

We walk together side-by-side. We wear matching rings on our fingers. He holds his hand close to mine, our knuckles brushing constantly. Skin against skin, metal against metal. Sometimes cool metal against skin. I never reach out. I walk beside him and that is enough.

A witch stole my heart, he says.

I remember the witch stealing my heart. I remember the times I had a heart. I say that sometimes, but he never believes me. How silly. I don't have a reason to lie any more. I don't have a reason to care.

She came the night before my wedding. My mother had scrimped and saved, and now I finally wore the white, lacy fruit of her earnest hoarding. I looked like a ghost in the hazy moonlight, but I felt so alive then. My stomach was fluttery, and my chest was heavy. This was what fear felt like. Now my stomach only rumbles when my body feels hungry, and my chest is light. Lighter than a feather, lighter than air.

A witch stole my heart the day of my wedding. She came in loud and frantic, like a hawk swooping down on a gale of wind. This is what anger looked like. My heart responded, fast and sudden, and I remember how I shivered. This is what anger felt like. I'm not angry anymore. I have no reason to be. I remember having a heart, even if there is no pulse in my chest, no desire in my brain. This is the way things are now.

He does not like the way things are now. He was at my side when the witch stole my heart, so now I am beside him as he goes to take back my heart. He talks constantly, and I listen. I listen constantly. He likes to talk about me, and he likes to talk about himself, but most of all, he likes to talk about *us*. He talks of how we met, and the times we fought, and the times we made up. He talks of our future.

A shadow falls upon my face, cooler and darker than the slim shadows the leaves make, as light filters mildly through their thin skin. I look up, and an eagle soars high above us. It is so far away, but it seems so solid, like a piece of earth given wings. He looks up too, mid-sentence about his father scrimping and saving so that he – we – could build a home.

“Bad omen,” he says and picks up the pace.

I don't, until he grabs my wrist and drags me towards him. His fingers are so tight. It makes me wish that the witch had taken not just my heart but my bones too. I feel all-too aware of how much flesh I am, and it makes me tired. I slow down even more, and he sighs impatiently.

“A witch stole your heart,” he says, facing away from me. “I don't know what is happening to you, but we must hurry.”

Whenever he talks of the witch, he grabs at the handle of his sword. It swings by his side, the one I am not next to. If he talks of her anymore, its hilt, engraved with some wayward creature, will be rubbed smooth. I think of saying something, but then he adjusts the fingers around my wrist, and I remember how much of my body is liquid and meat and skin. Not my heart though. My heart is somewhere else, weighing someone else down. I wonder if it still beats. He liked to place his hands on my chest and just feel it. She liked to place her head near and hear it.

We have been walking for a day and a half, traipsing between trees, over saplings and ferns. He moves almost mindlessly, cracking twigs and stomping down anthills. I stepped on a mushroom, a while back, and the sudden cushiness when I expected hard ground gave me pause. I continued stepping in time with him, but now I stare at the ground as much as I stare ahead, or at the sky. It's all the same to me. The only thing that seems to change is how much I can feel my body with no pulse to give sense to my life.

We've stopped only once. When it grew dark. I felt tired then, but I could not sleep. I feel tired now. Everything is so heavy compared to my chest. If air filled every inch of my body, perhaps I would feel light enough to simply float away. Perhaps my thoughts would follow suit, until I dreamed of just clouds and stars and sun. I can't wish for it, but my body does.

It becomes dark again, and so we stop for the second time. He eats, watching with narrowed eyes as I do not. I stare blankly back at him, trying to show him that I am here, even if I am different. I think my staring worries him more. There is nothing wrong with me. My heart is gone, but I feel fine. I do not tell him this. He will not listen. Besides, it's easier to sit, and breathe, and stare. I think if I stay like this any longer, I will melt into the ground and grass and rock. Will I feel heavier then?

We stay like that, gazing towards each other, until finally he bridges the gap, striding over to sit by me.

"You should eat," he says.

I look down at my soup. I know what it will taste like, how it will fill my stomach. My body craves it so much.

"I can't."

"At least try."

This happened last night as well. I think perhaps if I hadn't eaten that time, I would feel less heavy now.

"I can't."

My repetition creases his face and turns down his lips. This is what worry looks like. He wordlessly takes my spoon, dips it into the soup, and then forces it to my lips. I feel cold metal on my bottom lip and the warmth of the broth stinging my upper lip. This is what worry feels like. I allow it to enter my mouth, but I don't swallow, letting it sit there. When he removes the spoon, I simply don't close my lips, letting my face loll downwards. Soup spills out of my mouth. His frown deepens.

"This was your favorite."

I do not respond. From my mouth, down my chin, and onto my lap and knees, soup drips down. He sighs and uses his sleeve to roughly mop at me.

"We'll get your heart back soon."

He goes to sleep afterwards, right beside me. His nose just barely brushes against my soup-stained knee. I ended up swallowing some, but I still feel empty. I crane my head back and look past the treetops, at the stars. They turn the sky from a singular inky black into a fabric of dark colors, cosmic purples and nebula blues delving into one another. The moon is just hidden away by some branches. It peeks out here and there, illuminating some wispy clouds, more remnants of smoke than harbingers of rain.

Hundreds of memories of gazing at his sleeping form, and yet almost none of the night sky. I think I might have wasted having a heart...if that is such a possibility. I imagine the witch is taking better care of it now. I look and *look* at thousands of distant, glittering forms, until my neck aches and it's easier to lie down onto my back. I count stars until the sun dawns, and I can't see them anymore.

He wakes slowly but gets up quickly. He pulls me to my feet too, and I find my body balancing instinctively. He puts his hand around my wrist. Pulls me along into his familiar rhythm.

We walk quietly. Every now and then he opens his mouth, looks at me, and then closes it. The air is filled with the low thrum of insects thriving, punctuated every now and then by early morning birdsong. If it was louder, it could reverberate in the hollow of my chest, a sickly mock heartbeat. Instead, it just buzzes in my ears, like small ripples in placid water.

The sun is high in the sky when we come upon the witch's house. The trees don't fade away when we come upon her home. They stop abruptly. Dense forest turns into spritely meadow in mere footsteps. Sunbeams, no longer blocked by dense leaves, come to roost on the upper parts of my body. Warmth blooms onto my shoulders. My neck. The crown of my head. Once, I might have welcomed it. Now I can only focus on how much the sensation beats down on me. I've seen candlewax melt slowly, sloughing off every now and then as fire continues to abuse it. It would be easier, I think, if I could do the same. But I can't. And even if I

started melting, I think he'd simply gather my molten body up in his arms and carry on. He wouldn't let me out of his grasp for anything. I know this.

You see the house first, and then you see the fence. That's her nature. Her house is simple, made of wood, and despite how tall it is – three stories, at least – it seems small. The wood is light brown, so light that the noonday sun stains it easily, casting a yellow, gleaming glow to it. The roof juts out into a neat point, like a bird's beak, questing at the sky for worms. There are shingles, forming richly blue scales that almost sparkle under the sun.

The fence is just as simple as the thing it surrounds. Wooden stakes dot the ground evenly, several feet away from the house's perimeter. Connecting these stakes are just two slats of wood, one on top of the other, with a mild space in-between that any nosy person could peer through, but they are thick and large and broad. It would take a whirlwind to uproot this fence, and it might not even succeed then.

I remember the first time, stepping into this house. How the floor creaked under my foot, how every shadow seemed to house a spiderweb. How my heart would race with every sound my breath made. I remember seeing her for the first time - her auburn hair, her sharp grey eyes, her bland pink mouth. That is what nervousness looked like. My heart jumped in my chest for a different reason, and I could suddenly only focus on my meager offering. How small the cake was, how silly the lace looked, nestled between my offering and the plate it rested on. How stupid my reasoning was – what sort of woman came to a witch for an unhappy relationship? That is what nervousness felt like. I remember the second time I came to this house, too. And the third, and on and on and on. She never stopped by my house though, not until my wedding night.

And now here I am again.

This is my first time with him, though.

I know where to look. I see her first. He stoops by the gate, casting wary glances towards the house, at its small door, at its tiny windows. I look to the side of the house, peering through the gaps in the fence. There she is. Unlike on the day of my wedding, she looks calm and collected. Unlike on the night before my wedding, I feel nothing as I look at her.

She is tending to her garden, on her hands and knees, working vigorously to dig up something. A tuber, maybe. She hums a small tune, which takes a moment to work through his fear and apprehension, into his ears. He sees what I see, and then he stands to do what I would not do. His grasp on my wrist is a constant tug at this point. The moment we step through the gate, she knows we are there.

It isn't until his shadow falls upon her, however, that she deigns to look up. She sees him, and then I can tell when she sees me, by the way her eyes squint and her mouth smiles. I can remember this expression hundreds upon thousands of times. This is what joy looks like.

She springs to her feet and rushes at me. He lets out a startled breath, hands going to his sword, but she shoves him heedlessly aside and presses me into a hug. Earth and soil and freshly cut grass flood my nostrils, my mouth. Her fingers press into my spine, her elbows rub fiercely against my ribs. This is what joy feels like.

I feel so solid, encased in her grip. My dreams of floating away feel vapid, vaporous. When she lets go, I can still feel the imprint of her body against mine.

On impulse, I touch her neck, just a light press of my two fingers against her jugular. Even if I could, I would not be surprised to feel two pulses, just slightly out of sync. They both quicken slightly at my touch. I give no indication of noticing. She beams at me. I look placidly back.

“Hey,” – it’s his voice, raw and trembling, like a piece of fresh meat quivering with fat and still-oozing blood – “get away from her.”

She backs off, although I can tell it’s to see him better, not in compliance with what he said. He’s defensive, sword out, but clearly too scared to attack. She giggles, a small, high-pitched sound that makes the absence of my heart twinge in my chest.

“*She* doesn’t mind,” the witch says. And to make a point, she hugs me again, from the side.

I know what I should do. I remember wrapping my own arm around her in a similar fashion, sitting side by side, closer than friends, closer than bodies. Hip-to-hip and shoulder-to-shoulder and head-to-head. Feeling the pulses of our hearts through our stomachs and chests and necks and wrists. My arm remains at my side though, and I can’t find it in me to shuffle closer to her. She notices the little pause and moves to bridge our gap. I think, perhaps, I could stay like this. With her earthy scent encompassing my chilly body. It’s easier to think of myself as less than my flesh, easier to concentrate on more than my skin and bones.

“Get away from her. Haven’t you done enough?”

“I haven’t done anything,” she brings her hand to her chest, rests her fingers on her collarbone, the very picture of outrage.

“You haven’t done anything?” He’s flushed. As each second passes, I can see the sheen of sweat on his forehead ever more clearly. For a moment, I feel as if my own palms might be clammy, as if in nervous sympathy. The notion is gone just as quickly as it came. “You took her heart!”

“And?” Her arm around me squeezes a little. Her pulses beat a steady, two-time rhythm.

“*And?* What do you mean -” He lets out a long, shuddering breath. His next words are slow and measured, but he bleeds frustration with every syllable. “You took her heart. She’s - she won’t eat. She won’t sleep. There’s something *wrong* with her! She’s hurting. She’s hurting because of *you*.”

She laughs, a full, hearty sound. “Nonsense,” she turns to look at me, her arm coming away from my body, so that her knuckle can caress my cheek. We lock eyes, and I’ve never felt the absence of a thrill so clearly. “I’ve never *hurt* you.”

Gently, she adds, “I set you free, didn’t I?”

I think of days and nights by his side. Dusks and dawns by hers. I think of the fretting and worrying that gnawed at me, more than any joy or desire could hope to sate. I think of walking through the woods, and then being dragged through them by him. I think of her arm that was just around my waist.

“I’m not sure,” I say. It comes out easily, naturally. Emotionlessly.

She clicks her tongue, and for a second her smile falls away, leaving a somber gaze. I want to say her heart skips a beat, but it’s hard to say. If it does, her other heart makes up for it.

“What are you talking about?” His form is off, but he clasps his sword so tightly. He would lunge if it weren’t for the Witch’s extra heart. He needs it back.

“I wanted her heart,” she says. “So I took it. I can’t give it back to her unless she wants it.” She pauses to look dramatically at me. Despite everything, she’s enjoying this. “*Do* you want it back?”

“I don’t want anything,” I say.

She gestures then, flicking her hand towards him in a very ‘*I-told-you-so*’ motion. He frowns. In another life, I would have thrown myself between the two of them in a heartbeat. I would have pleaded with her not to antagonize him too much. I don’t have any heart to count the moments though. I think that if they were to set upon each other like lions, I would simply just sit down and watch. I know that’s what I would do.

Certainty is very empty without a feeling of satisfaction.

“What are you talking about? It’s your heart. Of course you want it.”

I gaze very carefully off towards the distance, into the forest. The vague shape of a bird flits in-between branches, just a sliver of indeterminate movement obscured by the shadows of leaves and the branches of trees.

“Well, what if I want it?” He takes a step closer to her, a step closer to me.

“Then you’re welcome to try and take it.” She smiles. “But I think, if it comes down to wanting - and believe me, it does - then I want to keep it more than you need to have it.”

He opens his mouth, then closes it. He turns to look at me.

“You want your heart,” he says. “Take it back.”

He will not listen, still I speak. There’s no frustration to hold me back. “I don’t. I don’t want anything.”

“Yes, because you don’t have your heart. Once you have your heart, you’ll want it. Take it!” One hand lets go of the sword to claw at the air as he says his order. I can only assume he wants me to rip her heart out with my bare hands. I slump at the thought, sitting down at the Witch’s feet with a weary sigh. She clucks and shifts her feet, trying to make me comfortable, maybe. How silly. My own blood and organs weigh me down so much – I can’t imagine how heavy another person’s blood and organs would be.

“I can’t.”

He lunges, finally.

He shouts as he does it, which gives her ample warning to turn into a songbird. It’s a foolish, frantic moment that follows. Him swinging his sword wildly into the air, her flitting away. His pursuit is stopped by the fence, and he scrabbles furiously into the wood as he clammers up over it, ignoring the open gate door just a few inches at his side. If I could, I would be surprised – impressed, even – that he doesn’t stab himself throughout this whole ordeal.

She’s long gone by the time he’s made it outside of the Witch’s front yard.

He trudges back, through the gate door, thankfully. There’s a slump to his shoulders, a downward slope to his lips. We stare at each other. Even if I knew what to say, I’m not sure if I could manage to speak it. My tongue feels dull in my mouth.

He thrusts his hand out.

I don’t take it.

There’s a pause before he grabs me, taking ahold of my elbow. He pulls me up with a grunt. And then we leave.

We walk together, side-by-side, his hand clenching my flesh so tightly, he can probably feel every groove in my bones. I can feel his ring biting into my skin. His steps form a heavy rhythm that I can't even begin to compete with.

The grass seems to get lusher as we move away from the Witch's house. Trees and brush sprout up and away. They look almost unreal, as if they were just put here to break up the monotony of the land. Nothing more. Nothing less.

He's silent as we walk, and that makes it easier to hear the lack of birdsong. Maybe it would have bothered me, when I had a heart that could pound faster in fear – or trepidation. Now I merely feel the cool silence. If I concentrate hard enough, I can feel the blood in the shells of my ears, combatting the chilly air.

He stops when night begins to fall, turning dark greens into moody blues, smudging inviting brown bark into odd indigo shapes. He lets go. My flesh tingles with the memory of his flesh – bone was encircling bone just a moment ago.

I won't forget that, I think. I won't forget any of this.

We stand an arms-length across from each other. I could move to touch him – I'm sure in another moment, one where my chest and stomach and wrists all pulse together merrily, I would have stepped towards him. I would take his head in my hands, or his torso into my arms – I would have encircled him as he had just encircled me – given him something to remember.

Instead we stare, and eventually, he crumples.

It's an odd, downward motion. His sword is still at his hip, and when he keels downwards, it turns out that it's just slightly taller than his kneeling form. It forces him at an awkward angle. But it doesn't stop him. It doesn't prop him up.

He cries at my feet. His head rests on my feet, and I can't stop the shudder that runs through me. They are already holding up an empty body – I don't think they should hold up somebody else's empty grief too. I tolerate it until I don't, and then I nudge his chin away from me with the toe of my shoe. He cries harder afterwards. I have no memory of what this is supposed to feel like. The crook of my elbow still feels odd from his touch. If I looked down, I would see a bruise. I'm sure of it.

I look down at him, and I feel *tired*. This isn't what I want. This isn't what I ever wanted. I try to think of wanting some more, but all that those thoughts give me is a hollow ache in my chest. Not for the first time, I think of how light air is. Maybe I'll never achieve that. But perhaps I could become something close – a feather, maybe. Or a speck of dust.

I sit down, and then lie back slowly, so that I don't jar my ribs too much. From this angle, I could look up at him, if I turned my head a bit. I don't want to do that either. I stare at the



leaves, and how they frame the sky in such varied ways. From the corner of my eye, I can still see him. He's looking down at me. I don't know how watery his eyes are. I don't care.

If a leaf were to drop down on me right now, would I feel it? If I didn't see it, would I know? I don't care about that either.

Late at night, he leaves me.

For a moment, I'll give him that, he stays, swaying upright, still staring down at me. I stare up at him, just to acknowledge his movement. I barely feel it when his fingers clasp around my wrist for one final time. I feel the fourth finger on my hand get nudged. There's a slight tug, and then relief.

Afterwards, my eyes wander past him, letting my head loll back to stare once more at the stars. I want to memorize every shade of dark blue in the sky. I want to etch every pinprick of light into my eyes and brain, into my skin and bones, into my chest cavity. My reverie is interrupted momentarily – there's a slight nudging at my side from a boot. It's gentle – so gentle, that I almost think I could have imagined it. He's gone the next moment, so I know I didn't. I can hear his shoes tramping against the grass, and I feel their dull thump long after he's gone. This is no heartbeat. It doesn't come close enough.

I am so heavy, too heavy to move, too heavy to get up. I don't want to get up. I don't want to stay here either. I'll waste away if I don't get up. I can't bring myself to care. My chest twinges in anticipation. My fingers rub against my palms. This is what acceptance feels like. I close my eyes, watching the world turn a uniform grey. This is what acceptance looks like. I stay down in the grass, and I fantasize. I have thought too much of the past, which weighs me down, as much as the minerals in my bones, the carbon in my flesh.

Instead, I try to think of what will be. I try to think of the heaviness of my body finally giving way, letting the lightness of my heart's absence have its way. Insects will not come, I know this. Maggots are too meaty, too fleshy, too hungry for what my body will have to offer.

No, first the flesh will recede, sinking back into the earth in thick, wet slabs of clay. Then my bones, now exposed to the elements, will erode, turning into sand and soil. Fine soil. Fertile soil. Soil more worthy of life than I could ever have hoped to be. Plants will come then. Dandelions and crabgrass and pigweed springing forth to fill the hollows of my body. Stretching up and away from the earth, growing into the sky, mirroring so plainly what she could see – what he would not see.

Perhaps, even, a tree will eventually take root. A tree with a strong trunk, and limbs that reach out to hug the sky. It will be covered in dark bark, that twists and winds its way across its circumference, creating little patterns and pictures for anybody who wants to look. Its leaves, in the shape of arrowheads, with the brightest, greenest, healthiest color, will brush the clouds, coaxing rain downwards, down to the tree's thirsty roots. As it uses rain and sun, so will it use

the soil to grow, and as it continues to move into the sky and down into the earth, more of what used to be me will shrink away.

Eventually, after years and years of growing and rising and blooming and living, something else will happen. A little knot will form in the tree's growth, and this knot will turn into a hollow. This hole will stay within the tree, but it will not grow – that is important. Something will come, and it will turn this little hollow into a little home. A squirrel, maybe. Bugs, most likely. If I could wish though...I would want a bird. Something small, something spritely, to hum its little tune and peck about the dirt, looking for worms or pebbles or tubers or the like. A songbird would be best – a sparrow, or a thrush. A robin, even. A bird, to make a nest in this hollow, to warm the hollow with twigs and down, to fill the hollow with the flutter of its wings and the scrape of its small nails against the wood.

I think this is what love should feel like.