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It really was quite eerie how perfectly the day's weather fit the occasion. Joshua parked his truck in the middle of Nana's big open field and quickly hopped out. He leaned against the driver's side door with his back to the big house, slowly running his eyes over the land he grew up on as if just seeing it for the first time. The wind had picked up a bit due to the fast-approaching storm, and the overgrown grass, scattered flowers, and the leaves on the huge willows all seemed to move as one with the wind. They whipped rhythmically back and forth; a dance in tribute for Nana. The sky was a cool, light grey marred only by splotches of blue and a bright white stripe cutting through and running west as far as the eye could see. Joshua turned and lightly jogged up to the back porch to enter the house. He smiled as he passed a half-finished treehouse that rested at the base of one of the willow trees. He was nine when the materials for it first arrived, and although it would never be completed, it had never felt right to move it. Especially not now. It was a part of this home.

Upon entering the house, Joshua stilled for a second, listening for a sign of Joan or Neesh. There was nothing but deathly silence; he guessed that they must have gone to bed. Joan must have been exhausted. She had given quite the performance at the funeral, sobbing so hard she had started to hack her lungs out. Wailing over the casket with her eyelashes dramatically fluttering, she cried out to “Almighty” for an explanation. It had been a revolting sight to witness for those who knew that she hadn't so much as called Nana for years. Joshua resumed walking down the hallway, taking everything in as if it were his first time there. The weight of Nana's presence felt infused into everything. The shiny, brown hardwood floors he would have to tiptoe through on cleaning days. That oddly placed end table that took up enough of the narrow hallway to require anyone walking past it to turn sideways to pass. Nana had always kept it there because she loved to switch out the table decorations according to her mood. A bright bouquet one week, a small cactus the next. She had believed that the item on the end table would let anyone walking in immediately sense her mood and treat her accordingly. Three days before her death, Nana said she only wanted positivity in her last days so she had placed a full and vibrant bouquet on the table, though it was now wilted and brown.

Joshua came to a stop in front of the closed door to Nana's room. A lump formed in his throat as he became enveloped in doubt. He almost felt like a stranger to the once familiar space.

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He hadn't been in there in over a week, preferring to rush past it as quickly as possible when entering or leaving the house. He had thought this was the only way to avoid the sadness everyone was warning him about. People had told him that she would haunt the house, that he was probably pushing his luck by remaining in the house at all so soon after her death. They said the walls held her soul and would always do so. They clucked over him both before and at the funeral, offering homes, hotel discounts, couches, guest rooms and trailers if he wanted to be out of the house for a while. And, despite dealing with death in his daily professional life, the warnings had started to get to him. Nana was the only dead person he had ever been close to in life. What if it was different when you knew the person? Each of the four nights leading up to the funeral he had startled himself awake from nightmares. Visions of Nana's restless ghost floated above him, demanding to take his soul for a walk, and he thought for sure he'd have to move from the only home he knew.

However, at the funeral when it was his turn to view the body at the altar, relief washed over him. She looked serene, almost like she was smiling. Whoever had done her makeup at Hookman's had done a great job of bringing color to her face. With the exquisite attention to detail, it was near-perfect work. Joshua himself would have used a less harsh color on her lips, however. Perhaps a nude paint? Nana had still looked great, though. Staring down into the casket, he had touched her wrist, feeling a familiar twinge of delight as the coldness of her skin sliced through the warmth of his like a gunshot in a forest. That little thrill was the self-assurance he needed to finally go through her belongings; death was not something to fear. So, he held his breath and confidently pushed Nana's bedroom door open. He immediately stopped short, the anticipation on his face melting to confusion.

Nana's bed, television, outdated radio, and wardrobe chest had all been pushed against a wall, leaving a large open, empty space in the middle of the room. Neesh, his mom's boyfriend was standing smack dab in the middle of the room. He was a man of average looks, but he possessed a winning, deceptively charming smile. Neesh was clothed in tightly-fitted black dress pants and a muted, long-sleeved dress shirt. He had taken off the matching jacket he'd worn to the funeral, and the shirt was now untucked and unbuttoned past his chest. He had his hands on his hips as he observed the four women kneeling in front of him: Joan, who Joshua immediately recognized in the super-long grey shift dress she had worn to the funeral, two women in

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matching plain black sundresses who had also attended the funeral, and one odd-looking woman Joshua had never seen before with multicolored feathers weaved into her purple and orange hair and loud gems dangling from her shirt sleeves and skirt hem. The women's backs were completely straight while their heads were bent down at the neck. In perfect unison, the women softly recited a chant Joshua did not recognize, nor could he fully make out the words. Neesh moved to stand directly in front of the woman with the colored hair, staring down at her bent form while he softly stroked an open hand back and forth across the top of her head. Neither Neesh nor the women even noticed Joshua's entrance.

“Again.” Neesh commanded. The women started the recitation again in that same measured drawl, their hushed voices vibrating together in a hypnotizing rumble.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” Joshua barked. “Why have you touched her things?!” The women didn't move an inch from their positions, nor did they break the prayer as they continued to carry on as if he had not spoken. Neesh looked up and gave Joshua a slow, cloying smile. That smile combined with that unblinking, all-knowing gaze Neesh constantly had at the ready made Joshua feel borderline nauseous; Neesh could always make him feel like doomed prey. Joshua gulped silently and forced himself to continue meeting Neesh's gaze, even as Neesh stepped around the women and began walking towards him. Neesh spread his arms wide in a gesture of friendliness as he approached.

“Joshua! Let me give my condolences agai-”

Joshua held up a halting hand. “Save it. I just want to talk to my mom.”

Neesh stopped in his tracks as if he'd been physically struck, dropping his arms back to his sides as that smile melted off of his face as slowly as it had come. He raised an eyebrow to Joshua, not hiding his irritation. Joshua shot back an irritated look of his own before bellowing, “Now!” Neesh visibly restrained himself before the smile returned.

“Of course.” Neesh half-turned back around to the women, who were still performing the observance, and loudly snapped his fingers twice. The chanting women stopped immediately at the sound, and the abrupt absence of their mesmerizing purr cloaked the room in a jarring silence.

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“I need Joan.” Neesh’s resonant command sliced through the still room like a knife. Joan rose to her feet in one smooth motion and floated to Neesh’s side. Neesh looked down at her, smoothing her hair back from her face as Joan stared up at him in lethargic awe. Tearing away from Joan’s gaze, Neesh looked back to Joshua. “In any case, I *am* sorry about your grandmother’s death. You must be incredibly sad...underneath it all.” Neesh’s sugary tone seemed almost slightly accusatory, and Joshua almost gulped.

Instead, Joshua simply retorted, “The guest room is upstairs if you’re lost. Move whatever this is into there.”

Neesh looked at him for a beat, a knowing smirk touching but not fully forming on his lips. “Right.” he responded. He then took Joan’s waist in one hand and her hand in the other to gently steer her towards Joshua. Neesh briefly smiled again at the both of them, before sauntering back over to his place standing in front of the odd woman. He swept his eyes over the three women who were still kneeling hushed with their heads bowed, and their hands clasped in their laps. Neesh’s eyes glittered with gratifying dominion as he snapped his fingers.

“Recompense. Accept your reckoning. Again!” he bid them.

The rumble of the praying women began anew.

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“You don’t have any sisters, Joan. You were Nana’s only daughter. Why am I having to tell you this as if it’s new information?” Joshua’s tone was harsh, condescending. Joan sat on the top step of the back porch, facing the open field while Joshua had opted to stand, preferring to pace a short line about ten feet from her. Joan chuckled nervously at his snide remarks.

“No, not blood sisters, obviously. I mean sisters within the Almighty.” she paused, anxiously glancing up at the sky. “Can we talk inside, Joshua? Pretty sure this storm is going to be nasty, and I don’t think standing on the back porch will be enough to stop us from getting soaked.” Joshua didn’t respond, and after a couple of beats, her short, uneasy laughter rang out again to fill the air. Joshua simply continued pacing, hands shoved in his pockets, waiting. She sighed resignedly before continuing, “Marci, Tana, and I walk the same spiritual tack. Jillycomb just joined us, but I think she-”

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“Tack? You mean ‘track’? And...Jillycomb?” Joshua furrowed his brows, his irritation mounting by the second.

“The one with the colored hair.” Joan answered. “She’s new, but she’s really devout and eager to learn. We’re excited to have her.” She beamed serenely as Joshua gave a loud exhale, rolling his eyes. Joan continued, “I know it can be hard to understand, but us leaning on each other as one within the Almighty saved my life.” She began quickly blinking back the tears that were suddenly filling her eyes. Joshua stared at her, taken aback by this unexpected display of emotion from his mother. Quite unlike the violent harridan he had had the misfortune of spending his early years with.

“And, just how does Neesh play into this “sister” stuff?” Joshua demanded to know.

Joan briefly shut her eyes, thinking of the best way to explain their sect to an outsider. Joshua continued watching her sharply with palpable agitation. The moments ticked by before Joan finally opened her eyes, looking up past Joshua to the darkening sky. The white stripe was just barely visible now, darkening by the second to meld into the ominous, silvery sky. Even though she’d been gone for years, she still knew the ways of the area. This storm was definitely going to be a bad one. “I guess you would call Neesh the...front runner of sorts,” she began softly, “He has this voice, a gift for bringing people to clarity within the Almighty.” Her voice had become lilting and faint, like she was nestled into something warm and fighting sleep. “He makes sure that we all know that real love and feel it in full. He’s tapped into our spirituality, freeing us from the shackles of materials and worldly possessions.” She had drifted off dreamily while talking about Neesh and the girls, but the sound of cackling quickly brought her crashing back. Joan blinked away from the sky to look at Joshua, who was almost doubled over in laughter. Joan sat silently and waited for the guffawing to falter and die down.

“So,” he muttered derisively to her, “you’re in a cult? Ha! That’s great. That’s just really, honestly great, Joan. Wonderful.” He turned his back to her, placing his hands on his hips and looking to the sky again, needing a distraction. His eyes were drawn to where the white stripe had been in the sky, but it was no longer there, taken over by the vast grey. The heavens were about to open up, and the trees knew it. The old willows were violently rustling now, frenzied. “I knew if you ever came back at all, you’d come back with something.” Joshua said, almost under his breath.

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“I just would have never guessed...it'd be a freakin' cult!” Joshua cackled again, shaking his head in wonder. Joan's hackles rose at him laughing at her family, and she fought to tamp her anger down and properly explain. This was the longest Joshua had conversed with her since she arrived, and she knew it was her only chance.

“We're not a cult,” she said, “we're a religious group like any other. Neesh has found a unique way to connect people to the spirituality of the Almighty through our own human love and intimacy. How can you see something bad or funny in that?” Joshua turned to face her again, mouth agape and eyebrows raised in an expression of exaggerated disbelief.

“You wouldn't know human love and intimacy if it walked up and slapped you in the face.” Joshua sneered. Joan snapped her mouth shut and eyed him closely, squinting at his face as something dawned on her. Joshua glanced away from her seeking expression, scoffing to cover his discomfort. She was wearing the same expression Neesh donned constantly. The one that made Joshua feel like an exposed, glaring open book.

“He acts like your boyfriend.” Joshua stated pointedly, trying to redirect the conversation back to Neesh. Joan did not move nor did she speak, but he forged on anyhow. “He also seems like Jillycomb's boyfriend.” She continued to remain silent, just running her eyes over his face like she was trying to eyeball a leak. Joshua was unable to shake the feeling that she had somehow figured something out. Beads of sweat popped up on his forehead despite the chilly wind. It was getting darker and darker, and it seemed as though the field itself was closing in on him. The first crackle of thunder ripped loudly through the air, and he turned his back to her once more. “You don't know me, Joan. Stop acting like you do.” The remark was whispered so low, Joan almost wondered if she'd heard it at all. It had begun to drizzle, and his old truck started glinting from the flashes of lighting. Joshua allowed the seconds to pass. “Will you explain what's going on or are we going to stand out here and get struck by lightning?”

Joan had little to offer by way of explanation. “He's not a boyfriend.” She said simply. Joshua smirked as another crash of thunder popped. “Are you sure you don't want to go inside?” Joan tentatively asked, “We could talk more to Neesh about everything. He'll be able to explain everything a lot better than I can.”

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Sidestepping her request again, Joshua retorted, “Am I to assume he’s *not a boyfriend* to the other three as well?”

“Their bonds with him are unique and their own, Joshua. You’d have to ask them.”

Joshua suddenly spun around to face her again. “Are there any other men in this *group* at all?” he snarled. Joan simply stared back at him, defiant pride setting her mouth into a thin line. Joshua took her silence as an answer and spat onto the ground near her feet. “Newsflash, Joan. Weaving tales to get some sexual variety out of clueless women isn’t a ‘new way’ of anything. How are people even still falling for this?” Joan’s indignation rose anew, and she could not quash it this time.

“You have absolutely *no* idea what you’re talking about. Neesh’s motives towards us are pure.” she retorted.

“Deep down, Nana believed you were somewhere reforming your life and were just too embarrassed to come back and face us. I’m glad she didn’t have to be here to know that her little druggie grew up into a little cult member. You’re pathetic.” Having had enough of her presence, Joshua gave a derisive snort, then began wordlessly walking to his truck. Joan stood with a huff before lightly jogging after him and catching the door of the truck just as he opened it.

“Wait, Joshua?” she said. He froze, clenching and unclenching his fists, when she saw his face, his hateful expression gave her the confirmation she needed. The question died on her lips, and she decided to simply be direct. Taking a deep breath, she began, “I’m aware that I wasn’t the best mother to you when you were younger. I was really bad off, on a lot of drugs.” Joshua’s eyes narrowed dangerously as he tightly pursed his lips. Tears welled up in Joan’s eyes again, and she furiously blinked them back. “I have prayed to the Almighty for forgiveness every day since I’ve found Him. Please know that, Joshua.”

“You don’t remember?” Had she not been looking into his face, she might have mistaken his whispered tone for calm. However, the spittle flying from the fierce snarl on his lips belied his relaxed voice; her words had only made him angrier. “Let me refresh your memory, *Mom.*” He slammed the door closed and stepped towards her purposefully. Before she knew it, he was toe to toe with her, leaning forward until his nose was practically touching hers. Another boom of thunder rang out, and the drizzle picked up immediately afterwards. “You would lock me in that closet for

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days.” Gnawing on a quivering lip, Joan reached out a hand to touch his shoulder, but he promptly swatted it away. The force of the swat was enough to knock her back a step, but Joshua swiftly closed even that space between them. “I had to use the bathroom in a bucket, *Mom*.” She squeezed her eyes tightly closed against the memories he was conjuring, scrambling to remember her meditations, the lengthy talks with Neesh about the importance of confrontation and acceptance to be cleansed by the Almighty. But, Joshua’s frigid glare, a black storm all its own, whipped around her fiercely, and she was struck with a feeling of profound wretchedness. The tears she had been holding back fought to get past her tightly closed eyes until she finally gave up and opened them. The storm was in full swing now, angry and vengeful. It looked like her reckoning day, and she forced herself to remain planted for the sweet release of recompense.

She painted that smile on her face as she reached for his hand. Before he could jerk away, he was feeling her hand hot against his, even in the cold storm. A wave of surreal warmth washed over him immediately after. He stared down at their hands entwined with each other, unsure of the sudden maelstrom of emotions crashing through him. The last physical contact he had had with his mother was the day Nana had come to take him home with her. He couldn’t remember his mother ever holding his hand, yet somehow it felt right in this moment. It felt like she held his hand all the time, and his heart gave a hopeful lurch. Joan’s hand was trembling violently, as if she was also being struck by the unexpected familiarity of the touch. Joshua looked up at his mother through the rain. Though he couldn’t make out her face fully, he could see that glazed, saccharine smile on her face again. Her teeth were quietly chattering, and he realized she was trembling from the cold of the raging weather. Joshua instantly became enraged all over again at his own stupidity, snatching his hand away. A buzzing grew in his ears, a layered revving that soon overpowered even the storm. Suddenly, all he wanted was to be alone in quiet. “You know what? I don’t care.” he growled.

Joan started to respond, but movement behind her caught his eye. He looked past his mother to see Neesh, standing in the house just behind the screen door. The buzzing in Joshua’s ears grew deafening as his body temperature skyrocketed. He felt suspended in space, and all he could see was Neesh with that focused, intense look on his face that oozed predatory excitement. Neesh had clearly seen the cracks in Joshua’s façade, and he looked ready to pounce. Joshua felt unbearably vulnerable under that wolfish gaze. He looked back to his mother, who was still talking. The



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animated flare of her hands conveyed that she was in the middle of a rousing, emotional statement. The buzzing continued to drown her out, and, he knew he had to get away from them. “I have to get out of here.” he muttered quietly to himself.

Joan abruptly stopped speaking. “Did you say something?!” she yelled over the crashing of the thunder storm. Joshua glanced at the screen door once more, but Neesh had vanished. He silently turned from his mother and opened the driver’s side door again. “Joshua!” she frantically reached out a hand out to grab his again. But, it was of no use; Joshua had already hopped into his pickup and slammed the door shut. He locked the vehicle before starting the truck up, his consciousness flooding back to him riotously. He was suddenly aware of his soaking clothes. How freezing cold he was and his chattering teeth. The willow trees bending, looking ready to snap from the tension. The sound of the heavy rain beating his old pickup. And, Joan. She stood at the driver’s side window, frantically tapping it.

“Please!” she implored him, “I am ready for my reckoning. I am ready for my penance. I’m planted and ready for it, Joshua! You hear me?! I’m sorry!” That smile was thankfully gone from her mouth, but still present in her eyes. Joan glanced up at the sky, then looked pleadingly back at him. The pitter patter of the raindrops sounded like pellets hitting his windshield. Joshua stared at her motionless, thinking about that closet. The beatings. The night she had finally gone too far with her cruelty and, her dealer had found a conscience and Nana’s number. The unfocused look in her eye now that further confirmed that she was still a lost stranger to him. Joshua firmed his mouth, snuggling into the well-stocked, pillowy reserve of hatred he kept in the place of Joan’s memory. He turned from her and faced forward, taking a calming breath before peeling off with his tires screeching across the soaked field.

Joan quickly hopped back to save her feet from being run over, watching his retreating car speed down the street until her vision blurred gray from the tears. She turned and shuffled back up to the house, deliberately slowing her pace. She would not run anymore. As her wet clothes clung to her body and her wet hair clung to her neck, she felt deservedly submersed in the fallout of the squalls. Her freezing discomfort was only a small piece of her consequence; she would embrace it fully like Neesh and the Almighty had equipped her to. Once she finally reached the safety of the porch awning, she turned and looked over the field for the last time. It was awash in the rain, each flower and blade of grass submerged in water. However, bony willow trees still held their ground

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against the winds, refusing to break. Joan smoothed her hair back from her face, donning that syrupy smile once again. Turning, she reentered the house to resume observance.

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Joshua flung open the front door of Hookman’s Funeral Home, rushing to close the door behind him before quietly shaking himself off on the welcome mat. Mr. Hookman, a short, somber man somewhere in his early fifties with a penchant for brown sweater-vests, was sitting across the room at a large oak desk that was covered in files and loose papers, chatting away hurriedly on the phone. Mr. Hookman looked up at Joshua in surprise before holding up one mottled finger to indicate that he’d only be one second longer. Joshua set about removing his wet coat as he waited.

Flipping a page in the open folder directly in front of him, Mr. Hookman made a quick checkmark on a form before saying in his most placating tone, “I understand, Mrs. Pritchett. Unfortunately, there’s just no way it’ll arrive in time. Premium stone materials need to be ordered at least a week in advance, even with rush orders.” Mr. Hookman pursed his lips with thinly veiled annoyance as the person on the other end replied before he responded, “Of course. I’ll see what can be done.” He hung up the phone with a heavy sigh and flipped the folder closed before clasping his hands together on top of it. “And, just what are you doing here, Joshua?”

Joshua walked over and stood directly in front of Mr. Hookman’s desk. “I’m scheduled to work today, sir.” Joshua made sure his voice was flat and devoid of emotion to discourage any pity or emotional inquiry. He had had enough today to last a lifetime. Mr. Hookman pointedly looked him up and down, taking in his soaked, haggard appearance with a raised eyebrow.

“To work?” he asked dubiously. “Wasn’t the funeral today?” Joshua simply nodded. Mr. Hookman looked at him a moment longer before shrugging his shoulders. He fished through the files on his desk before pulling one out and handing it to Joshua. “I know you like to know them a bit, but you don’t really need this. I’ve already cleaned her out and the family doesn’t have any unusual requests besides using her regular makeup, which is already in there. She just needs to be touched up and dressed. The guys’ll be over with the coffin in a bit.” Joshua reached over the desk to take the extended file, then walked away without another word, flipping open the folder to glance over it as he headed to the embalming room.

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Joshua reached the room and quickly darted inside, locking the heavy door behind him. He spun around and fell back against the door, inhaling hungrily. Being in his element was just what he needed to regain his lost control. The air was thick with the smell of mixed chemicals, and Joshua welcomed the aroma like an old friend. He rested his eyes on the sheet-covered figure on the slab in the middle of the room and smiled as felt all of his prickly pretense melt away. “Mallory Balmort.” He rolled her name around on his tongue, savoring it. His insides lit up, and a familiar flutter in his belly kicked into high gear. Joshua loved this part of the job. It was like witnessing a resurrection, each cosmetic addition making them come alive bit by bit. His gleaming tools and tall bag of cosmetics were neatly arranged atop a stand next to the body, clean and ready to do their work. Next to the bag was a stack of clothes, a long-sleeved, silky red shirt and black pencil skirt. A pair of shiny black heels rested on top. He walked over to the stand and dropped her folder onto it before pulling gloves on and running his eyes over the tools to check that everything was there. “Mallory Balmort.” He repeated her name in a whisper. Joshua sat the folder on top of the stack of clothes before pulling the sheet off of the figure on the slab.

His heart pounded with excitement and buzzing filled his ears again, a softer buzzing that always made him a bit lightheaded. His eyes were lit with a kind of worship as he ran them over her figure. He huffed her name again over the lump that had formed in his throat. “Mallory. Balmort.” The nude female was about mid-thirties with wispy blond hair and a slightly parted pale mouth. Her eyes were peacefully closed, and if it weren’t for the bluish-grey cast to her skin, one would think she was only sleeping. Joshua ran a finger lightly down her cheek, noticing that his palms had grown clammy with sweat inside of the gloves. He let out a low chuckle at this; each time felt like the first time, ensuring this would never get old. He walked down the length of her form, stopping at her small feet. The buzzing trickled away into a smothering quiet that made his face warm. Beginning at her left ankle, he reached out ran his hand up the leg and thigh, then walked back up to her head, running his hand up her shape the whole way. He did this a few more times until walking became too cumbersome, and he came to a stop at her side. Her limbs were his favorite kind, waiflike and delicate. He only got one this perfect about once a month. The disinfectant she had been bathed in had transformed her skin into something akin to delicate porcelain, cool and smooth all over. He grabbed and squeezed her hand and used the other hand to

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reach out and twirl her hair between two of his fingers before moving down the center of her face to trace her sutured lips repeatedly. She was invigorating without trying, and Joshua felt himself come alive in anticipation of commandeering their encounter. Her silence conveyed what he had already surmised, and he almost didn't dare breathe for fear of breaking the smoldering tempest enveloping them. Joshua stared into her face a moment longer before stepping over to the stand and grabbing an orange bottle of facial moisturizer. “Mallory,” he said, “yes, you're gonna be beautiful.”