

Roaming

Cecilia spent her lunch break on the wide, steep steps of her office building, lounging and letting the warmth of the sunshine and concrete replace the air conditioning that had soaked into her bones. No thoughts weighed her down, and no worries troubled her mind. Comfortable and warm, she listened to the city buzz peacefully around her.

“Cecilia.”

She jerked at the sound of her mother’s voice, knowing it wasn’t her. She looked around wide-eyed for the source, but the passers-by ignored her, obviously not awaiting her acknowledgement. Everything continued as usual—people walking here and there, eating their lunches, talking. No one had spoken to her. It was just an echo in her head, a twitchy synapse. She exhaled the tension and gazed down the street. A block away, in a building she couldn’t see from here, her mother was sleeping in the same place she’d slept for seven weeks: the fourth floor of St. Christopher’s Hospital.

Whether or not her lunch break was over, Cecilia was done. As she rose to return to her office, her phone rang. Only because it was her brother, she answered.

“I’m going to see her tonight,” Nathaniel said.

“Have fun.”

“Come with me.”

She pulled the phone from her ear and stared at it, thinking he’d meant to call Angie.

“C’mon, Cecilia.”

No luck; he’d called the right sister.

“It’s been weeks. Well, years really, for you. We don’t know how long she’s got.”

Cecilia had gone to the hospital the night of the accident. But not again. Her mother was in a place of healing, and Cecilia had none to offer.

“It can’t hurt anything, Cecilia. It can’t hurt you.”

This wasn’t his first try. No one more than Nathaniel had tried to draw her back into the family, or even still treated her like family. Angie had written off Cecilia long ago.

“Okay, Cecilia.” He sighed. “Look, I’m going tonight after work. They say it’s good to read to her. I’ll be there for at least a couple of hours. I hope you come.”

And he hung up. He didn’t tell her goodbye. She recognized the sound of that silent hangup—it echoed Angie’s last hangup, her final severing act. Nathaniel was all she had, her only family, her only tie, the only proof that she wasn’t alone. She wasn’t willing to lose him, too.

That evening, Cecilia followed Nathaniel to their mother’s room but didn’t go in. Crossing that threshold meant crossing back into her mother’s life.

“I’ll be out here.” When he hesitated, she said, “I won’t leave.” He finally nodded and went in.

She watched him through the big window in the door. Seated in the standard rust-orange pleather visitor’s chair, he read to her. His right ankle rested on his left knee, his left arm stretched over it, and the book lay open in his lap. A childhood memory

—*story time*—

slipped across her mind of someone reading to her just like that. But she couldn’t form the picture; it was just the shape. And as with all her slippery dreams, she couldn’t hold on to it.

Half an hour later, Nathaniel closed the book and set it on the table, stood, and walked towards her. Her heart jumped into her throat. He would leave, or tell her to leave. She should have already gone in. When he stepped out, she started to stumble through some kind of apology. But before she uttered a word, he asked, "Can you go in, sit with her for a while? I need some air." He wiped at his red eyes. "Please, sis? I just need to get some air."

Her fears restrained, she swallowed her apology and drifted past him into the room and sat in his still-warm chair. Gwennlian, their mother, lay bound to the bed with tubes and wires connected to fluid and monitors. If she batted an eyelash, they'd know, but she hadn't, not in seven weeks.

On top of the thin, gray hospital blanket, Gwennlian's hands rested. Those perfect hands—slender and elegant, a pristine pair of originals to which Cecilia's would never measure up—had stroked Cecilia's hair at bedtime, spanked her when she disobeyed, and held her when she hurt. She reached out to touch them but hesitated. How long had it been? How long since she'd touched her mother? Years, more than years, a lifetime since everything turned upside-down and inside-out. What did she expect from that motherly touch now? She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Nathaniel wasn't around and grabbed her hand before she could think about it anymore.

Warmth, like the concrete steps at lunch, filled her, and she remembered how it used to be. Story time and dream time. All the traveling. A chair, the story-time chair. Then arms, and the empty chair. Memories of everything that followed flooded her. She squeezed her eyes shut to make them go away. But they didn't.

When Cecilia opened her eyes, Gwennlian was gone, wires and tubes strewn around. The electricity was off; the monitors were blank; no air flowed from the vents. Early evening light—*gloaming*, her mother used to call it—was everywhere, sourceless. She knew this place, and she hated these dreams.

She held her breath to listen for sounds of people, for an echo of someone's voice or a tiny creak to prove she was anywhere but here. But there was nothing. The only sounds were her ragged breath and her heart thumping in her ears. The gloaming made her skin crawl; it might as well have been black as pitch for all the comfort she felt.

Reminding herself that the only way out was through, she trudged to the door and opened it. The dusky hallway was silent and deserted, even lacking the alcohol, bleach, and sickly sanitation smells of hospitals. No doctors buried their noses in charts; no nurses hustled about. No Nathaniel; no mother. Just her and the certainty that the terrible something she never saw in these dreams would find her this time.

She stumbled down the hallway on trembling legs. After passing eight empty and lifeless rooms, she paused at the nurse's station. No people, no noise. Nothing but empty rooms and deserted chairs in this stale reflection of reality. She willed her body to wake herself up and end this. But nothing changed, and she rested her forehead against the wall, closed her eyes, and waited. As she wondered how long Nathaniel would let her sleep, a sigh of warm breath drifted across her shoulder.

Ahhhhh.

The warmth of that breath did nothing to dampen the chill in her bones. She told herself that breath wasn't real because she was alone, she was always alone here, and it wasn't real. This place wasn't real.

Ahhhhh. Closer now. Farther up her neck. Warmer.

But this was a dream; she was fine. She didn't feel dreams. Dreams didn't hurt, didn't turn marrow to ice. She was safe. Yes, safe, she was safe because dreams didn't hurt.

Ahhhhh. All the way up her neck, and along the back of her ear.

Spinning around so fast to catch the monster that haunted her dreams, she stumbled and fell. Above her, over her, something dark, not something that was but something that wasn't,

—*empty chair*—

filled her vision. Shaped like a man, it wasn't physical. It was absence. It was void.

A scream built up in her chest, but a hand from the void reached out and her breath disappeared. She scrambled backwards, pulling herself with her hands and pushing with her feet across the cold linoleum.

From a few feet away, Cecilia almost didn't see it. In the dusky light, when it no longer dominated her field of vision, it almost wasn't there. Her eyes kept sliding over it. But as it drew closer, it became real, distinct. She paused her retreat and stared. That shape, she knew that shape.

She knew *him*.

As Cecilia peeled her hand from the floor to meet the void's, a third hand, a perfect hand, reached through the nearby doorway and clamped around Cecilia's wrist. She tensed and pulled back, but the grip was stronger than she.

Cecilia looked up at her mother's perfect face, and Gwenllian stared agape at the void.

"Dangerous here, Cecilia." She glanced at her daughter. "Have to go."

Before Cecilia could react, Gwenllian yanked her into the room, dragging her along the floor. As she dropped to Cecilia's side, Gwenllian glowed and her body transmuted to light—pink specks, blue streaks, and orange tinges swirling in a sea of white—and it flowed through her into Cecilia's arm. Cecilia watched familiar light

—travels—

ripple through her until she became every color in the spectrum: vibrant yellows and smoky blues churning with fiery reds and mellow purples. The void lumbered after them, still reaching out, and Gwenllian embraced her daughter, cocooning her in light, and they sank to the floor below.

Gwenllian released Cecilia from the embrace but maintained the grip on her arm. Cecilia wanted to fight, to draw back, but she couldn't focus. She wanted to throw up and wondered crazily if she'd vomit rainbows. As soon as Cecilia was ready to barrage her with questions, Gwenllian pulled her up and dragged her through wall after wall until they stopped, floated up, and settled in Gwenllian's room.

Bound again to tubes and wires, Gwenllian's body lay in the hospital bed. Cecilia's body sat in the nearby chair. With her head on the bed, she still clutched her mother's hand. The

monitors displayed nothing; the vents remained silent, and dusk the only light. The usual clatter of hospital noises sounded muffled and flat.

“We’re okay here, Cecilia. We’re safe.”

Cecilia yanked her arm free of Gwenllian’s grasp. In the hall, a Nathaniel made of subdued green and orange lights watched his sister sleep by their mother. He smiled and walked away. A figure of soft yellow and green, the charge nurse, walked by. One of Gwenllian’s doctors, now pale red and blue lights, strode in the other direction. This was nothing like her other dreams. The light was the same; it was the same place. But no one had ever been here with her. The people, the sounds—all of it real and not real, like echoes.

“Projecting,” Cecilia mumbled at the door. This wasn’t the same kind of dream, but surely, it was still a dream. This was fantasy, a story,

—*story time*—

imaginary. They’d spent so much time convincing her this place wasn’t a real place, teaching her the difference between reality and nightmares, pushing her to accept that those things she’d seen

—*the arms, the empty chair*—

weren’t real. They told her she’d just been a sleepy kid who got confused about something she saw, something she thought she’d seen her mother do. And eventually, she’d accepted their version of reality. But standing here again and feeling that familiarity, the delusion that this was a dream cracked.

“Where are we, Mom?”

“You know, honey.” She stroked her daughter’s cheek and their light mingled. “You remember. We’re roaming in the gloaming.”

“Roaming in the—?” She slapped Gwenllian’s hand away. “Bullshit, Mom! That’s a fucking song! This—” she pointed in circles around the room “—is not a song! Where are we?” She needed someone else to say it, even Gwenllian. Especially Gwenllian.

The fondness in her voice disappeared, and she stepped closer. “Stop it, Cecilia. Some things are real whether you believe or not. Call it bullshit if you want to. But you’re here. And I’m trapped.”

Cecilia’s stomach clenched as years of therapy unraveled. The source of all her suffering was asking for help to escape the place she’d sworn wasn’t real. But everything was real. And cunning and calculating Gwenllian had exhausted her means to return. “You brought me here.”

“What? No. Of course not, Cecilia. What do you think I am?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” All of her children, but none more than Cecilia, knew exactly what she was, what she was willing to be, to save face, to be normal, to bury secrets.

She stepped back and sighed. “Jesus, Cecilia.”

“You called. I heard you.”

“Called, yes. Brought you here, no. Only you can get you here.”

No, that wasn’t right. Someone had been pulled here—Cecilia had seen it. That memory
—*arms*—

hovered just out of reach, in the place kids put memories everyone says are wrong. The chair, the arms, the empty space. Gwenllian was wrong. But realizing that didn’t release

Cecilia's memory. She played with it, tried to coax it from its forced isolation, but it eluded her, another slippery dream. She knew, though, in the same way she knew she wasn't dreaming, the memory concerned that void.

Cecilia put her fingers to her temples. Too many memories were trying to be remembered but couldn't get through. She couldn't process all this information or muddle through the lies. She needed to leave.

"How do I get back, Mom? I can't stay here."

Gwenllian cocked her head and asked, "You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"You figured it out before—" she said. "You figured it out first."

Echoes of more trapped memories—a game, a story, traveling. "Figured what out?"

She paused and then said, "Look down."

A silver thread extended from the middle of Cecilia's abdomen. She grabbed at it, but her hand slipped through. Her light pulsed into it. As she traced it to her body, it thickened into a cord, and the pulses became stronger and more distinct. Nothing came from either Gwenllian's body or her light. Her thread was missing. Nothing connected her to her body.

"That's why you can't get back."

Gwenllian nodded.

"What happened?"

"Exactly what I warned you all about when you were kids." She shook her head and mocked herself: "*Don't go too far, or you'll get lost.* I went too far. I got lost. Quite a while ago I

learned to detach, and I've been roaming farther and farther. I've done it a lot. But the gloaming has so many things we didn't know."

"Like what?"

"Scavengers."

Cecilia pictured aquarium sucker fish floating around on a dream plane and gagged a little. "What do they scavenge?"

"Loose threads and broken cords." She offered a crooked smile. "Like mine."

Cecilia put her hand to her mouth. "Is that what was after me?" It wasn't.

"No. No, that wasn't a scavenger."

A secret floated in her tone, and Cecilia waited for her to share it.

"There are scavengers," Gwenllian explained. "And there are hunters. You can find the scavengers if you look hard enough. They hide, but they're natural. They belong here."

"And the hunters?"

"They don't belong here. They got here by accident."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what do they hunt?"

Instead of answering, Gwenllian gazed at the floor, far away and deep inside herself. A master of avoidance as a cornerstone of a happy life, she wouldn't go further without force.

As Cecilia waited, she realized why hunters were almost invisible in the gloaming. Instead of reflecting light, they absorbed it. She only saw hers because he was so close. In this

place where living things were made of light, hunters were an inversion of light, stars collapsing on themselves ... like they'd been turned inside-out ... like someone from the gloaming

—*arms*—

had grabbed someone in the physical plane

—*the chair*—

and pulled him through

—*the empty chair*—

turning him inside-out ... turning him into an astral void that mirrored his physical absence.

Cecilia clenched her fists and stood so rigid she shook. They both knew that void. They both knew what Gwenllian had done. A chasm nearly twenty years deep containing her jilted childhood opened in Cecilia's chest, and something akin to a sob escaped.

"Cecilia? What's wrong?"

"Did you recognize him, Mother?" She felt like fire and wondered if she could be a dragon here. "Was he familiar to you?"

"It's a human-shaped void. How would I recognize it?"

"We recognize people's light forms." Cecilia gestured towards the door. "It's not a stretch." She stepped closer and glared into Gwenllian's eyes. "Tell me, Mother. Did you recognize him?"

"Stop it." She barely met Cecilia's stare.

Everything Gwenllian would never say hung between them. Cecilia wanted to tear her mother apart, to rip the layers away until she found something that looked like truth, or at least

honesty. She wanted her childhood back from the cops who laughed at and pitied her, from the shrinks who couldn't believe her, and from the mother who caused it and let it happen.

With her hands on her waist, Cecilia took several deep, calming breaths. Though the act was physiologically pointless in this place, it helped her focus. She closed the chasm in her chest and extinguished the fire she so desperately wanted to breathe. Gwenllian couldn't be trusted. Whether on the physical plane, the astral plane, or the dreaming—however many ways the universe split into existence—Gwenllian would always be the same.

Cecilia faced her again and nodded, accepting Gwenllian's well-practiced avoidance and her own lack of skills to combat it. "Okay, Mom." She would have no closure tonight. "Have it your way." And instead of breathing fire or shredding her mother, Cecilia frowned at Gwenllian, a disappointed frown, the first frown she'd learned. She crossed her arms over her chest, hiding her fingernails embedded in her palms, and stepped to the window. "What will you do?"

Gwenllian shuffled her feet and said, "I'd hoped you might help."

"Wanna hitch a ride?"

"I wish it were that simple. No, I need my own way back. But I'm out of ideas. Nothing I've found has been helpful. Without a cord, I can't get back."

"So, you want ... what? Research?"

"Yes. Please. Anything. Everything. Whatever you can find." She strode to the window and turned Cecilia to face her. "Keep my body alive, Cecilia. It's weakening, but there is a way back. Just keep my body alive, and we can find a way to get me home."

She suffered no illusion that saving Gwenllian might repair any of the damage she'd caused. But her desire to remain free did not mean she'd let her mother die. "I'll do my best."

And she would. She'd be a good daughter, do the research, and make every reasonable case for keeping her body alive. And then she'd be done with it. But Cecilia needed her, just this one last time. "Can you help me first, Mom? How do I get back?"

Gwenllian smiled, cupped Cecilia's face in her hands, and kissed her forehead.

"Everyone's different, but it's about synchronization, like trying to ride the ocean. Watch the cord and focus on the waves. You'll see how it works."

Halfway to her body, Cecilia saw it: both her light and her body pulsed into the cord. The way home was where those pulses rolled together. Before she'd figured it out, she'd always just waited for her body to wake up.

Without so much as a glance over her shoulder, she said, "Bye, Mom," and rode the next wave away.

Cecilia raised her head and dropped Gwenllian's hand like a bag of dead rats. Nathaniel sat in another chair on the other side of the bed.

"Good nap?" he asked.

"How long was I out?"

"An hour and a half. I'm glad you came."

"Me too." She'd been vindicated, justified, freed from the burden of so many of her mother's wrongs.

"We need to talk, Cecilia. She's been out for seven weeks. She's—"

"No." She had too much to think about. Whatever love she had for her brother or desire to belong to her own family paled in her need to leave. "I have to go, Nathaniel." Regardless of

her promise, she couldn't handle a pull-the-plug conversation tonight. Besides, he wouldn't do it without the siblings discussing it. Gwenllian's body would be safe for a while. She stood and turned to the door.

"Did you see her?"

She turned and looked from him to the bed and back again.

"You know what I mean. Did you talk to her?"

Nathaniel knew. Or he was baiting her. She asked, very slowly, "Have you talked to her, Nathaniel?"

He almost rolled his eyes. "Look at the book on the table."

The cover showed a chakra-laden shadow walking into a light at the end of a tunnel. The title suggested that Nathaniel really did know: *Incidents of the Soul: Hazards of Dimensional Journeys*. But then, why hadn't he said anything?

"She swore me to secrecy, said to keep you out." He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "I'd forgotten all about it, Cecilia, thought it had all been pretend."

She returned the book to the table. "Angie?"

He laughed. "When I tried to bring it up, she asked how my meds were working."

"How long have you known?"

He bit his lower lip. "Six weeks."

She dropped to her seat and stared at nothing. Being aware of the truth now made every second of those lies pure torture. And for six weeks, her brother, the only person who mattered in her life, had let her keep living in that torture.

"I'm so sorry, Cecilia."

She stopped herself from screaming. He wasn't to blame. Their mother could exert such power on people. And naturally, he had to be careful with information capable of unraveling seventeen years of someone's life and potentially destroying everything they understood about who they were.

"Cecilia, I—"

"What have you learned?" She looked at him. "Have you found anything to help her?" It was good that she couldn't breathe fire here.

He clamped his mouth shut and leaned back in his seat. "There's no way to get her back without a cord. I think we should convince her to move on."

Cecilia raised an eyebrow.

"No, she won't be happy," he said.

"Would unplugging her force her to move on?"

"Mixed information on that. I think souls can choose to stay or go. But she's in danger if she stays. There are creatures, like scavengers, that clean up detached energies. She probably told you about the detached cords, but I haven't mentioned the other to her."

"What about the voids?"

"The what?"

"Hunters."

He stared, seeming to wait for her to fill in his part of the conversation.

"I saw one."

He swallowed but said nothing.

"I almost touched him."

“Him?” Nathaniel whispered.

“Yes.” She leaned forward to impress on the importance of this. “Him. How much do you remember? Do you remember what I saw?”

He shook his head.

“He read to me that night, from the story-time chair. Arms reached out of nothing, and then her head and torso followed. She grabbed him and pulled him through.”

All the color drained from his face.

“Hunters are voids, Nathaniel, inversions. They’re physics flipped inside-out.”

“That’s not even—. How is that possible?”

“I don’t know how she did it. But I can figure it out. I always figured these things out first. Maybe she even learned the trick from me.” Cecilia rubbed her neck, thinking of the harm she might have inadvertently instigated.

“Figure it out? Can you get her back that way?”

She shrugged. “She’s just energy. I can’t imagine what that kind of flip would do. But if I figure out how she did it ... maybe I can reverse it ... and then Well, we have to try. Don’t we?”

He nodded.

She leaned over and rested her arms on the bed. “For both of them.”

“Could that work?”

“No idea. He’s a body, a physical presence on an energy plane. What happened to him might be—is most likely—irreversible.”

He threw his head back and covered his face with his hands. “She should have brought you in sooner. I wonder why she didn’t.”

“She knew I’d find him. Or he’d find me.”

“Shit, Cecilia, it’s been—” he dropped his hands and leaned forward “—almost twenty years. What would he even be like?”

“Who knows? People aren’t t-shirts. You can’t turn them inside-out twice and expect them to be right.”

He laughed. “But we can try.”

“We can try.”

Nathaniel glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s late.”

“Bedtime.”

“Story time.”

“Time to travel.”

They both stood and walked together in a side hug to the door. As they left the room, she remembered again how it used to be. How stories became travels and the whole family traveled together. The empty story-time chair, the arms, and the absence that followed. Memories drifted up, finally coming loose of the lies they’d been buried in. But she didn’t shut her eyes against them. She smiled and let them all come back to her.