

The Stars Remain

Emma moved softly through the woods. Her feet soundlessly pressed against the spongy ground as she crept through the trees, bright dark eyes turning this way and that, watching for any signs of life. A rustle to her right made her turn suddenly, startled. She smiled as she recognized the bristling tail of a squirrel disappearing through the underbrush.

She resumed her journey, glancing up at the sky, trying to estimate how much time she had before her grandmother awoke and noticed her absence. Her grandmother was exceptionally protective, especially since Emma's father's death, and if she knew Emma was out alone at night she would wrinkle up her leathery face, sigh in disappointment, and stump around with her knobby cane in stony silence until Emma fervently vowed to never be so disobedient again. The sky was a dusky grey, and the gloom under the trees was deeper than before. She guessed it was one hour past midnight. It was so difficult to tell, even for her, here where the sun never truly departed from the night sky.

She emerged from a belt of trees and looked out over the valley that she had come to find. She smiled up at the mountains across the valley, greeting them silently. They stood tall and solemn as always, ever-present sentinels of her people. She loved them most in the mornings, when the blush of the new day touched the snowy caps and made them burn like fire. Now, they were dark and mysterious, guessed- at monoliths cloaked in twilight.

Emma cast about the mossy ground for a few moments, searching. Finally she found the familiar trailhead and followed it. The trees dripped slowly, the only sound other than her own breathing to break the vast heavy silence. She let her hands trail beside her, caressing the tall ferns that pressed close beside the trail. Small flowers glimmered under their leaves, twinkling warmly up at her. Though her time was short, she could not resist kneeling to examine one closer, as she did almost every time she passed this way. Pure white and perfectly formed, the flower seemed to glow in the dusk. Like a star, she thought, smiling at the idea. A small star lost in the great dance and trapped here in the gloom under the trees, unable to rejoin his fellows in the great vault above. Emma straightened and looked up at the blank sky. Her mouth tipped ruefully. It was nice to see even this small star under the shadow of the damp ferns when his great brothers high above were obscured by sunlight for months at a time. Sometimes her heart ached with the loss of the glittering stars and the moon and the dancing sheets of color. Despite everything that it now stood for, she longed for the crisp, clear darkness of night, when all one could see was the great black dome of the sky and the hard, sharp points of light strewn across it. Darkness of the land, darkness of the heart. But still she longed for it, a yearning in her blood that she could not ignore.

At last she reached the heart of the valley, where the trees blocked the dusky light and made it difficult to see. She went more slowly now, cautious. Each step she took made hardly a sound as the soles of her feet pressed softly against the mossy ground. The fragrance of the cool summer night rose around her and the familiar sounds of nature were like a balm to her wounded spirit. She could stop and lose

herself for hours in the greatness of it all, forgetting her sorrow, but she resisted, reminding herself yet again that time was short. Maybe another night.

A splash of red! She knelt and lifted up the green branches of a bush, revealing the clusters of blood-red berries hiding shyly underneath. Smiling in satisfaction, she removed the pack she had carried slung over her back and went to work. Slowly, careful not to crush the small plump berries, she plucked them one by one and let them fall into the bag. As the soothing monotony of the action began to settle over her in the damp stillness, she sensed, as she knew she would, the familiar cloud of grief settling over her, the ever-present twilight of her soul. Much as she might wish to, she could not suppress the memory of other nights, of other small brown hands that once picked these berries alongside her. Hands now still forever.

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Winter. Perpetual night. Darkness and light uniting in a great splendor. Rose and I sit on the porch, swinging our short legs, and watch the sun begin to sink after his brief, incomplete sojourn in the land of the living; he has only raised his head above the horizon and glanced about before sinking back beneath the horizon as if wearied by his efforts. It is a glorious sunset; all the world seems afire. He sinks slowly, the clouds about him flaming and soaring across the great blue vault like some grand ceremonial headdress. He plunges lower and lower, bowing his great blazing head in gracious farewell. He vanishes. His plumage, shed right before his retreat, continues to cling to the vestiges of his glory, glowing with ever-fading traces of gold and scarlet. Finally, it becomes what it always was, thin wisps of dim

cloud, and the whole sky falls into purple twilight. The stars leap out brilliant one by one, rejoicing at the repose of the one who dims their splendor.

Rose leaps to her feet and yanks me off the edge of the porch, almost sending me face-first into the snow. Chattering and squealing with excitement, we hold hands and twirl around and around and around until we are dizzy, falling with a breathless plop into the drifts. In the cold comfortable silence that follows, we hear Grandmother grumbling from inside the house, her walking stick tapping its way towards the door. We roll towards each other in the snow and hush one another noisily, giggling so hard we can hardly speak, and scamper away into the woods, to one of those secret, magical places that only children know or care about.

It is nothing but a clearing in the middle of the woods, surrounded by the looming dark sentinels of the trees now shrouded in night and heavy with snow. But in the winter day, when darkness and silence reign, it becomes a place of wonder. After a fit of giggling and scampering, Rose and I choose a completely ordinary patch of ground, dig ourselves a hole in the snow, and unceremoniously flop down, snuggled together in the cold. Above us is the night sky, shrouded by nothing but the vapor of our own breath and the fringe of my fur hood, shivering in the icy air. The vault is littered in bright glittering stars, like a diamond shattered on a piece of black velvet.

I often wonder if those scintillating sparks aren't really holes in the sky, through which other children peek through and laugh and call out in the darkness. We are just too far away to hear them. The whole great dome of the sky is a vast net of gems, a treasure trove we delight in night after night. I turn to Rose to point out a

particularly large and shining star, but she is gone. I start up with fright, staring wildly about me and calling out in panic, suddenly alone in the vast darkness.

“Shhh!”

I spin around, getting snow in my eyes, and squint desperately, fear blooming in my stomach. A giggle from the trees.

“Rose!” I hiss, angry that she scared me.

“Come on!” A giggle, and she is gone. I know where she is going. She is always wanting to go to the lake. She says the trees don’t block the stars there and when there’s no snow on the ice we can slide around and pretend we’re seals.

“Rose!”

We have never been to the lake with Papa gone. He has always been at the cabin waiting for us in his sturdy wooden chair, carving little seals and bears with his jagged iron knife. But now he is at the next village and it is just grandmother, and she can only walk bent double, with a cane.

“Rose!”

I will have to follow her, I know. Groaning, I roll out of my snow nest and trudge after her, dragging my feet through the powder and complaining loudly.

When I get to the edge of the lake, I peer through the trees, looking for my sister.

“Emma!”

I turn, and there she is, fighting to clear some of the snow from the ice so we can slide. She digs herself a hole until she reaches the ice and then starts pushing, but the snow is too much. Her feet slip and she falls, burying her head in the snow.

Shrieking with laughter, she shakes her long dark hair and starts again. Laughing despite the fact that I am still mad at her, I skitter down the bank and run to join her.

A long, sickening groan echoes under my feet and travels through my bones. I stop, terrified. Papa told us once that when we hear the ice speak, it means it is hungry and it could eat us up.

“Rose!”

She turns and looks at me, laughing. She wildly gestures for me to come join her.

“Emma! Come help!”

She turns back to her project. Then, without warning, amid a riot of deafening creaking and tearing ice, she is gone.

“Rose!” This time her name is a scream. I fight my way towards my little sister, struggling through the thick snow that now seems to reach up and seize my waist, sucking me under, freezing my limbs. When I stumble to my knees at the edge of the jagged hole that has eaten Rose, all I can see is her small brown head and flailing arms. Rose is a wonderful swimmer, all the children in the village are, but I know that the cold is stealing her breath and turning her body to stone. Screaming her name, I lay down on my stomach and stretch out my arm as far as it will go, straining.

“Rose! Hold on!”

With a desperate heave she raises her head above the water. I hear her ragged breath, dragging between her blue lips and jolting to a stop in her frozen

chest. I see her eyes, wide and uncomprehending. I feel her wet fingers touch the tips of mine, grasping.

Then she is gone, leaving nothing behind her but a smooth, heavy swell in the dark water.

I scream, a shivering wail that comes from the deepest recess of my body, from some place I did not even know existed. My mind is frozen, just like my sister. All I can do is lay by that still, calm pool, serenely reflecting the stars, and shriek.

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There was more, of course. There were the lights on the shore. There were the shouts of panic when they saw her lying motionless on the ice and heard the inhuman noise coming from her. There were the strong hands, pulling her off the ice as she kicked and screamed, wanting only to stay with her sister. There were the warm blankets, the hot drinks forced down her throat, the comfort and soothing and wise words about death and the life beyond.

There was the funeral.

There was more, but Emma could not bear to think of it any longer. She had not intended to think of it at all, but the memories forever haunted her, waiting until she was alone to come drifting to the surface of her mind. Pulling one last berry from its branch, she dropped it into her sack and rose, her hands trembling with that trembling she never had learned to control over the years. Turning, she began to plod along the path back to the village and the cabin with the sturdy wooden chair on the old rickety porch. Before she made it five steps, the trembling overtook her

entire body and she slowly sank to the soft, moist earth. From her lips broke a low moan. Different, perhaps, from the ear-splitting screams that had ripped from her throat as a child, but then again perhaps not so different. Her moans throbbed on and on as she rocked beside the raspberry bushes. All around her, the forest continued to slowly drip, drip, onto the thick carpet of green below. The slate-grey sky rolled out above them, featureless and dull. And beyond even that, high above the thick clouds and the perpetual sun, the bright stars glittered like a diamond shattered on a piece of black velvet.