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## Birdsong at Sunrise

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The train tracks curled around the base of the mountains, winding through conifer forests smothered in mist, glimpses of blue peaks crowned in snow flashing between the trees. Someone farther up in the compartment had opened a window and Camellia inhaled the early autumn morning scents of damp leaves and the tang of frost. She had never been so close to the mountains before and they loomed impossibly huge on the horizon, sunrise brushing gold over the peaks and scattering through the mist in shimmering veils of light. The day and night of train travel had exhausted her and she was sore from the benches and the stiff position she'd slept in, slumped against the window, but the sun was rising and that wasn't nothing.

Camellia bought a paper cup of lukewarm coffee and a limp turkey sandwich for too much money in the dining car as they chugged closer to their destination. She packed the sandwich away for later and took gulps of the coffee until it went cold. Her hands shook around the cup. Only a few hours and a long walk left.

The town they finally arrived in seemed about the size of half a postage stamp, but lively. The train station wasn't crowded by any means, but the streets had people walking dogs and sitting on porches, peering curiously at Camellia's red hair. She sat on a bench in a small park and choked down half of the sandwich, then wrapped the other half up in paper again and shoved it back into her backpack. The sky had filled with clouds in the last half hour of her journey and they cast gloomy shadows over everything.

Camellia pulled Michel's scribbled directions from her pocket and did her best to follow them, eventually walking out of town and onto an unpaved dirt track that vanished into the forest. She set off, hoping it wouldn't rain before she found the house, that this was the right dirt path, that Rowan was somehow at the end of it.

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The house she came to after half an hour of walking was just as Michel had described – a low single-story cottage, surrounded by trees and propping up an ancient iron and glass greenhouse. The garden around the house was more overgrown than the path, rose vines and blackberries and rosemary spilling across the paths, chamomile choked out by sprawling mint, the autumn leaf-fall spread out and slick with rot. Sun-bleached curtains covered darkened windows and the trees cast fuzzy shadows even with the sun covered by clouds. Camellia

shivered and hitched her backpack up on her shoulders. This was where she'd live, hopefully, until she could find Rowan and drag them back to the city and all their shared friends.

The porch steps creaked under her weight, but the front door unlocked easily with the key Michel had pressed into her hands. The porch needed new boards in a few places, sanding and refinishing, new paint on the railings, oil on the door hinges. Camellia hoped she wouldn't need to be here long enough to fix it.

The front door opened into a hallway, facing folding pantry doors, stretching into dimness on the right and opening to a large room on the left. The air was musty and stale, as though no one had opened a door or window for months. But this was where Rowan had been, before they stopped responding to the letters piled on the front mat. Camellia nudged the pile out of the way with a toe and shucked off her muddy boots and heavy backpack, setting them neatly by the door. She took a deep breath of dusty air and stepped farther into the gloom.

The house was small and simple, much brighter and airier once Camellia opened the curtains and cracked the windows. The left side of the front hall opened into one large room, separated into a moldering kitchen towards the front of the house and a dusty living room with an ash-filled, soot-stained fireplace towards the back. Next to the fireplace was a fogged-over sliding glass door that probably led into the greenhouse, looking from the outside of the house. On the back wall was another door that opened onto a porch and the overgrown back garden.

Camellia retraced her dusty footprints to the front door and followed the hall in the other direction. Windows opening onto the porch lined the right side and three doors were on the left, one the empty bedroom, one the long-neglected bathroom, and another door onto the front porch that wrapped around to the north side of the house. Camellia closed the side door and shuffled back to the bedroom, leaning against the open doorframe. The air was just as musty and untouched in here as in the rest of the house, tinged with something that tasted like soil or forest-rot. The window was closed but unlocked. The house was empty. She'd known it would be, but she'd still hoped.

If she was going to live here, she'd have to make it liveable, at least for a little while. At least the house was structurally sound and in pretty good repair for how abandoned it looked, but she wasn't sure yet about the greenhouse. She'd start with the bathroom. She flicked on the buzzing yellow light and pulled open the doors to the cabinet under the sink with sharp tugs. Her scrounging resulted in a crusty bottle of what smelled like bleach and two boxes of homemade

soap. There was a pile of old rags in a drawer that would work well enough for scrubbing. She filled the sink with hot water and a splash of the bleach and got to work.

Camellia cleaned for what felt like hours, scrubbing caked on grime and sludge of unknown provenance and trying not to breathe through her nose. She couldn't cry. She wouldn't. Rowan had always hated when she cried, especially over them. They'd been gone for months and she'd kept herself busy enough then.

By the end of it, bleach almost a visible scent in the air, her knees and wrists ached, on top of the lingering soreness from the train car. She washed her hands and arms up to the elbows with one of the bars of soap. Camellia inhaled. Thyme and lemongrass. She swallowed hard and dried her hands on the hem of her shirt. At least the bathroom was clean.

She walked slowly to where she'd dropped her backpack in the front hall, slamming her hip into a doorframe on her way. The light-switch shocked her with static when she flipped it, but the hallway lights glowed steady, reflecting back in ripples from the dark windows. It had gotten late. Her stomach growled.

She pulled out the second half of her sandwich and flung the dust sheet off an armchair, sitting with her legs curled and knees and back braced against the arms to eat it. Several hours sitting in her backpack had not improved the sandwich.

The evening stretched out in front of her, a yawning darkness spangled with high cold stars. She stared at the empty hearth, eyes slowly unfocussing, and wondered if she could see the stars out here, if she looked up. If she were at home, if Rowan was home, they could read quietly together, share a pot of tea or hot cocoa. They could curl up on the rug next to the gas stove shoved into a corner of her tiny apartment, Rowan's cold toes on her shins under the blanket Camellia's mother had knitted when she was too small to walk. Or they could sit on the fire escape and stare at the city lights, tell quiet stories or just lean against each other. She wouldn't feel too loud and too large, breathing in this empty house.

Camellia shook her head and fell out of the chair, stumbling on stiff legs back to her backpack to dig in it for her towel. She needed a bath.

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The sun still rose early, dappled light slanting into the living room through the kitchen windows, pressing gently on Camellia's eyelids where she slept curled into the armchair. When she woke, she uncurled just a little and stared blearily at the arm of the chair and the dust motes in the sunbeam. She had to walk back to town today, get her name attached to this address at the post office, send a note to Michel so he wouldn't worry, maybe ask people if they'd seen Rowan – a person like a coarack with hair.

Once she'd woken up enough, she dressed in wrinkled but clean clothes and walked off the porch and down to the path through the woods. The forest was muddy but full of birdsong, sunlight filtering through fir needles and yellowing leaves to the path beneath her feet, air fresh and thick with the smell of soil and autumn. She was here and the sun had risen. She could hear the birds. She could see the last wildflowers were crowding around the edge of the path and scattered through the undergrowth. She could feel the earth under her feet, the hole in her coat pocket. She could smell sun-warmed pine needles and the leaf litter. She could taste the inside of her own mouth, still bitter from the plain black tea she'd over-steeped earlier. She was here.

Town was still small and sleepy, but the post office was open and she spotted the library on her way there, so she couldn't ask for much more. The post office itself was somewhat predictably small, lit with ancient fluorescents that flicked every so often. Camellia carefully wiped her boots on the mat before stepping up to the counter.

She chatted with the employee behind the desk as she filled out an address form, bought stamps, scrawled a note for Michel on the back of a postcard and passed it across the counter. [Camellia learns their name/pronouns/talks about her reason for being there. Person eventually warns Camellia about the woods: "Well, you're new to town, so I suppose you don't know. Just, ah, don't walk alone too late at night. That's all."]

Tired again from interacting with someone, Camellia only stopped briefly at the small grocery market so she wouldn't starve before she found Rowan before heading back up the hill. The sun had risen high enough to make the walk home uncomfortably warm on the stretch of road between the town and the woods through fields thick with berry vines. The blackberries still left on the vines after the season perfumed the air and Camellia breathed deeply, carefully. The woods, when she got to them, were blessedly cool and shady, the sky brilliantly blue above the trees. Camellia watched the branches move in the slight breeze until she almost tripped on a rock. Then she watched her feet instead.

Something moved in the ferns and bushes to her left and Camellia stopped and glanced over. She'd been humming, she realized, something aimless or maybe the song Allison sang while ey kneaded bread to keep a rhythm. What had heard her?

The wind ruffled the branches and the undergrowth, scattering the leaves that had begun to gather on the path. Camellia breathed in. Out. In. She started walking again, steps just a fraction quicker than before.

The house was still dark and cold and empty when she made it back. Camellia swallowed down irrational disappointment and set her boots by the door again. Maybe she could eat something and take a nap and feel better in time to wash the sheets and hang them to dry in the afternoon sun. Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she would stay leaning against the doorframe until Rowan walked out of the woods.

She shook herself out of that foolishness and put away her small packages of groceries in the half-empty pantry, sliding jars of home-canned applesauce and jam towards the back of the shelves to make room for her loaf of bread, her box of eggs, the small pats of butter wrapped in waxed cloth. The vegetables, late zucchini and tomatoes, three gleaming green apples, fit on the shelf below. When she'd peeked in that morning or the day before, she could have sworn one of the shelves held a row of squat yellow-brown onions, but she couldn't find them now. She'd have to make do without them until her next trip to town, or until she could go home with Rowan.

That afternoon passed in a haze of handwashing laundry. Stripping the sheets off the bed and dust covers off all the furniture, hauling the big metal tubs from the greenhouse into the kitchen, boiling water and shaving soap and scrubbing to get the dust out from between the fibers. Camellia let herself drift in the soothing rhythms of manual tasks, finding some peace in the ache of her muscles and the wrinkling of her fingers. The sheets dried easily on the west side of the garden, fresh clothesline and clothespins stored in a can by the base of the poles.

The next morning, she took down the sheets and made the bed, fried an egg in butter for breakfast and brewed strong black tea. She took a walk in the woods before the last summer heat baked the air too hot. She saw the same flash of black fur between bushes but didn't let it stop her this time. The afternoon was spent sweeping the back porch and living room, hauling rugs over the railings and beating dust out of them.

The rest of the week and a few weeks after, passed much the same as the first few days. Camellia woke groggy in fresh sheets and made breakfast and tea and cleaned, went on walks shadowed by almost-silent footsteps. She felt hazy and out of time, not sure how to mark the days without anything out of the ordinary happening, without Allison's gentle invitations for dinner or tea or Michel dragging her to libraries and tiny bookstores. Rowan made no appearance and Camellia refused to let herself get too comfortable. She scrubbed the floors and washed dishes and did not think about Rowan living in this house alone after their grandmother died, did not think about the last letter they had sent to Michel that made no mention of where on earth they might have gone. This house was where Camellia knew they had been, so she would start here, even if no one in town knew where they had gone either. Before she knew it, it had been almost a month since she had first arrived, but she was no closer to knowing where Rowan was than when she'd stepped off the train.

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One morning Camellia opened the door to the back porch to go out to rake the leaves out of the garden and almost stepped on the small corpse of a rabbit. Its paws were curled up to its chest, small rents in the fur around its neck and blood around its mouth the only signs it wasn't sleeping. Its head was slumped at an unnatural angle, neck broken.

Camellia stared at it a moment longer before closing the door again.

If she'd known how to skin or butcher it, she could use the meat or fur. She couldn't, though, and honestly, it just felt sad and a little gross. It felt like a waste, to just throw away what could be a meal or a coat collar. The winds were cooling and she hadn't packed well for winter in the mountains. She'd written to Allison for the coats she'd kept in storage, but if she could have used this, she would have.

"I'm sorry," she called to the woods and gathered the small body in her hands. The skin under the soft fur was still warm. The plank under its head was stained with four spots of blood. She stepped barefoot across the porch into the wet loam and through the wild garden over the smooth stone paths. The rabbit was so small.

Camellia laid the body in the leaf litter. The neck rolled unnaturally. She inhaled sharply. Her hands felt cold in the early chill.

She went back inside to put on her shoes and left out the front door, picking a direction and stepping carefully into the woods. The trees today, maple leaves turning stark yellow and red against the dark evergreen shadows, felt more welcoming than the chill of the living room or even the comfortingly uncultivated winding paths of the garden. Crisp autumn air and cold sunshine, clear and white against the clouding-over sky, cleared the panicked tightness in her chest with each deep breath.

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Camellia's next trip to town was supposed to be short, just picking up packages at the post office and seeing people that weren't her own reflection in the bathroom mirror every morning. However, her walk took her past the library. The glow of the windows against the rainy gloom of the autumn afternoon pulled her in and she was stepping into the warm space before she realized it.

The town was small, and so was the library, but it seemed brightly lit and well-cared-for, shelves dusted and circulation desk gleaming, scattered tables between the shelves half full. The cheerful person behind the desk – Elise, from her nametag – directed her to the gardening shelf. The books in the library had more on gardening than her mom had ever been able to teach her, how to know what was a weed and how to trim back the roses in the winter. The back garden was overgrown and wild, but she hoped she could dig through the yellowing vines and patches of weeds to find something worth saving.

Camellia stacked a few books on the circulation desk and quietly asked Elise about useful hobbies, if there were any books she could learn from. Elise laughed and pointed her at the small collection of books, some handwritten and bound, on handicraft, then let her browse for something for beginners in the comfortable hushed bustle of a library in use. Embroidery didn't seem practical until she had something to embroider that wasn't the hems of her own clothes and she was going to garden enough that that would be a waste. Knitting and crochet seemed too complicated, no matter how easy Allison had always claimed them to be. Quilting – likely, especially because she could already sew.

She just needed something with a tangible result, something she could build. Cleaning had worked for a while, but the house was spotless and she could feel the fog of restless



exhaustion settling over her again. She needed something to *do*. The garden couldn't last for that long, not with the rains that had begun sweeping up the mountains and the chill of frost on the grass in the mornings.

Frustrated with herself, Camellia grabbed the first book on quilting she saw and went back to the counter. Elise smiled at her choice, checked the books out to a temporary card, and pointed her to a nearby shop that might have fabric scraps she could use. She felt sharp and disconnected, like she couldn't really touch the world from wherever she was, so she nodded and thanked them and left for the post office for packages Michel had told her to expect, then home, wanting to just be under blankets in the dark.

The walk home from town was getting colder as fall went on, the darkness of early evening and the shadows under the trees chilling Camellia somewhere close to her bones. She'd have to see if Rowan's grandmother had had any storage of thick blankets or winter clothes, perhaps in the chests under the windows in the living room. She hadn't really thought about the house she was living in beyond what it meant that Rowan wasn't there, but she was almost inheriting something. Rowan's grandmother's home, her cast iron pans and her sachets of lavender tucked into the backs of dresser drawers.

The sunlight faded so early this far north, after the equinox and before the solstice. Camellia always felt so much more tired in the winter. The books, from what she had skimmed in the library earlier, said the garden would need to be cared for and covered, the root vegetables and the last of the summer harvest brought in.

She'd found an overburdened apple tree on one of her walks the other day, hidden behind other trees in a neglected orchard. The ground underneath it had been scattered with rotting apples, the branches still heavy with them and when she walked to the trunk to press a hand to it, wasps had flown up from the ground to buzz around her hair until she walked too-quickly away. Her mother had made apple pies on weekends, crust flaky and golden and apples tender and spiced with cinnamon, and they'd shared hot cider some evenings, when her mother wasn't working late. Maybe she could gather these apples for a better price than what the grocery asked for. For now, it was just her and the trees and the ground.

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Camellia wasn't sure what could be done for the garden and wasn't sure she was the right one to do it, despite the encouraging note Elise had slipped between the pages of one of her books. The areas covered with cultivated plants started at the front door and continued around the south and west sides of the house, small stone paths winding through what had once been neat rows to the two outside doors of the greenhouse and the steps and ramp off the back porch. She had tried to look over the bookshelves in the living room and bedroom to see if Rowan or their grandmother had left any records of what they'd planted, but she couldn't find any, so she was relying on one of her books to tell her what was meant to be there and what wasn't.

Camellia sighed and started at the front porch with the rusty heavy-duty shears that had been leaning against the back porch. The plants here seemed to be mostly perennials, from what she could tell, sturdy bushes in pots against the ramp railings and curving around the front of the house. Camellia trimmed carefully, hesitant to cut too far and pulled stubborn green sprouts from around their roots. Her palms had blisters and were covered in dirt by the time she took a break to flop, sweating, in the faint afternoon sun on the back porch. She felt like she'd barely made a dent and for a moment the scale of it overwhelmed her.

This wasn't supposed to take this long. She was supposed to be home by now, with Allison's gentle bullying and Michel's enthusiasm, with Rowan's airy sarcasm. She hadn't heard anything from Michel about Rowan in weeks, hadn't learned anything by being here except that Rowan's grandmother preferred lace curtains and thin rugs. She couldn't leave, though, not until she was sure. Not until she knew where to go next. And she could barely manage to drag herself out of bed long enough to sweep for a few minutes or pull a few weeds.

Camellia pressed her stinging palms over her eyes. This was useless. If she wasn't gardening, she should make something for lunch, or at least get off the deck and take a bath. She didn't move.

Finally, the breeze on her sweat-cooled skin was too cold, even in the weak fall sunlight. Camellia stood and slapped her palms to her face, then winced when she remembered how dirty they were. She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of a forearm, then breathed in, and out. She would find Rowan because she had to. And while she was looking – not waiting, not stagnating, *looking* – she'd take care of this house and the garden for them.

Camellia walked off the back deck and off the path into the grass that spread across the west side of the house, under the bedroom and bathroom windows. She hadn't walked around on this side yet, too busy with what she could reach on the inside and from the front door.

The grasses were drying and brittle under her boots, wildflowers long since faded and fallen from their stems. Seedpods burst as she brushed them with her fingertips, burrs sticking to the laces of her boots and the seams of her pants. Clouds were moving over the sun, the faint wisps she'd seen this morning thickening into dark gray ropes. Rain tonight, by the latest. Camellia stepped forward again and slammed the toe of her boot into something, overbalancing and catching herself at the last second on the frame of a door.

It was large enough for a person to walk through, set at a slant into the foundation of the house and the earth by her feet, stone forming a triangle for it to rest against. It looked like the door to a cellar.

Camellia tugged it open and peered down the stone steps into the darkness of underground. She wished she'd brought a flashlight, but if this was what she thought it was, there should be a light somewhere. She didn't really want to go down those steps, the thought she'd been trying to bury for weeks, that Rowan had been dead and she just hadn't found them yet, floating to the surface of her mind. The cold, dank air certainly didn't smell like what she imagined a body quietly decomposing alone would, but she still couldn't make herself step forward. She'd come back, with light, tomorrow.

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The cellar was a root cellar, as she'd thought, and there were no bodies in it, Rowan-shaped or otherwise. Bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling illuminated shelves with a few withered carrots and sprouting potatoes remaining, strings hanging from the wooden ceiling tied around bundles of dried herbs, and barrels tucked against one wall. A drain in the floor and an [air-pressure powered, what are these called] fan on the wall took care of the moisture from the winter rains. Against the wall next to the door were the larger gardening tools she'd been missing and worrying about acquiring – a spade, a hoe, a pitchfork, a flat-edged snow shovel. Camellia took down the herbs and left the barrels alone, not sure what to do with them. The herbs she stuffed into an empty basket in the pantry. If there was a root cellar, there were probably root

vegetables in the garden, though she couldn't know how many or what condition they might be in until she finished with the garden. If she ever finished with the garden.

The next days of gardening were drizzly and gray. Camellia breathed deeply over the wet earth in the beds and began a growing heap of plant cuttings. She could only do her best to get everything cut back, the more fragile plants covered, before the first frosts lingered longer than the first cold hours after dawn.

Camellia fell into another rhythm without realizing; spending chilly mornings in the garden, taking long hot baths before lunch, reading in front of the empty fireplace until dinner, cutting out squares and triangles of scrap fabrics until her eyes closed over them. Sometimes she went on walks in the woods instead of reading, sometimes she kept working in the garden until it got too dark to see.

She was getting better about remembering to eat, especially with the cookbooks she'd checked out from the library on another trip to town. Allison copied out recipes for sugared lavender shortbread cookies and lemon rosemary scones from her carefully preserved family recipe box and mailed them to her. Elise pressed soft loaves of spice bread and notes about everything from the weather to the latest gossip into Camellia's hands from Elise's seemingly infinite supply of aunts whenever Camellia made it into town. The grocer knew her name and knew to keep back extra heads of garlic for her, or save huge stalks of brussel sprouts from the morning rush. She had finally met the local butcher, who sold cuts of meat from livestock from the surrounding farms and had the loudest laugh of anyone she'd ever met.

Something in her was settling into this house like a cat into a blanket, and she hated it.

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The first snows came by early December and by the solstice Camellia couldn't walk off the porch without her boots crunching inches down into powder. The morning after the longest night, still bleary from staying up to watch the sun rise, Camellia pulled the snow shovel out of the root cellar and leaned it next to the front door. She curled her hands around her favorite mug and sipped at the strong, sweet tea. She'd nap later, but she'd made little cakes out of almonds Allison had mailed her and the jar of honey Elise pressed on her when she'd returned the

gardening books, and she wanted to make it to town before evening, to share them with – her new friends? Was that what they were?

She hadn't noticed when she'd stopped needing Rowan back like her heart needed blood. She hadn't noticed when she'd started growing roots into this strange, tiny town and the mountains that embraced it. It had been almost four months, and Michel had no news. No one in town had seen them since spring. Camellia didn't want to be giving up.

Her tea was gone. The walk was still covered in snow. She wouldn't accomplish anything just sitting here.

The shovel handle fit awkwardly in her hands, rubbing new blisters into her palms by the time she made it halfway down the walk. There wasn't that much snow on the ground, barely half a foot, but she wasn't practiced at shoveling snow; the streets in the city had always been plowed by the time she cared to walk on them. Her breath fogged into clouds in front of her, and sweat felt like ice on her forehead. How was she sweating when it was this cold?

Camellia paused to wipe her brow on her jacket sleeve and looked up at the trees. Then she glanced back at the gate and froze.

The shadows she'd seen in the woods were nothing like seeing the wolf on the path, in full daylight. It was a wolf, somehow impossibly huge and dark black, paws larger than Camellia's face barely making a sound on the gravel as it paced forward. Camellia breathed shallowly, not daring to look away, not daring to move. She'd never been this close to a wild animal before.

Camellia's heart throbbed against her ribs. Each breath was ice in her lungs. Her fingers were numb around the shovel handle.

The wolf had Rowan's eyes.

In the next moment, the wolf saw her looking back, and turned away, bounding back into the undergrowth with only the soft hush of snow flying up marking where it had gone. Camellia was alone again.

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A week passed after that solstice morning before Camellia could think about the wolf without breathing too fast. She couldn't be sure. She needed to be patient. The firewood she'd gathered from fallen branches in the forest crackled and hissed in time with her heartbeats.

Camellia had gotten stew meat and beef bones from the butcher in trade for parsnips and the last of the apples. She had potatoes and carrots she'd pulled from the ground the week before, garlic and drying rosemary and sage and thyme from the root cellar. She'd replaced the little she'd found there in the fall with what she'd been able to gather from the garden before the snows came, stocking the shelves with root vegetables and jars of lemon peel packed in oil and salt, hanging herbs and flowers from the hooks in the ceiling. On the advice of Elise's aunts when she'd asked about stew-making, she'd asked the grocer about how to tap the barrels, and discovered the beers Rowan's grandmother must have laid down the year before, the taste dark and rich with malt.

The greenhouse was warm even in winter, though barren, and Camellia could rest there in the sun without being cut to the bone by the wind. She'd added orange peel to her tea that morning while she started the bones roasting, sweetened with carefully-gathered honey from the hives along the north edges of the garden, had felt like summer sunshine in her stomach. She'd drunk three cups of it curled in blankets in front of the fireplace, bricks warm under her crossed legs and stitches coming easier under her unpracticed fingers. The warmth of the morning lingered in her chest.

The bones had been boiling since her second cup of tea, with a quartered onion, whole garlic cloves, and a carefully rationed half-inch of ginger. Bay leaves and peppercorns floated on the surface next to puddles of beef fat. The smell had filled the kitchen, something heavy and bright.

Camellia chopped onions, carrots, mushrooms, and potatoes, piling them into bowls when they crowded the cutting board. She turned to the stove, turning off the heat under the bones and pulling the stew meat out of the ice box to cube it. The stock could cool for a few minutes while she seared the meat, then she could strain it. Rowan's grandmother's cast iron cookware was heavy and Camellia's arms protested as she swung a pot onto the stove. The meat browned well, sizzling in the bottom of the pot. Camellia started crushing rosemary, thyme, and sage in the pestle, adding a bare drizzle of the beef fat to make them into a paste. Even dried, the herbs smelled amazing, the warm fat sinking into the broken-open leaves.

She pulled the meat out of the pot and added butter and the onions, turning down the heat on the gas stove and stirring them until the butter foamed and the onions went translucent. Then the garlic and flour, then the beer and the strained stock. Then potatoes, carrots, the mushrooms and meat last. She covered the pot and wiped the sweat off her forehead onto her sleeve. It would simmer until the potatoes cooked through and the meat fell apart.

[smh cut a lot of that stew making stuff, the pacing is so weird]

Camellia had thought about making bread, but the stew simmering was enough of a victory for the afternoon. She went back to the greenhouse and the fireplace, to her nest of blankets, and stitched quilt squares out of her pile of fabric shapes until the sky grew too dark to see them by.

When the stew was done, Camellia ladled out two bowls and set one on the kitchen table. She carried the other to the back door, slid the door open, set the bowl down on the wet boards, and closed the door again.

It was delicious, even when it burned her mouth.

The next morning the bowl on the back porch was licked clean.

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The winter passed slowly, snow building in drifts around the bushes in the garden and gathering heavy on the branches of the trees, clinging to the needles of the firs. Camellia spent a lot of time in the greenhouse, pulling weeds and planting seeds for the plants that would need longer to grow before harvest. She kept quilting, tacking pieces of fabric together into squares, laying out parts on the living room floor, furniture pushed to the walls, slipping on the cloth on the slick wood when she stopped paying attention. She kept leaving bowls on the back porch, and they were always empty by morning.

Camellia had gathered what she could of the vegetables left in the garden and stored them on the shelves of the root cellar, but she was getting sick of sweet potatoes and winter squash. The butcher had given her an extra string of smoked sausages the last time she'd been in, and she'd been slowly eating them, but she was getting sick of that too. She was running out of the money she'd brought with her, and she wasn't sure what she would do to make more. She'd seen the wolf in the trees every so often, but they wouldn't come closer.

At least she could cut back the tips of the plum trees' branches, balanced carefully on an old wooden ladder. She could sweep the snow off the front steps and shovel it off the stone walkway. She could finally read some of the books on the shelves, curled up in her favorite armchair by the fire and squinting at the words under lamplight until her legs went stiff. There were two sets of scrawled commentary in the margins, one thin and spidery and faded and one a little slapdash and illegible. The blankets in the chests and the back of the closet were warm and soft, the oldest ones losing color and thread from love. The sun rose earlier and set later each day since the solstice, though it was often hidden behind gray skies.

She wasn't unhappy. She wasn't bored or even unfulfilled. She could watch the tiny sprouts in the greenhouse get bigger and bread dough rise in Rowan's grandmother's kitchen. She could scrub mud off the floors and dust the bookshelves. She could carry stacks of firewood in to the fireplace, or linger under rare sunbeams on the greenhouse paths. But the house was still chilled, to the bone, and layers of knitted blankets and quilts on the bed wouldn't change that.

Camellia was setting a bowl of soup on the back porch one evening a few weeks before the equinox when she looked up at the full moon and turned with a jerk to take a blanket from the chest and brew a pot of tea. She added lemongrass and ginger to Elise's black blend of teas and summer honey for a taste of gold on the tip of her tongue. The wicker chairs on the porch were dusted with snow, but it wasn't too thick or iced over to brush off, and once she curled her body into the blanket and her hands around a steaming mug she was warm enough.

The moonlight spilled over the tops of the trees, silver-cool and haunting, leaving branching shadows on the boards of the deck. It was a miracle the clouds had cleared long enough that it could be seen at all, but the stars were still shrouded by them, dark gray against the dark blue sky.

She heard a howl from the forest, and lifted her face to the trees, smiling.

--

Camellia woke just before dawn, frost on the tips of her hair and the edges of the blanket, a warm weight sprawled across her lap.

Rowan's ears in this form were soft, coarse top coat giving way to dense, fine undercoat. She stroked the top of their head, tangling her fingers in their fur. They were huge – it always



surprised her, how big wolves were, and Rowan was no exception. Shaggy black fur and paws the size of her head, sharp fangs tucked under black lips, wet nose pressing into her hand for more scratches.

“Good morning,” she murmured, curling forward over their head.

The eye facing her opened, then closed. Rowan whuffed.

Camellia laughed, soft and wondrous, light filling her chest like the rays of sun on the tips of the branches far above them. “Did you think I didn’t know? You weren’t subtle.”

Rowan snored pointedly.

“Let’s go inside then,” she said, still smiling. “You need a bath.”

A tree branch in the sunlight let its burden of snow fall to the forest floor.

--

Camellia had found a few mentions of it in a book of local legends she’d checked out from the library at the start of winter, but Rowan’s grandmother had far more detailed writing on it, understandably. It wasn’t supposed to be harmful or a curse. It was originally a protection charm, long before the town grew to be this big, and it had been tied to Rowan’s family long ago. When Rowan’s grandmother died, it had passed to Rowan, and they couldn’t hold it by themselves.

The idea of magic itself was a little strange, but Camellia had heard Michel’s stories of their strange late-night walks and knew Allison’s herb sachets worked more than just herbs should. The giant wolf in the bathtub that kept shaking their head when she got close enough to get splashed with water was just – another step further.

Once Rowan’s fur was clean and smelling of thyme and soap, towed as dry as she could get their thick coat and a nominal attempt at brushing made, she led them back to the bedroom and curled around them on the bed.

“I missed you,” she said. That was a start, at least.

Rowan whuffed, and licked the tears from her cheek.

--

It was easy now to focus on her quilting, on mulching the vegetables and feeding her baby sourdough starter, sweeping the root cellar and scattering fresh straw over the packed dirt floor. Rowan was no help at all, chasing rabbits and squirrels through the garden through the beds and tracking muddy footprints all over the house. She hadn't laughed so much in months. The tomatoes and peas were sprouting well in their small containers, leftover jars from the canned peaches and applesauce they'd been slowly eating. Camellia was looking forward to the variety of the summer harvest, but for now she had to prepare the garden for the beginning of spring.

The crocuses were sprouting in earnest now, tiny purple and white and yellow jewels scattered around the garden, and even the daffodils, the tiny tazettas and larger jonquils beginning to sprout. The buds on the plum trees were one by one turning into blooms, the cherry trees not far behind, and sometimes the breeze felt almost warm. The rain was lightening, even, which Camellia hadn't expected so early. It was a slow and drippy spring.

Even the trees were starting to grow leaves, spots of green on the ends of branches, and Camellia could feel her spirits lightening. She wouldn't have much time for quilting once the planting season really began, so she'd taken to sitting on the front porch under the eaves to try to make progress, watching the bulbs along the fence start to burst into life. She was hoping the finished quilt would be warm enough for her and Rowan's bed the next winter. There was a shepherd the next town over she'd been writing to, trying to get fleece to insulate the fabric layers. She'd had to barter a new set of curtains and a scone recipe, but their note exchange had been slow and polite, no sense of rush.

She could feel herself putting down roots here, far away from the rest of her friends and her hometown, and it was so easy to slide into life without noticing. Even the house had become warmer, more friendly. Not that it was hard to feel warmer with a huge slobbery dog in the same bed, putting off heat like a bonfire.

Now Rowan was sprawled along the top of the stairs next to her, head lying just far enough away from her fabric squares that she wouldn't scold them for drooling on the material. They were dreaming, legs twitching and nose wrinkling.

Sunsets in the house were always a little anticlimactic, the trees and hills swallowing the light before the sun got close enough to the horizon to send up scattered rays to the clouds, turning them pink and purple. Camellia missed the sunsets on the coast, the distant mountains

glowing pink and gold. She missed having Allison only a short tram ride away, her friends close enough to hold and not just through letters. She missed Michel and the way Allison always made her coffee too sweet and the scent of herbs drying in her parents' kitchen.

Camellia loved the mountains too, would miss the trees and the clean smell of rain on the fir needles, this house and its cranky and overflowing garden, the small town library and Elise and her aunts, the friends she'd made at the butcher and the dairy. She would miss Rowan.

They loved these woods, loved this house, had been so stifled and small in the city. Camellia hadn't noticed when they'd first met in person, still caught up in their lives in the city, but now that they were here, out in the mountains with the forest only steps away, she saw how much lighter they were. They could sprint through melting snow and run back to her, shake off the resulting mud all over her clothes and bound away again before her shrieking died down. She wasn't sure how much of it was the forest and how much was the shape, but they certainly seemed more cheerful, and they answered her words with specific enough body language that she knew they understood her and weren't completely lost.

Together the two of them had dug trenches for the new seeds she had to plant, mulched roses and blueberries, taken frost covers off the plants that could survive a late frost. Rowan was just the same as they were as a human, though some element of a predator's grace had ironed out the worst of their awkward clumsiness. She shouldn't still feel like she was missing something. It wasn't Rowan's fault that they were still on four paws instead of two feet.

The light was dying. Camellia gathered her fabric and went inside, nudging Rowan with a foot to wake them as she passed.

--

Clouds were rolling up from the base of the hills, brushing the tops of pine trees on the horizon. Camellia was throwing a waxed tarp over the fragile seedlings when the first drops of rain splattered the ground around her bare feet. Rowan had wandered off that morning, Camellia reluctant to let them out of her sight but unwilling to stop them from going. She hoped they would make it back before the worst of it hit, but meanwhile secured the tarp with stones at the corners and ran inside before she could get soaked.

The rest of the plants had survived the whole winter, so could manage one storm, even with how loud the wind was against the windows. Camellia shut the doors and filled the kettle, grabbing a kitchen towel to roughly dry her hair while the kettle heated. Rowan would come back, or they wouldn't. She could make tea, and start a fire, and reread Allison's latest letter – *Do be careful, dear heart*, ey said, as if she was the one who broke her arm falling off a fence when they were kids and not the other way around. As if she wasn't perfectly safe in Rowan's grandmother's house, well-fed and sheltered and busy.

The rain had started in earnest, a low drumming on the roof slowly growing in volume until it seemed louder than the rush of blood through her ears, the air in her lungs. The windows rattled in their frames against the wind. Camellia settled in a corner of the couch with her letter and her tea and watched the flames.

--

Rowan nosed open the back door hours later. Camellia hadn't moved in a while, and her legs were stiff where they'd been tucked under her body. Her tea had gone cold, and Allison's letter was tucked under the base of the reading lamp on the end table. The fire had burned down to embers, but she hadn't gotten up to add more fuel.

She looked up at the heavy thumps of paws trying to be loud on wood floors that really didn't deserve to get mud all over them again. Rowan panted at the edge of the firelight, fangs and eyes gleaming.

"Welcome home," she said.

Rowan whined.

Camellia sat up slowly, straightening her legs and putting her feet on the floor. The fire had warmed the wood in the time she'd been waiting.

"It's late," she said. "Let's get you dried off so we can go to bed."

Rowan whuffed, and Camellia looked up at them. They shook their coat out, probably getting mud on the furniture too. She sighed.

"Rowan," she said, and stopped before she finished her sentence.

Rowan – melted, or expanded, or twisted. Their head arched back and they shuddered, and whined, and then –

Camellia was sure she head bones snapping, or skin tearing, or Rowan's strangled howls, but she couldn't move. She couldn't even look away. Her breath had started coming faster, but she couldn't step closer to help – if she even could help.

It was too long before the sounds stopped, and Rowan rolled onto their back and groaned, wiping at the blood on their face with their hands.

Camellia breathed in and out, blinked, shook her head, and went to help them up off the floor.

The bath went much more easily, now that Rowan could hold the soap themselves. Camellia cupped a hand over their eyes to rinse suds out of their hair, water running out of it red. She wasn't thinking about how much pain Rowan had been in, just about the jars of broth she'd tucked into the icebox or if she could get away with adding salt to plain water. Rowan was docile under her hands, and when she wrapped them up in their grandmother's towels and wrung out their hair they didn't protest, even when she was sure she'd tugged too hard.

When Rowan was clean and dressed Camellia hustled them into bed, curling up against them and putting her head on their shoulder. This was familiar, like home, even if it wasn't the same place or time as home had been before. She put her hand on their sternum and their heart thumped reassuringly steady under her fingertips.

Camellia was shaking, she realized, and she pressed her face into Rowan's shirt and tried to sleep.

--

The next morning was almost too easy. Camellia woke up and Rowan was still sleeping, so she went and made tea in the sunrise light, scrubbed the living room floor while the water boiled, carried the steaming pot and two mugs and two pieces of bread with butter on a tray back to the bedroom. Rowan didn't wake right away, but when they did they submitted easily to Camellia pressing her hand to their forehead and ate the bread and drank the tea without a sound.

When Camellia got dressed and went out to the garden Rowan followed her, wandering along the paths while she checked the soaked plants for any serious damage from the storm. They swayed slightly after an hour or two in the morning sun, and Camellia led them inside and they had lunch. It was easy to pull out pickled onions and the last of the smoked sausage and an

early roll of soft goat cheese and cut slices of bread, easy to watch Rowan eat it, though they didn't touch the onions.

They stayed inside for the afternoon, Camellia writing a letter to Michel and trying not to say too much or too little, Rowan on the floor in front of the dark fireplace surrounded by books and flipping through them. Dinner was potatoes in chunks and carrots cut into orange and purple coins swimming in dark broth, soft boiled eggs, and bread again. Camellia took a bath before they went to bed, curled around each other.

Camellia woke to the easy, shallow snores she'd learned the sound of the year before, tangled under too-hot blankets and clinging to the hems of Rowan's clothes. They hadn't felt real for the first month. And Rowan was in their bed again, sprawled over their half and part of Camellia's, easy sleeping company. They were warm and Camellia shifted closer, tucking her feet against Rowan's calves.

She could sleep in a little longer.

--

Days that felt like dreams later, Camellia was making scones, with salt- and oil-packed lemon peel from early autumn, preserved the way her mom taught her. She'd pulled out dried thyme from the cellar, dried vanilla bean from the marketplace in town, sweet cream butter and fresh buttermilk, coarse-milled flour and sugar. The small town had less variety and finery, she'd learned, than the markets in the city. Those were far distant from Rowan's grandmother's house, miles from the coastal floodplains. The dough was just coming together, and she thought this time she'd gotten the ratios right – not too wet, not too dry, just right.

Her quilting project had been put on hold for digging rainwater ditches in the garden, keeping the plants from getting flooded. She hadn't known how much rain the mountains got until it began, light drizzles to soaking showers, and constant cloudy skies all day besides. The garden had some ditches dug along the paths, but the new bulbs and some of the farther reaches had been drowning until she could kneel in the mud and bark mulch and press her fingertips into the dirt, channel the water away.

Rowan had been sleeping on the couch in the living room when she'd gotten out of bed, kettle boiling dry on the stove, arm outstretched and book on the floor, pages bent. She'd picked

up the book and refilled the kettle, taking it off the heat before it whistled. They hadn't woken until she put a hand on their shoulder, and then they'd barely moved, only blinking up at her and reaching for the mug she'd brought them.

She'd sent them back to the bedroom, hoping they'd stay and sleep. But the window opened, and the moon was full in three days. When they came back, at least there would be scones.

--

It was weeks before Rowan said anything, but each day they turned their face to Camellia a little more. They started helping her in the garden, pulling weeds and adding mulch over roots, getting shovel blisters on their hands to match Camellia's. It seemed almost like they were slowly waking from a dream, eyes clearing like the sky after a storm.

Camellia would be content with their silence, with just knowing they were here and present. Their expressions said everything, or gestures when just a face wasn't enough. She'd wondered about sign language, if she could learn from someone and teach Rowan in turn, but it hadn't seemed important when they communicated well enough without. They'd known each other long enough.

It was a cloudy morning when Rowan shuffled out of bed and slumped over the kitchen table with their hair sticking up in all directions. Camellia poured them a mug of tea and slid it over the table with a finger until it rested against the back of their hand. Rowan murmured something into the table, and she turned back from the kitchen window.

“Hm?”

They lifted their head. “Pancakes?”

Camellia blinked, and laughed. “Yeah, okay.”

She made pancakes.

--

Rowan had fallen into bed early, and she'd laid down with them for a while, but they hadn't slept, sprawling across the sheets and tucking their nose into her neck. She'd rolled over

enough times that both her hips were sore from pressing into the mattress for too long, and her hair was tangled around her ears.

Her mother was often up late, and Camellia had been a restless child. She'd always known that if the light was on in the kitchen, she could toddle in and tuck her face into her mother's hip, that her mother would stroke her hair and heat milk and honey on the stove for her. She'd fall asleep curled up in her mother's lap, and wake tucked into her own bed.

Milk and honey certainly couldn't solve everything. They might help her sleep, tonight.

She started trying to ease herself out of bed, but stopped when Rowan inhaled sharply, like they'd been woken from a doze.

"Miel?" An old nickname. They sounded less asleep than thoughtful, as though they'd been running over something in their mind.

"Can't sleep," she murmured back. "Milk and honey?"

Rowan sat up, hair a bird's nest. "Nah, I'm okay."

They followed her to the main room and curled their bare legs up onto the couch cushions. The weather was getting warmer, so they'd been wearing less to bed. Camellia stirred the cream-thick milk on the stove, adding a spoonful of wildflower honey. The steam that rose up smelled like her mother, like comfort.

When the milk was hot and the honey dissolved, she poured it into a mug and tucked herself into the other corner of the couch, toes brushing Rowan's calves.

It was a quiet night, dawn too far away, but Camellia slept before the sun rose.

--

Spring came quickly, and the forest exploded in new green life in what felt like a matter of days. It rained on and off, but Camellia stepped out on the back porch one afternoon and thought she could chance it. She'd been in this house and its garden for far too long.

She put on her boots and grabbed a jacket, then thought to check if Rowan wanted to come.

"Walk?" she asked, leaning over the back of the couch.

They rolled over on the floor in front of the fireplace, their preferred reading spot, and squinted at her. "Kay," they said, and wiggled to their feet.



The air was damp and fresh and green in the forest, sunlight filtering through the leaves and birds calling back and forth on the branches. Camellia hadn't had a direction in mind, so when Rowan took her hand to lead her down a path, she followed. The grasses and wildflowers rolled across the undergrowth, ferns and mosses and climbing vines covering fallen logs and the roots of saplings. Bushes with long spindly branches and round leaves reached over the narrow trail, fir and oak trees forming vaulted arches above them. The trees grew larger and thicker as they walked, shade falling on the path and their shoulders. Rowan's hand was warm in hers.

Rowan led her to a clearing, and pulled her forward until she could see the hollow in the ground.

It wasn't large – a little over her height across, and half as deep. A tree had fallen and pulled the earth away with its roots; those roots arched up in curling fingers. A nearby stream must have diverted, a tributary flowing into the hollow and pooling around the roots before sinking into the earth. Around the pool, bluebells swayed in the gentle breeze that had made its way through the surrounding trees, the rustling almost sounding like chiming.

Rowan sat at the edge of the clearing, tugging her down by their joined hands, and Camellia sat next to them and watched the water and the flowers and breathed.

--

The spring mornings warmed, the sun a more frequent visitor in fits and starts of rain. The radishes grew larger, the peas and beans wound upward around their trellises, and the strawberries ripened into red jewels. The herb garden, replanted after Camellia had gotten fed up with the sprawling chaos of the dying mint plants and ripped everything out, was becoming neat rows of seedlings with tiny leaves. The house itself was looking a little bedraggled after the winter of storms, and the front porch needed repair even more than it had when Camellia had arrived over half a year ago.

It still hadn't felt like it had been that many months. The butcher had pointed her at the farm supply store the next town over and laughed when Camellia tried to refuse the extra half-chicken she'd pressed into Camellia's hands. Elise had offered an extra hand and a wagon to carry the planks and sandpaper and wood stain up the mountain. She knew these people, even if she felt strange to this place sometimes. She'd passed muffin recipes from Allison to Elise and

back again, shelved books, wrapped cuts of meat in paper and twine, hauled crates for the grocer. She'd found Rowan, and brought them home.

The new planks were laid out on the back porch, but she still had to measure and cut them down, lever out the old nails and boards and put in the new ones, and sand the wood smooth for staining. Rowan was hovering at the edge of her work area, hands tucked under their arms where she couldn't see them being idle. She pulled them out of the shade and put a sheet of sandpaper in their hands.

She started humming as she laid the new boards into the gaps where the old ones had been, lining up edges and joints and hammering new nails into place. Rowan blinked up at her from the bottom of the steps, covered in sawdust and sweat. She smiled, and went back to work.

When the porch was as finished as she could make it for now, she gathered Rowan from under a tree and tugged them back inside by the hand. She made iced tea and flopped on the cool kitchen floor to drink it, muscles aching and fingers throbbing from missing the nail with the hammer.

Rowan rustled around in the icebox and produced lettuce she'd picked yesterday morning, a harder cheese that they hadn't gotten around to eating yet, the leftover chicken they'd roasted the other day, and the thick whole grain mustard the grocer stocked in straight-sided jars. Rowan had tried their hand at making bread a few days before, rounded loaves a little burnt on top, but not bad. She watched as they cut slices from the loaf and assembled sandwiches out of the miscellaneous ingredients. The tea was cold and sweet in her mouth, the sunlight bright through the living room windows. She'd woken this morning to a quiet sunrise, the birds just starting to sing.