





I was eighteen years old, give or take a fairy-tale century, when I had my first kiss.

I was in my senior year at a school in Brooklyn, where I'd enrolled not long after two twisted-up years in the Hinterland. I craved normal, I craved routine. I had, to be honest, this image of myself wearing a leaf-colored sweater and studying in a wood-paneled library, which was embarrassing to think about later, when I was reading *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* beneath our underfunded high school's flickering fluorescents. The only thing that made it all bearable was Sophia Snow.

Maybe *bearable* isn't the right word. She was the only thing that made it *interesting*. Unnerving is another way to put it.

Sophia was an ex-Story like me, another Hinterland reject. Wide eyes and a knotty ballerina build and black hair that moved against itself like water weeds. She had one of those hologram faces, different from every angle, the kind you want to stare at till you've uncovered all its secrets. And by the time you've figured out you never will, she's stolen your wallet from your pocket and your watch off your wrist.

Boys liked Sophia. Not just boys, but it was them she'd meet out, on shitty non-dates that mainly involved drinking and walking around. For a while I'd let her drag me along, because there was a period when I felt like nothing that was of Earth could hurt me. It made me brave, but it also meant I was just a couple clicks shy of feeling numb, *inhuman*, and I wanted to fight that feeling away.

There was this night when we were down by the water. Across the way we could see the geometric glitter of the Financial District, and I was staring at all the little pin-prick windows, reminding myself that every light might have a person under it, and every person had a story, and the city was full of people whose lives were nothing like mine. It was supposed to make me feel less alone, I guess, but instead I was thinking that none of those people, not one, could understand what I was, or what I'd seen, or where I came from. The only ones who could, Sophia among them, were broken. Some of them had broken like glass, sharp and glittering, but some had cracked into dusty pieces that the city swept up and away. I was a little bit drunk on warm spiked Coke, wondering which

kind I'd turn out to be, and feeling so sorry for myself I should've been ashamed.

One of Sophia's boys—there were three of them that night, two she might've liked plus a hanger-on—sat down next to me. He was one of the main ones, decently hot, with two lines shaved through his eyebrow. That meant something, I thought, but I could never remember what.

We sat for a minute in silence.

"You know, I watch you sometimes."

That didn't deserve a response, so I said nothing.

"You're quiet, but I like that. You've got a lot of soul, right?" He smiled at himself as he said it, in that way guys say those fake-sensitive things they think will make a girl's clothes come flying off. Just because I hadn't been kissed yet didn't mean I hadn't heard some lines.

"What makes you think that?"

"You're so little," he said cryptically. He'd clearly come to the end of his material. "But I can just tell, you've really got a lot of *soul*."

"To be honest, I don't know if I've even got a soul." I said it to the skyline. "If a soul is what makes you human, then I probably don't. Unless a soul is something you can *grow*, like, after the fact. And I don't think it is. So. No soul. Just to explain why your pickup line's not working on me."

It was the truest thing I'd said to anybody in a long time, and the most I'd said all night. I thought he might stand up and walk away, or get confused and call me a bitch. Instead, he smiled.

“God, you are so fuckin’ weird,” he said. Then he kissed me.

It wasn’t that simple. First I stiffened, then I ducked my head and turned away. Finally I scrambled back and tried to stand, because he wasn’t taking my high-beam hint.

“Hold on, hold on,” he said, laughing. He put an arm around my waist, and he was so strong he made holding me in place feel casual. I wasn’t scared exactly, but I couldn’t get away from him, either. His mouth tasted like Coke and garlic, and it was gummy with dead skin.

The part of me that could have killed him for this, once upon a time—that could have turned his blood to ice with a touch—fizzed in my chest. The Hinterland in me: it had dried up and drained, it was nearly gone. Maybe it lived where my soul would’ve lodged, if I’d been truly human. Now I wasn’t either, exactly—Hinterland, human—and the way his face was shoved against mine made it hard to breathe.

Then all at once I was panting, and he was screaming, and the places where his skin had mashed against mine were damp with cooling sweat. It took a scrambled second to make sense of what I was seeing: Sophia had dragged him off me by his hair, then thrown him to the ground. She kicked him twice, efficient and well placed, while his friends yelled *oh, shit!* and did nothing to help him. The whole time she kept a lit cigarette in her mouth, like dealing with him wasn’t worth throwing it away.

Finally she pressed a dirty low-top to his neck. She must’ve been pressing down pretty hard, because he

was rasping out all sorts of stuff but you couldn't really hear it. When he tried to pull her down by the leg, she stepped back and kicked him again, then leaned far over to look into his face.

"You're gonna die before you're thirty," she said, blowing smoke in his eyes. She didn't say it meanly, just matter-of-fact. "In an accident. Quick, at least. If that makes it better."

His friends were helping him up by then, calling Sophia crazy and worse, but taking care not to get too close.

"What?" the boy kept saying, his face stained with fear. "What are you talking about? Why would you say that to me?"

She didn't answer, just watched them scramble and take off, yelling ugly stuff over their shoulders.

When they were gone, she turned to me.

"Was that asshole your first kiss?"

Maybe. Kind of. At least in this version of my life. It was too much to get into, so I just nodded.

She kneeled next to me, put her hands on my shoulders, and pressed her mouth to mine. It tasted like smoke and sugar, and under it a tickling electric-green current that must've been the last trace of the Hinterland, or whatever magic it was that allowed her, still, to look at people and know things she shouldn't. Like when and how they would die.

"There," she said, pulling back. "Forget that boy. That was your first kiss."

That's what I like to think of when I think of Sophia Snow. That small, sympathetic proof that not everything

the Hinterlanders did was meant to cause damage. But they didn't belong in this world, and that was the truth. The cracks they made were small, but cracks can bring a city down.

And if they didn't belong here, I didn't either. We were predators set loose in a world not made to withstand us. Until the summer we became prey.



The day after Hansa the Traveler died, I was sitting in a humid auditorium in Brooklyn, suffocating inside a polyester gown.

Sophia had enrolled in high school alongside me, but she hadn't made it to graduation day. She'd barely lasted a month. The rumors around what finally got her kicked out were conflicting: Petty theft. Less petty vandalism. Affair with a teacher. Her terrifying confidence, the product of an ancient brain and a smoldering death wish shoved inside the casing of a teenage girl.

That was the main one, I think, but they were all some version of true. I might've left with her but for Ella. My mother, incandescent with pride that her daughter



was getting a high school degree. I'd squeaked my way to passing, did a couple of phys ed makeups, and picked up a starchy blue graduation gown from the front office that swished like a prom dress and fit like a habit.

It was an oppressively hot Sunday in June when I crossed the stage toward the principal and his stack of fake diplomas, because the real things came by mail. I had the oddest swell of feeling as I approached him: pride. I'd done it. I'd done *something*. Clawed my way free of a fairy-tale loop, put my head down, and achieved a thing that was never meant for me. I squinted out across the auditorium, looking for Ella in her black party dress and unseasonal lace-up boots.

I found her near the back, fingers in her mouth to whistle. I lifted my hand to blow a kiss, then saw the woman sitting just behind her. Close enough to reach out and touch.

The woman's hair was as bloody bright as a red-cap's hat, and her eyes were hidden by the smoky circles of street vendor shades. She smiled when she saw me looking, leaning forward till her chin nearly grazed my mother's shoulder. Then she put up a finger and crooked it. *C'mere*.

The air of the auditorium swelled a little as the two halves of my life met and repelled like inverted magnets. I stumbled heading back to my seat, feet suddenly stupid. I craned around once I'd sat but couldn't see over the ocean of graduation caps.

The woman was Hinterland. Her name was Daphne,

and she was the reason I'd been steering clear of the other ex-Stories for months.

Applause brought me out of my head. The ceremony was over, and my classmates were laughing and shouting like we'd done something real. For a second there, I'd agreed with them.

I sped to the lobby as soon as I was free, looking for Ella. I found her beaming at me from behind a bouquet of blue hibiscus.

"Hey, you," she said, as I grabbed her and hugged her hard.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

"Am I *okay*? I'm amazing."

She pulled back but didn't let go. Even though I'd grown my hair out and dyed it darker, we still looked nothing alike. It's funny the things you can ignore when you don't want to see them.

"So what do we do now?" Her voice was almost giddy. "I'm in a dress, you're in a—what do you have on under that robe?"

"Eh. It's laundry week."

She made a face. "Whatever that means, *I* am in a dress and I don't want to waste it. Pick somewhere fancy, we'll get lunch. We'll get ice cream!"

I should've done it. I should've slapped on a smile and let my mom take me out for sundaes to celebrate the day neither of us thought would ever come. But I couldn't. Because Daphne was here. She'd come close enough to touch. And needing to know what she wanted from me was a splinter beneath my skin.

“Tomorrow?” I said abruptly, scanning the room over her shoulder. When her face fell, I kept talking. “I’ve got to work today. I forgot to tell you. So, tomorrow?”

“Okay.” She pasted a smile over the expression that let me know she smelled my bullshit, and brought me in for another hug.

“Thanks for coming,” I mumbled.

She gave me a little shake. “I’m your *mother*. Don’t thank me for being here. Just come home after work, okay? We’ll get the good takeout tonight.”

She cupped my face, her hands cool. Then crisply she turned away, sweeping off through the crowd without looking back. That was a new thing, too: when she sensed herself clinging, she’d cut it off quick. It left me feeling bereft every time, wishing I’d hugged her longer. Wishing I hadn’t lied, and we were on our way to a fancy lunch. But I had, and we weren’t, so once she was gone I made my way to the exit, too.

I thought Daphne would be waiting for me, but I didn’t see her. Families dotted the pavement, siblings batting at each other and moms wearing summer lipstick and dads in khaki pants looking at their phones. I wound around them like a wraith. When I passed a trash can, I peeled off my gown and dropped it in. The sky was soft and low, in a way that made you feel like you were inside when you were out. And there was this feeling in the air, this *waiting* feeling. Like the square of city I stood on was a mouse, and a cat’s paw hovered just above it.

Things were different now, I reminded myself. Our

lives had changed. If they hadn't, I might've called the feeling by another name: bad luck coming.

Here's a story I don't like to tell.

It started on an ugly day last spring, frigid and murderously bright. I walked into a Hinterland meeting late, my fresh-washed hair frozen into pieces. When I first discovered the weekly gatherings of displaced ex-Stories, on the second floor of a psychic's shop on Avenue A, I thought I'd been saved—from the loneliness of singularity. From being the oddest creature I knew. And the meetings *did* save me. But they messed me up, too. Kept me from trying too hard, I guess, to be normal. To stop being so damned *easy* on myself, because who could expect much from a girl created to live in a fairy tale, attempting now to fashion an unmagical life?

I was used to mixing with the same junk drawer of ex-Story oddballs. Even the ones I couldn't stand were comforting as old wallpaper, drinking instant coffee and kvetching about something or other week after week. But that day a woman I'd never seen was standing at the front of the room. She had the hard, painted-on beauty of an Egon Schiele portrait: dark-lipped and paper-pale, with perfect heroine hair that flowed and bent down her back in flat red colorblock. She was sitting on a high stool with her knees pulled up, sleeves pushed to her elbows, talking. Her talk turned the room's drowsy air into something crackling.

“We’re infiltrators here,” she was saying. “And we always will be.”

It was about eighty degrees hotter inside than out, and I was sweating through my layers, trying to shuck my coat while balancing a full coffee cup. But the fervor in her words stopped me cold.

“This world is a gray place. A place of small and scattered lives. Disordered. Ugly. Chaotic.” She brought a fist down on her knee. “But us? We *blaze*. We blaze against it like red ribbon.”

Her voice was a drug. Dense as fog, rubbing its back against your ears like a cat. Everyone in the place was angling closer, warming their hands by her ferocity. Even me: I hated to think about it later, but she tugged at something in me, too.

She’d looked at someone sitting by her feet, a boy I’d never heard speak. His head was always down and his lips were always moving, noiseless. I suspected most of his mind was still lodged inside his broken tale.

“What were you?” she asked him. “In the Hinterland, what were you?”

I couldn’t see the boy’s face, but I could see the panic in his rising shoulders. “I was a prince. Conjured by a witch of dandelions and blood, to fool a princess.” He darted a look around. “Sometimes I can feel the Hinterland sun on me again. Hear the insects whispering in the dirt. I don’t understand why I’m still a boy.”

The woman had looked at him with such ferocity. “You’re not. You are *magic*, through and through. We all are. Be proud of that.”

She'd looked past him then, right at me.

"We aren't like the creatures who were made in this world. We aren't meant to *debase* ourselves with them. To live a human life is to forget who we are. To forget who we are is to be an enemy to ourselves. To each other."

"You," she said, pointing at a man in a frumpy hand-knit sweater. "Stand up."

He rose slowly, shaky in his frost-stained boots, and my heart dropped.

Because the thing was, these meetings weren't just for ex-Stories. They were for anyone still drifting after leaving the Hinterland behind. People from *this* world, who'd found their own doorways in and out again, different from us but bonded to us all the same. The man in the snowflake sweater was one of them. Not Hinterland, but human.

"I'm not trying to . . ." he stammered, "I'm not here to . . ."

"Shhhh." The woman pressed a finger to her lipsticked mouth, then smiled behind it. "You walk a very narrow path. And the woods are full of wolves. And the wolves have sharp teeth. And we've had no one to bite for a very, very long time."

She closed her eyes. "I want to live in a world of wolves. When I open my eyes, I won't see a single lamb."

Snowflake Sweater grabbed his coat and fled. A pair of teen girls in black lipstick followed, holding hands, and a man with dreadlocks hidden under a shapeless hat. An old woman in wire-rims shuffled out after them, slow enough to make her point.

I felt half of myself leave with them. The half of me that opened my eyes to my mother's face when I woke from bad dreams. That burrowed all the way into the heart of fairyland to find my way back to her, when the Hinterland tried to take her away. But I didn't move. I waited to see what would happen next.

When they were gone, the woman opened her eyes with a baby-doll click. She smiled, a flash of needle teeth.

"Hello, wolves."

The meeting had broken up pretty quickly after that, everyone still buzzing with a bent energy. I hated the way they looked so jacked and cocky, like they'd just won some kind of war. I tried to sneak out without talking to anyone, but the new woman caught me by the stairs.

"You're Alice, right?"

She was even more startling up close. Her eyes were the silver-blue of shallow water, like the Spinner's had been. More than one ex-Story had those eyes.

"Nice show," I told her. "Very dramatic. You make all that wolf shit up on the spot?"

She wrinkled her nose a little, like we were just teasing each other. "I've heard about you. The girl with the ice. The one who broke us free."

She said it so slyly I couldn't tell how she meant it. I'd been the first one out of the Hinterland, yeah. The one, I'd learned, whose escape left a snag in the weave, allowing the other Stories to crawl out after me. Not that they thanked me for it.

“That’s right. You’re welcome.” I made to elbow past her.

“Is it true what I heard, that you live with some woman?”

I paused. Some of the hypnotic hum had gone out of her voice; I realized she could turn it on and off.

“In Brooklyn, right—cute place on the second story? I like it. I like the blue curtains on your woman’s bedroom window.”

I grabbed her arm. Half to hold her there, and half to steady myself. “What are you getting at?”

She looked at my hand, then up at my eyes.

“It’s all gone, isn’t it? The ice?” The wicked lightness had left her voice. She looked at me with something like disgust, speaking loud enough that all the stragglers could hear it.

“I said I didn’t want to see any lambs here.”

Her name, I later learned, was Daphne. She was the very last Hinterlander to come through. The one who tightened the ranks and broke all attempts at assimilation against the rocks. Within weeks, according to Sophia, she had all of them on a string. Even Soph, I think. Though she wouldn’t tell me much.

I didn’t stick around for it. Till graduation I hadn’t seen Daphne again in the flesh, but she visited me sometimes in dreams. There was a night I woke up panting, my chest feeling crushed and tight, like the devil was sitting on it. I swear I saw her standing by the bed, street-light catching on her pointed teeth and red hair. But when I turned on the lamp there was nothing there.

Daphne’s threats were a good thing in the end: they



made me do what I should've done ages ago. I gave the Hinterland up for good, and set about making my life an entirely human one.

It was half past eleven on a Sunday. If Daphne wasn't waiting for me, I knew where to find her: packed into the muggy air of the psychic's shop, along with Sophia and the rest of them. It was meeting day.

Something in my stomach twanged as I approached the building for the first time in months. It was shabby brick and a foggy glass door, with a palmist's sign above it and a staircase just behind. But all I could see as I walked up was Daphne. Leaning against the brick with her legs crossed, her eyes hidden by the smoky circles of street-vendor shades. When she saw me coming she gestured at me to hurry up.

"Hey, you," she said in that smoky, bullshit voice. "It's been a minute."

I approached slowly, stopped a few squares of sidewalk away. "What do you want?"

"I want to make amends," she said. "I think you got the wrong idea about me."

"I'm pretty sure I got the right one. Tell me what you actually want."

"That was a nice ceremony. Is Ella real proud?"

That dark thing that lived below my sternum stirred. "Get my mother's name out of your mouth. If you want something, want to talk to me, want *anything* from me, you don't mention her again. You don't go *near* her again. Ever. Got it?"

Quick as a whip, she grabbed my hand. Squeezed it once, then dropped it. Checking, I think. I shouldn't have cared what she thought, but for a minute I wished I was what I used to be: full of ice to my fingernails, and ready to bury her in it.

"If you were *my* daughter," she said, "here's what I'd teach you first: never let 'em know how to hit you where it hurts."

I felt my cheeks going hot. "Fuck's sake, you've *won*. You warned me off. I stayed away. Why are you still bothering with me?"

She lifted her sunglasses, trapping me in the twin tractor beams of her eyes. "Oh, sweetie. What makes you think watching out for you is any bother?"

A man walking by us slowed, turning so he could keep staring at Daphne as he went. She kept her shades up, smiled at him sweetly, and popped off her top veneers, revealing a double-row of filed-down shark teeth.

"Mother of God!" the man yelped, half stumbling over a stoop, then sprinting away.

She used a pinky to push the veneers delicately into place, turning her attention back on me. "Let me start again. I'm not trying to make an enemy of you. I want you here because Hinterland blood is precious, more now than ever. Despite what you might think, you're still a part of us. And I need you *here* for us, the way we're here for you."

I stared at her. Half the creatures gathered up those stairs would knife me for a hot dog. "Where is this coming from? Why now?"

"There've been some deaths lately."

"Some . . . deaths?" She said it like you'd say, *Some rain*.

"Three since the beginning of spring."

"Who died? How did they—"

"Killed. The Prince of the Wood first. Then Abigail."

The prince I'd known a little. Aggressively handsome, with hair like a pony's mane and a brick of urgently white teeth. Abigail, though. I felt shitty that I couldn't even put a face to the name.

"And a third was killed last night: Hansa the Traveler."

I startled. I'd met Hansa in the Hinterland. I knew she was in New York, but the last I'd heard she was living with two older ex-Stories, attending a charter school on the Lower East Side. The news shocked me into forgetting who I was talking to. "But Hansa's a *kid*. And she's actually got—she had a chance. Who would hurt Hansa?"

"What does being a kid have to do with it?"

"It's horrible," I said quietly. Hansa had been a little girl when I met her in the Halfway Wood. The moon's granddaughter. "What happened? How did they die?"

Shadows moved beneath the blue of Daphne's eyes. Looking at them too long felt like staring into infested water. "Death is death."

"What does *that* mean?"

She ignored me, turning toward the door, imperious. "Now you know. And now we've made peace. Come on, come be with your people."

I peered through the glass at the staircase behind it, water-stained and disappearing into the shadows of the

second floor. With a longing as palpable as thirst, I did not want to go up there.

“Thanks for telling me. But I can’t right now. I’ve gotta work.” I tried out the lie for the second time that day.

“No, you don’t.” She opened the door. “Your last shift was Thursday, and you work again tomorrow. But you don’t work today.”

I couldn’t say what my face looked like when she turned around to smile at me.

“I take care of my people, even the prodigal ones. Don’t worry about a thing, princess. I’ve always got eyes on you.”

