

CHAPTER 4

Whose turn is it?”

“Not it.” Lin lobbed a kernel of caramel popcorn upwards, missed its descent by a millimeter. It bounced off his nose and rolled under a shelf. Fat-faced dolls in ragged magistrate wear, chignons still sleek, watched us from beside princesses in full jūnihitoe, cascades of emerald and golden damask, their brows dewed with brass. I stared as a fly hatched from the husk of a boy’s small porcelain skull. Of all the figurines, this was the only one to have not survived time’s touch. It looked like someone’d grabbed him by the jaw, squeezed until the cheekbones snapped, fracturing inwards. A sacrifice.

The thought filled me like ice water.

The dolls—an audience of dozens, set on thin shelves—stayed silent as Talia padded back inside from

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wherever she had been, their hands on their thighs, suspended on the brink of breath. It was late enough to lose track of the hours to exhaustion. Talia made us parade through every room until we found this one. This one because the last six lacked the right atmosphere. I'd thought it was stupid at first. But as we told stories of drowned things and hungry ones, it started to make sense. There was power here, even if it was of our own invention.

We killed a candle with every story until there was one last flickering survivor. Its light twitched through the shoji screen. The walls here frothed with waves and rough ocean. Through its lambent waters, the paint glittering as though tintured with crushed sapphire, woodblock octopi watched us incuriously.

"I'll do it." I flipped my phone onto its screen, pounded down the last Asahi, chasing down the thin, flat flavor with Lin's plum wine. My teeth were just sugar now, furred with so much plaque I couldn't stop working my tongue over them, over and over. Like a horse. Like a dog that'd gotten into a bag of toffee. Back. Forth. Back. Forth. "I've got a story."

Faiz spoke up first. Sometimes, he still remembered how to be a best friend. "You don't have to. You've had a rough night. Just sit and enjoy—"

My vision gyred, one way and then another. I'd

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drunk too much. I didn't care. I swayed upright onto my feet, bracing against a shelf. "No, no. I'm okay. I've got a story. Blow the rest of your shit out of the water."

"I don't know. Faiz's one about his ex's uncle was pretty good. Makes me never want to go back—" said Lin.

"Ssh." I pushed a finger to Lin's mouth. Shadows frescoed the corners of the room, elongated its angles, bent them into nightmare bodies. Bile soured the back of my throat and I swallowed against the coming hangover. I was sick of this. Sick of everything. "Ssh."

The world swung.

"Sit down."

"You going to tell me to go fetch next?"

"Jesus." Faiz got up, grabbed a water bottle, tipped its neck at me. "You're drunk, Cat. Sit down before—"

"I make a fool of myself?"

"He didn't mean it like that." No break between Faiz fucking up and Talia stepping to the plate, cause and effect, the two synthesized into one perfect choreography. I hated them for that. This wasn't how any of it was supposed to go.

"I've known Faiz—" I strangled the rest of the sentence and sat down again, a knot of acid sizzling just under where my ribs fork from my sternum, like chapel doors or a wishbone. *I've known Faiz since before the*

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thought of fucking him was a wet spot in your crotch. I gulped down vomit, two fingers bolted over my lips. “Just let me tell my story.”

Phillip exhaled. “Christ.”

“Fine,” Talia said, while Faiz continued standing, looking like he had at least another paragraph left to recite. But he gave in, stroking his fingers through Talia’s hair as he lowered himself beside her, knees bumping. He wouldn’t compromise on hydration, however, wouldn’t stop bobbing the bottle in my direction until I snatched the container and took a swig.

The water went down like a swallow of light. “Okay, okay. Let’s do this. Once upon a time.”

You know how poets say sometimes that it feels like the whole world is listening?

It was just like that.

Except with a house instead of an auditorium of academics, collars starched, textbooks like scriptures, each chapter color-coded by importance. The manor inhaled. It felt like church. Like the architecture had dulled its heartbeat so it could hear me better, the wood warping, curling around the room like it was a womb, and I was a new beginning. Dust sighed from the ceiling. Spiderwebs fell in umbilical cords, a drape of silver.

It felt like the house talking to me through the mouths of moths and woodlice, the creak of its foun-

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dations, the little black summer ants chewing through what remained of our food like we'd left bodies, not balled-up, slickly gleaming cling wrap. The air smelled of raw meat, lard, and bits of seared protein.

I hoped to hell in that moment that *she* was listening.

Half because I was tired of being unloved, being pitied like a fawn panting its last handful of breaths into a ditch. Half because I hoped it was all true.

A little bit of magic.

Even if it was hungry.

Even if it was a house with rotting bones and a heart made out of a dead girl's ghost, I'd give it everything it wanted just for scraps. Some unabridged attention, some love.

Even if it was from a corpse with blackened teeth.

Anything to feel alive again right now.

Suenomatsuyama nami mo koenamui.

I'm so tired of this, I thought. Come make me warm and I'll give you what we both want.

"Once upon a time," I repeated. "Once upon a time, there was a house in the middle of the forest and it stood silently until a group of twentysomethings barged through the door, looking for ghosts."

Phillip and Faiz gave each other high-fives.

"They ate their dinner. They drank their beer. They

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played a game to call up the dead from their rest. Except they didn't have to. The house already knew they were there." I sloped backwards, weight balanced on the heels of my palms, watched that one fly as it wiggled from a crack in the ceramic boy's skull and buzzed to another doll, squeezing through its black-lipped mouth. I thought I could hear its feet scratch at the lacquer.

Lin caught on first. "Did you see something?"

"A girl," I whispered. It should have sounded like a joke, something stupid. But a wind frissoned through the cracks in the shoji and it was as if the manor was laughing, I was sure, its voice dripping with termites. "A pale little bride with a smile full of ink."

Right on cue, all the lights went out.