnant in many ways. Holly Meadowlark leaving town was perhaps the most unusual thing to happen there in many years.

He knows that his return has prompted confused whispers, prolonged stares, and intrigued glances from the townsfolk. That's to be expected as well, all things considered. Holly is a man now, a stranger even to people he was once close to.

A soft sigh escapes Holly as he wonders if it was worth it to come home at all, even for Clove.

"Hey," a familiar voice says, startling him out of his thoughts. He lifts his head to see the man from before, the one who had spoken to him at the funeral. The man has a sheepish smile on his face, as though he has anything to be embarrassed about.

Holly blinks at him, not sure how to respond. The man speaks again.

"Sorry to bother you," he says, "but I think we got off a bit on the wrong foot earlier. You look like you could use a friend to talk to." When Holly still doesn't respond, the man looks nervous. "I-I mean, if you want me to leave, I will, but I know sometimes it helps to talk to someone when you're feeling down."

After another moment, Holly finally speaks, looking away from the man's face. "Yeah, you can sit, that's fine." A beat passes, and he adds, "Thank you."

The man takes a seat across from Holly, settling into the booth with an ease that speaks to being a frequent visitor. Maybe it's just Holly who feels uncomfortable in this space.

"Can I buy you a drink?" the man asks. Holly grimaces.

"I don't drink alcohol," he explains with a nervous little shrug, "but thank you for offering." The man nods and smiles at him.

"I don't either," the man confesses with another awkward smile.

Before Holly can say anything else, though, something seems to abruptly occur to the man and his amber eyes grow wide. He quickly holds out his hand.

“I just realized we don’t know each other’s names,” he says with a chuckle. “I-I’m Valerian Whitewillow. And you are?”

Holly stares at Valerian’s hand for a moment, then he cautiously reaches across the table to take it. Valerian’s hand is warm and calloused from years of hard work, and his grip is firm yet gentle as he shakes Holly’s.

“Holly,” Holly says. “Holly Meadowlark.”

“It’s nice to meet you properly, Holly.” Valerian’s smile softens, then, and Holly takes the opportunity to really look at him.

Valerian looks to be around Holly’s age, maybe a little older. He has the beginnings of laugh lines at the corners of his narrow eyes, and his skin is a warm, sun-kissed tan, a few shades lighter than Holly’s own. His hair is long and dark, pulled back into a ponytail, with a few strands escaping to hang loosely in front of his face. He’s handsome in a way Holly immediately feels guilty for noticing, and something about him is achingly familiar.

Holly withdraws his hand, clasping his hands on the table as he averts his eyes. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

If Valerian is aware of the thoughts swirling like a whirlpool in Holly’s mind, he’s gracious enough not to say anything as he rests his own hands on the table in front of him, a pleasant smile spreading across his face.

“How long are you in town?” he asks.

Holly shifts a little in his seat. “Not long. I’m mainly just here for the...” He trails off and clears his throat. “Well, y’know.” Somehow, he still can’t bring himself to say the words.

“I’m sorry again for your loss. And for making a complete ass of myself earlier.” Valerian really does sound sorry, and a part of Holly feels strangely touched by the realization.

People usually aren’t *sorry* to Holly for anything, especially not the occasional social faux pas, especially not people from his hometown. He truthfully doesn’t hold Valerian’s mistake against him, irritating though it may have been, but it’s... nice, in a way, to receive an apology.

Suddenly, Holly feels very, very bad for earlier, for wanting Valerian to feel guilty about making such a truly minor mistake.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” he says with a wry smile. “I’ve heard a lot worse.” That doesn’t seem to make Valerian feel better. He’s quiet for a moment, and Holly looks up to see that he’s frowning deeply.

“That doesn’t make it right,” Valerian says softly. There’s a look in his eyes that makes Holly a little uncomfortable in a way he doesn’t understand or know how to address.

So, Holly does what he does best. He deflects and changes the subject.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” he blurts out before he can stop himself. Valerian seems surprised, and Holly is suddenly grateful that his dark skin hides the way his face heats up in embarrassment. “I-I just mean, you seem a little familiar. I feel like I’ve seen your face somewhere before. I don’t mean-”

Valerian chuckles, holding up a hand to stop him. Holly trails off, face burning so fiercely he wonders for a moment if Valerian can tell even against his brown skin. Thankfully, if he does, he doesn’t feel the need to call him on it or tease him.

“Maybe you saw me once or twice when we were in school,” he offers as an explanation. He thinks for a moment, shifting. “I... don’t think I was ever close with you or Clove, but I saw you both around sometimes. I was in the year above, if I remember right.”

That makes sense, Holly supposes, but that only prompts him to ask another question, frowning his brow curiously.

“Why come to the funeral, then?” he asks. “If you weren’t close with her, I mean.” It’s the question that’s been burning in the back of his mind all day, seeing the funeral full of veritable strangers, but he hadn’t been sure how to ask it.

Valerian shrugs. “I mean, I don’t think most of the people there were very close with Clove.” He snorts, as though sharing a joke. And maybe he is. “I think your mother invited half of Cerulea.”

“Sounds like her,” Holly sighs, running a hand over his face. He thinks about how she’d been wailing at the center of the crowd at the funeral, making the scene all about herself and her personal grief with no room for anyone else’s.

His mother has been like that for as long as he can remember. Everything always has to be about her, and if anyone else objects, then they’re the problem. Miss Jasper Meadowlark never learned how to share the spotlight.

He remembers the look on her face the night he left home for good, when he told her his gender and his plans for the future. She probably would’ve been less shocked if he’d struck her, and to this day her angry, defensive words are seared in his skin like a brand.

Holly’s bitter, angry thoughts must show on his face, because he notices Valerian shift a little uncomfortably.

“Do you mind if I ask a personal question?” Valerian asks. Holly glances back at him, and he sees that the other man is watching him with an aching sympathetic frown on his face.

“Ask away,” Holly says, unsure of where this is going. Valerian glances down at the table, wrinkling his nose. When he looks up at Holly, he looks even more uncertain of myself.

“Why aren’t you with your family right now?” There’s no judgment in Valerian’s words, only gentle worry, and it’s enough to make Holly feel vaguely nauseous.

"I wasn't invited," he says simply, averting his eyes so he doesn't have to see Valerian's face when he responds.

Valerian makes a sharp sound, a sudden intake of breath. It sounds angry, though it's clearly restrained. "Wasn't Clove your-"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Holly cuts him off. His shoulders tense and he lets out a sigh, resigned. "Just... it's complicated. I'd rather talk about literally anything else right now."

For a long moment, Valerian is quiet, and as the seconds tick by Holly can feel his clasped palms growing clammy. As discreetly as he can manage, he wipes them on the sleeves of the deep red button-up he's wearing. He still doesn't look up at Valerian, terrified as he is of what he might find there. Finally, Valerian speaks.

"Alright," he says calmly. "We don't have to talk about that if you don't want to." There's a cautious note to his voice, but Holly is too relieved to pay it much mind. He chances a glance back at Valerian, and he sees that his expression is carefully neutral. At this point in his life, however, Holly has more than enough experience reading between the lines to decipher how people really feel.

Right now, if Holly is right, Valerian is very, very angry, but he's restraining himself for Holly's sake. Distantly, Holly wonders what would happen if his mother were to walk through the door to the tavern right now. Would Valerian confront her?

He's not sure how he feels about that.

Instead of dwelling on the idea, Holly changes the subject quickly. "So, ah, what do you do for a living?" It's not the best segue in the world, and Holly never has been the best at small talk, but Valerian once again doesn't call him on it. Instead, he chuckles a little.

"Nothing exciting," he says. "I'm just a farmer. Er, rather, my mother is. She and my sisters handle all the important work; I mainly just help with whatever extra work around the farm needs doing."

Holly perks up at that, a genuine smile spreading across his face. "Well, I think that's pretty exciting."

From there, conversation flows easily between the two men, and as the hours pass, Holly becomes much more relaxed and open. Eventually, his shoulders feel less heavy, and he almost forgets his parents' rejection.

Almost.

--

Holly remembers the first letter he ever received from Clove after he left home for the first and final time. He still has it saved, pressed between the pages of the book of folk tales she'd always read to him when they were children. Sometimes, late at night, when the ache of

missing his family is powerful, he pulls it out to hold it between shaking hands, and he reads it to himself by candlelight.

He's never shared the letter with anyone, and since Clove's sudden death he hasn't had the heart to read it to himself.

The night after the funeral, when he sits alone on the threadbare cot in the room he'd rented at the local inn, he holds the book of folk tales in his hands. Carefully, he thumbs through the old, thick tome until he lands on one page in particular, at the end of his favorite story.

The story is an old one, and he hasn't heard or read it in years, but he remembers it by heart. It tells the tale of the brave adventurer Sir Saffron Brightside and his sister, the wise Lady Buttercup, as they travel the world in search of glory. Some of Holly's fondest memories are of reenacting the story with his sister. Clove always wanted to be Lady Buttercup because she was the smartest, and Holly always wanted to be Sir Brightside because he was brave.

In hindsight, Holly wonders if Sir Brightside featured in so many of his daydreams for more than just his bravery.

The text is faded and discolored, the pages wrinkled and worn from decades of being pawed at by curious young fingers. As Holly runs his finger along the intricate ink, he thinks about how Clove had laughed as they chased each other through the forest, pretending to be adventurers. She'd always called him a dreamer and teased him for having his head stuck in the clouds, but he knew she enjoyed their games as much as she did.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Holly turns the page to find the letter, stashed away next to the final illustration of Sir Brightside and Lady Buttercup watching the sunset together. The letter feels and looks fragile, weathered and old despite spending years pressed in a book.

With trembling hands, he takes the paper in one hand and sets the tome aside, resting it next to him on the cot where he sits. Then, he turns his attention to the letter, which he unfolds slowly. As he does, the paper makes a creaking sound, sounding as though it might crumble into dust any moment now.

As he reads the first words, Holly feels like he might crumble into dust as well.

To my dearest little brother,

He'd forgotten how Clove liked to dot her i's with hearts.

Unbidden, tears begin to well up in the corners of Holly's eyes and he clutches the weathered scrap of parchment close to his chest. A sob tears its way out of his throat, his shoulders shaking as he folds in on himself.

Holly wonders if Sir Brightside ever felt the same grief he feels now, so crushing and heavy it feels as though his chest is aching and his bones struggle to bear the weight. Did his hero ever weep, alone, at the memory of his dearest sister?

He finds he isn't sure what answer he's hoping for.

--

The next morning, Holly takes a walk by the beach.

Cerulea is far from the oceans, but just past the swathe of trees surrounding town is a lake that spans so widely it may as well be a small sea. It's pleasantly warm today, a soft breeze ruffling his curly hair as he walks. He wears a loose, white shirt that hangs off of his bony frame and a pair of brown trousers, and with his hands in his pockets he strolls along the white sands.

Clove had never liked the beach, but Holly has a fond place for it in his heart. It was one of the few things they disagreed on when they were growing up, though they never had any actual arguments about it, as far as Holly remembers.

As he walks slowly, he turns his head to gaze at the vibrant blue water, and a deep sigh escapes him. Though he hasn't felt truly at home in Cerulea in a very long time, nature, especially the waterfront, has always brought him peace in a way not much else has. It's one of the few things he's missed about his hometown since moving to the much more urban Dove's Roost.

When he's alone in nature like this, he never feels like he has to pretend to be something he's not. He doesn't have to be Holly Meadowlark, the outcast; and he doesn't have to be the daughter his mother wanted him to be. He can just be himself.

Eventually, he comes to a stop at his favorite place on the beach, where the townsfolk constructed a rickety, wooden dock many years ago. The dock isn't anything special, but Holly remembers spending hours there as a child, and even though she hated the beach and the water, Clove often came with him.

There's no one on the dock today, which Holly is grateful for. Holly walks to the end of the dock and takes a seat at the edge, allowing his feet to dangle just above the water. He takes a deep breath, enjoying the taste of the salty air in the back of his throat, and releases it in a long, slow exhale. His hands come to rest in his lap.

It really is a beautiful day.

Holly isn't sure how much time he spends sitting at the dock, enjoying the weather and allowing his mind to wander. He finds himself looking up at the sky, admiring the shapes of the clouds slowly drifting through the expanse.

When Holly was a child, he dreamed of being an explorer, a strong and brave pioneer testing the limits of the world and learning all there is to learn. As he grew older, his dreams became a little more realistic, but he still clung to the idea of traveling the world someday. He and Clove had talked about it in their letters, but things never seemed to work out.

Holly clenches his hands into fists and lowers his gaze to the water as the realization suddenly hits him, nearly knocking the breath from his lungs.

Clove never will travel the world with him, now. If he wants to follow his dreams and explore, he will have to go alone.

A quiet, choked-off sound escapes him, and he lifts a hand to cover his mouth as if trying to keep it from escaping. He blinks rapidly to try and stop the stinging tears he can feel trying to form, and he takes deep breaths. The breaths are shakier than he means for them to be.

Holly hears the sound of footsteps against the wood of the dock, and he turns his head to see someone walking towards him. He tenses, but he soon recognizes the person coming over, coming to stand a respectful few feet away.

"It's a nice morning," Valerian says in lieu of a greeting. He's dressed down today, wearing a deep green vest and tan trousers tied around his middle with rope. His hair is still tied back, and he has a relaxed smile on his face. In his hands, he holds a small leather pouch.

"It is," Holly agrees after a moment. He can't help the amused snort that escapes him, and he shoots a lopsided smile Valerian's way. "You keep showing up everywhere I go. Have you been following me?"

"I'm just going about my business," Valerian says, rolling his eyes playfully. "You must be the one following me."

"Sure I am." Sarcasm practically drips from every word, but rather than take offense, Valerian snickers. Holly laughs with him, and once the two are calm, Valerian gestures towards the dock.

"Mind if I sit with you?" he asks. Holly nods and shifts over to make space. Valerian takes the spot next to Holly at the edge of the dock, leaving a respectful distance between them but still sitting achingly close.

For a moment, the two are quiet, and Holly's eyes drift towards the clouds once more.

He hasn't known Valerian for long, but he finds the other man a comforting presence somehow. Perhaps it's just that Valerian is the only one who seems willing to acknowledge Holly's right to mourn his sister, or perhaps Holly is just desperate for a friend after being away from home for so long.

"What's in the bag?" Holly asks absently, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the pouch in Valerian's calloused hands.

"Oh, it's something for you, actually," Valerian says. That catches Holly's attention, and he turns his head to look at him curiously. Valerian looks proud of himself, the perfect picture of the cat that caught the canary, and for a moment Holly can't help but be wary.

"For me?" he asks. When Valerian doesn't elaborate, Holly looks down at the pouch again. It's small enough that there probably isn't anything dangerous in there, and he's reasonably sure that Valerian wouldn't try to hurt him, but still, he feels uneasy.

As if sensing where Holly's mind has wandered, Valerian's eyes widen slightly and he quickly says, "It's not anything dangerous, don't worry! I just... well, here, let me show you." He reaches into the pack and pulls out a pair of small, smooth pebbles. They're almost perfectly round, and when he places them in Holly's hand, they feel cool to the touch.

"What are these?" Holly asks, gazing down at the pebbles with wonder. They don't seem like much at first glance, but the smooth stones have clearly been sculpted and shaped by skilled hands. One is purple and veined with white, while the other is a sparkly white that shines in the light from the sun above.

"They're crystals," Valerian explains, and when Holly looks up at him he sees that Valerian is rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I, ah... crystal stuff really isn't my thing, but my sister Amarylis is really into them. She said that they can help a little. Something about healing energy."

Holly isn't so sure if he believes that, as he's always been a skeptic about that sort of thing, but he's still touched by the gesture in a way he doesn't know how to explain. It's the nicest thing anyone has done for him since he came back to Cerulea.

"What kinds of crystals are they?" Holly asks, looking back at the smooth stones in his hand.

"Lepidolite and moonstone," Valerian says. "I think Amarylis said they're supposed to help with healing the mind after... well, after something like losing a loved one. Don't remember what they're supposed to specifically do, though."

Valerian looks suddenly very sheepish, as though he expects Holly to laugh at him, but all Holly feels is a rush of warmth. It may be a small gesture, but he appreciates it more than he can express. For a moment, he simply stares down at the rocks in his hand, feeling choked up.

The moment passes, and Holly finally speaks.

"Thank you," he croaks. "That's... that's very kind of you." He glances up at Valerian, and he receives a smile in response.

"Of course," Valerian says softly. "I may not have known Clove very well, and you and I might not know each other well either, but no one deserves to go through grief alone."

The words strike a chord in Holly, and he stares down at the water as he runs them through his mind.

No one deserves to go through grief alone.

A soft sigh escapes Holly as he comes to a decision. It's an abrupt one, and perhaps it's foolish, but his desperation to share his grief is strong and he realizes in that moment that Valerian is *safe*. He's a stranger, but he's shown more care and concern for Holly than any of the people he was once actually *close* to.

“I want to show you something,” Holly says abruptly. Valerian looks a bit surprised, but Holly doesn’t elaborate as he gets to his feet and puts the lapidolite and moonstone in his pocket. He holds a hand out to Valerian and offers him a hesitant smile.

“It’s nothing bad,” he promises, “but... it’s important.”

Valerian blinks at him, then he nods. He places his hand in Holly’s, and he allows him to pull him to his feet.

“Alright,” Valerian says with a smile of his own. “Whatever you want to share, I’d like to see it.”

--

The room Holly rented at the local inn is small and rather unremarkable, but Valerian doesn’t seem to mind as he sits with Holly on the cot. In his hands, Holly is holding the book of folk tales.

“When I was a little kid,” Holly begins, “Clove used to read stories from this to me to help me sleep.” He chuckles, ignoring the pang in his heart as he does. “We liked to act out the stories of Sir Brightside and Lady Buttercup.”

“That sounds like fun,” Valerian says with a small grin. “I bet you two made quite the adventuring duo.”

“Oh, we did,” Holly snorts. “We made a lot of progress exploring the local forests, but our parents never let us go far enough to actually discover anything.” He decides not to tell Valerian that he never liked exploring after dark, so he was usually the one insisting they go back inside before they could actually find anything interesting.

“Better than my sisters and I,” Valerian says. He shifts, crossing his ankles. “We used to play pretend that we were members of Madame Blackthorn’s Band of Guardians, charged with protecting Cerulea from anyone who might want to bring it to ruin.”

The two share a laugh, and a genuine smile spreads across Holly’s face. “That sounds adorable,” he says. “I’m sure the town was in good hands.” Valerian looks at him wryly, and he snorts a laugh. After a moment, Valerian joins in, and the two laugh together until Holly feels almost breathless.

It feels good to laugh, and Holly’s chest feels almost lighter.

“What did you want to show me?” Valerian asks once they both calm down. Holly pauses for a moment, rubbing one of the corners of the cover between two fingers.

“It’s a letter,” Holly says. “The first one Clove sent me after I left Cerulea.” Without further ado, he opens to the page where the letter is kept, and he carefully pulls it from where it lies nestled in between the pages. He holds it in his hands, nervously rubbing the thin, cracked parchment between his fingers.

"I have the other letters she's sent me in my apartment in Dove's Roost," Holly continues. He knows he's babbling a little, and he keeps his eyes on the page. "But I like to keep this one with me... it's really important to me. She wrote me a letter every week, and at the end of each month she would send them all in a bundle..." He falls quiet, a sudden lump forming in his throat.

A gentle hand rests on his shoulder, and he glances over to see Valerian offering him a soft, sad, gentle smile.

"It sounds like you two had a wonderful friendship," he says softly. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Holly."

Holly smiles back at him, and he clears his throat to try and make the lump disappear. It works, at least a little. "Thank you. I... Um, I was hoping to read this to you. I've never shared it with anyone else before."

Valerian looks touched as he realizes what Holly is offering him, and he glances at the paper before his eyes settle on Holly's face once more.

"Of course," he said. "Whatever you're willing to share, I'd love to hear."

Holly smiles, and he shifts to lean a little more towards Valerian, who squeezes his shoulder before removing his hand.

After clearing his throat one more time, Holly begins to read.

"To my dearest little brother..."

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Three days later, Holly and Valerian stand in a field of flowers just outside Cerulea. There are dozens of kinds of flowers there, many of them round with dark pink petals turned up towards the sun. In his hands, Holly holds a small bunch of flowers he'd bought from the local florist, small white blossoms with long, thin petals shaped like drops of rain.

It's Clove's favorite field, the place where Holly's mother and stepfather had spread her ashes the night of her funeral.

For a long moment, Holly stands there with a hesitant expression on his face as he stares out at the meadow. They look beautiful, though he's never been a particularly good judge of that kind of thing.

A hand rests on his back, and Holly looks to his right to see Valerian offering him a gentle, understanding smile.

"Take your time," Valerian says. Holly smiles back at him, then he turns his head back to face the field.

He takes a deep breath, and he starts to speak.

“Clove,” he begins, “you... you were the best sister anyone could’ve asked for.” That feels like a good start. “You were always a little crass, direct, and mean, but you were always there for me, and you were never shy about your feelings. I always liked that about you.” He feels choked up, then, and he has to take a moment before he can continue.

When he can continue again, his voice is hoarser than before. “I... I’m really going to miss you.” It feels good to admit it. “You were there for me when I went through hell, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to express how much that means to me. I wish I could’ve been there for you, too.” His hands clench unconsciously around the flowers.

Valerian pats his back, and he shoots his new friend a grateful glance before he looks down at the flowers in his hands. They look small and fragile, as though if he holds them too tightly they’ll fall to pieces.

Holly feels like he and the flowers have that in common.

He takes a deep breath, and he continues his speech.

“There’s nothing I can do to change the past,” he says, “but... I’ll always remember you, and I’ll always love you. And, maybe someday, I’ll see you again.” The thought is enough to bring a small smile to Holly’s face, though it’s a small and sad one. He’s never believed in any sort of afterlife, but it’s a nice thought, and it brings him some comfort now. It’s a nice dream, at least.

“May your memory be a blessing, Clove Meadowlark,” he finishes. With that, he kneels down and places his flowers in the grass, among the pink blossoms at his feet.

It’s not much of a funeral, and he’s not sure if it’s what Clove would’ve wanted, but it feels better than the ceremony from a few days prior. It feels more like closure, and it feels more personal.

“May her memory be a blessing,” Valerian echoes. When Holly gets to his feet, Valerian is looking at him with a gentle, almost proud expression on his face.

“That was nice,” he says. “I think Clove would’ve really liked that.” Holly smiles back at him.

“Thank you,” he responds. “I... I think so, too.”