

Entwine

The only first impression that matters is the one made at birth.

If mortals knew this, of course, they would surely protest. It was unfair, they would lament. How could they possibly know the consequences of their actions when merely three days out of the womb? How could they, as infants, know that just a small hiccup or a hearty gurgle or a shrill cry would determine the entirety of their human existence?

Nevertheless, listening to humans discuss fate never fails to bring amusement. They scheme, and they calculate. They theorize the trajectory of life, whether through a formulaic approach, or a concession that it all comes down to a little bit of luck. It's ripe entertainment — the way they think that one act could switch their tracks to a new destination, that a life different from the current could be set into motion. As if they could change their fate. As if they could run from it.

As if they could run from *her*.

“Lace?” a child’s voice floats up to her. Lace glances down to her left, where Tilly’s dark round eyes fixate on her own matching ones. “Have you decided?”

She hasn’t — not yet. It’s always too easy to become distracted by the room. Pinks and blues and every entrancing color in between sometimes coat the walls. On this occasion a cartoon-ish zebra and giraffe and other animals greet her from their flat existence. Out of habit, she notices the rocking chair made of newly polished mahogany, and the stuffed bear fluffed and propped up to watch over the tiny being squirming in its cradle — the one whose fate she now will decide.

Lace can feel Tilly's gaze linger on her as she reaches a hand into the crib. She knows that her young sister — in a loose sense of the term — won't be bothered by her examination of the child. For their older sister to her right, the feeling isn't mutual; the tapping of Aisa's foot — one of her only *human* habits — matches the steady ticks of the clock on the wall behind the three of them. Lace wants to make a remark, to reiterate the importance of her personal ritual, but the abrupt seizure of her hand by a much smaller distracts her from the thought.

Chubby, worm-like digits grasp onto her pointer and middle fingers. They are smooth and soft and warm. A shock goes through her system, her body charged like a gray sky before the first strikes of thunder and lightning. Her first instinct, had she not been in a state of frozen wonder, would have been to pull back immediately.

No human has ever touched her before in all the moments she stood over them. She occasionally examines them closely before giving their fate, but only close enough to feel the dim heat emanating from their tiny bodies. Distance is her and her sister's priority, their goal. But this child's finger latching onto hers feels like a determined bridge being built over insurmountable terrain.

Strong, she thinks to herself while the baby's minuscule fingernails scrape and prick her skin like a dull threading needle as he seems to pull her hand closer. *He's strong*. For a small, scrunched up wriggly thing, of course. Lace shakes her head slightly. Humans are given such a frail body for an equally frail existence. This one already acts like he knows that fact, yet still has the confidence to try to prove it wrong.

She has to decide soon. This boy's fate is entirely up to her; how he lives and when he will die is at her sole discretion. An idea sprouts in her mind, taking root amongst the millions of

other similar fates she has given throughout her existence. Adding him to this list is all well and good; his fate is simply one more of many. Once everything is decided, she and her sisters will leave, and this boy will be no more than just another speck of life. Only Aisa will meet him again to witness his death, to bring him to a close.

Lace takes one last discreet look around the infant's room; her eyes come to land on the pastel grass wall in front of them, where a wooden board hangs above the crib. White paint in elegant flowing font reads the baby's name like a proclamation: *Silas*. She almost says it out loud to feel how gently her wide lips would wrap around the syllables, but Aisa is watching her every move now in expectation.

"I'm ready," Lace declares, promptly turning towards Tilly so as to not endure the look of utter irritation that Aisa is surely giving her. Her younger sister's great distaff and spindle appear, and she secures the long handle of the former item in her armpit. At once she begins spinning the fibers into thread.

The thread of life isn't red like Lace knows humans imagine it — if they imagine it at all. Instead, it is a colorless, incandescent, shimmering thing that has no texture to be felt or weight to be measured. It is its own unparalleled entity spun with the greatest of care, meant to latch onto the soul and to only be destroyed by the cut of a singular pair of shears.

The thread pools out from the spindle now; a rope of brilliant opaque light that Lace gathers in one hand while she lifts her measuring rod with the other. The colors of the room and the presence of the squirming child fade as she focuses on the thread; with Tilly's help, they mold it as she states the baby's fate out loud for her sisters to hear. Using her rod, she then

measures the thread's length, eventually tying it off at a distance much shorter than most of the previous children given fates that hour. Aisa hums in approval.

The task is finished when the thread glows dimmer as it begins to sink into the child's skin in search of his soul, his life force, his essence. All the while, Lace ignores the pointed smile Aisa gives her. She frowns; for her, it isn't a matter of getting back at humans, or favoring some over others. It's simply a matter of life. Of fate.

With the baby's thread secured, the three sisters vanish as if they had never been there at all.

17 years later.

For the people of Rocky Hill, Connecticut, Quarry Park is a sanctuary.

It's a tangible reverie, a place where countless lives spend countless hours. It's a town relic, gleaming and polished so that every person who steps on its path can see themselves in it. A place where stars slowly flicker from cloudless night skies, where bridges over gilded meadows take someone not where they might want to go, but where they need to be. But underneath all of this — it is just dry dirt and overgrown foliage sitting on dusty old rock.

Lace doesn't understand why the humans who live here revere it so. They treat it like a precious secret, like the most important heirloom to be passed down from generation to generation. Something that the rest of the world will covet if only they knew of it. *How wrong they are*, she thinks with a sigh, plucking yet another twig out from the clutches of the eager curls in her hair as she and Tilly trek through bramble and thicket.

Her sister marches ahead with uncovered arms lacking the bumps and shivers that the night air of early autumn tries to induce. And when Tilly turns her head around to make sure Lace is still trudging behind, the skin on her face is neither scratched nor marked despite recently crawling underneath tangled thorn bushes. As long as she isn't expected to climb a tree or dig in the soil, Lace is content to accompany the youngest sister, especially if it lets her escape from the oldest one.

Tilly seeks green lacewings, a nocturnal insect that lays its eggs in pearl-like drops on the end of fine silk strings that hang from leaves. This is the silk fiber she uses to spin life's thread. Lace doesn't mind them; after all, the insect's name inspired her own modern one, after her ancient, given title: Lachesis. Deeper into the park's forest now, Tilly motions for Lace to stop at the edge of a clearing blanketed with leaves. Her younger sister searches the underbrush, delicately pulling back fronds drenched in silver moonlight. She doesn't have to wait long to find the lacewings; soon they crawl up her arms, glass mosaic wings fluttering with excitement, as if aware of their innate purpose. Lace surveys the area while she waits.

Her gaze is caught on the structures that have laid claim to the clearing. Old concrete arches are arranged in neat lines with cracks crawling up each like black vines. Loud graffiti wraps around the drab gray surface, each eccentric shape and color fighting for attention. Leaves fall softly onto the arches, coaxed down by the breeze; for a moment that whispering of wind is all that can be heard. Then, a rustling. Lace merely thinks it is Tilly moving further into the forest, but when she turns her sister is still behind her, attention absorbed by the insects that swarm her body.

Hollers and whoops reverberate through the trees, and then bright, innocent laughter echoes in following. *Humans*. Lace's pulse spikes, not in apprehension, but excitement; she isn't prepared for this odd jittering in her chest, and sharply whispers Tilly's name. They need to leave. *She* needs to leave, before lingering turns into being unable to untangle her curiosity toward the mortals. A curiosity she is only able to explore discreetly as she assigns newborns their fates.

But Tilly is too preoccupied with her lacewings and doesn't respond fast enough. Three shadow-like figures break through the forest's opposite edge. Two double over, placing hands on their knees while panting; the other raises his arms to the sky, rubbing and stretching muscles overused from maneuvering his wheelchair through the forest pathways. Once they've caught their breaths, their eyes wander across the clearing, spotting the sisters immediately.

A shadowy arm waves, and then all three move in unison across the clearing. They pass the arches, two pairs of legs and one pair of wheels crunching shriveled leaves. Instinctively, Lace makes herself into a shield and steps in the view of her younger sister; it's faintly in vain, as Tilly wouldn't need any help defending herself, even with her slight frame that looks about 10 years old, 12 at the most. As if chiding herself, a light sigh escapes Lace as she sees the three human's faces and their pleasant expressions, sees that they probably wouldn't attempt harassment or harm.

"Hey," a boy with close cropped dark hair says to them. "What's up?" He's tall and gangly like a tree that hasn't fully grown into itself. "You two spending your last nights of freedom out here as well?" His smirk reveals one lone dimple.

The girl next to him clucks her tongue in disapproval. “It’s hardly the last of your freedom, Jay, since you skip enough school that you’re basically truant.” If Jay is a sapling, this girl is a graceful willow with long flowing tresses the color of dark, amber leaves; her straight, unbending posture and the way she stands with turned feet reminds Lace of a ballet dancer. She turns to the sisters and her smile comes naturally. “I don’t think we’ve ever met,” she says thoughtfully. “I’m Anne. Do you both go to Rocky Hill High School?”

Lace is lucky that Tilly quickly responds, “We’re homeschooled,” in a sweet, melodic voice.

She’s too focused on Anne’s words: *I don’t think we’ve ever met.* Oh, they’ve met all right, years before she could even speak. Just to be certain, Lace senses the thread inside Anne and finds what she thought she would; Anne will die at 73 years old from a long awaited heart attack — just like her mother. She senses Jay’s next — he dies before Anne, at 68, when a tipsy driver smashes into his vehicle one unsuspecting night. She moves on to the next thread, that of the boy in the wheelchair with spiky hair in an unremarkable shade of brown, whose face is covered in freckles of all sizes that look like constellations in a star-filled sky.

Lace sucks in a sharp breath; she remembers this thread. The baby boy who was strong. *Not so strong now*, she thinks, glancing at his immobile legs. Life has weakened him; she has weakened him. His name is right there in her mind, in that same flowing script on that same wooden name board—

“I’m Silas.”

Lace blinks. One of his hands is outstretched; both are covered in fingerless, black leather gloves. His expression is eager. Too eager. He thinks she’s just like him, like them. It takes her a

moment to process her response to this human gesture, but then her hand slowly reaches out to meet his, to shake it once and then pull back. Somehow, she can still feel the chubby fingers of a baby boy grasping her own.

“This is Lace,” her sister chimes in, and Lace is able to push the memory back. “And I’m Clotilde, but people call me Tilly,” she says through a toothy grin. Lace almost scoffs. The only ones who call her that are herself and one of her older sisters. Aisa often rejects the alternative names, preferring to use *Clotho* when speaking to the youngest of them.

Tilly tilts her head. “What happened to your legs?” she asks Silas, staring openly at his paralyzed lower half. A question so brazen would bring any human shame; Lace merely looks on.

Silas doesn’t appear affected at all. His friends, however, carefully watch him as anxious energy swirls in the air. “I was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma when I was ten,” he responds in a serious tone. A blank look from both sisters is their reply.

“It’s basically just a fancy way of saying I’m fucked.”

A strangled sounding laugh bursts from Anne while Jay reproachfully interjects, “Not true, Dude. The surgeon said all of the tumor was removed from your spine.” The tall boy frowns down at his friend like an owl in its perch peering to the ground with disapproval, a perch and a look it’s clearly borne in the past.

“Yeah, yeah.” Silas waves away his concern. “Didn’t make it out with my legs, though. But who needs legs anyways? These two can hardly keep up with me now,” he says with a glance at his friends, smiling and patting the wheels beside him in affection. It earns a laugh from all three humans; Tilly forces a smile while Lace watches with poorly feigned indifference.

The green lacewings still crawling on Tilly begin to buzz louder. All of the mortals watch her with a mixture of awe and disgust. Her younger sister notices, and smiles wide. "I can show you where they live, if you like. I bet you've never seen so many bugs, ever!" While Anne and Jay agree to entertain the girl, Silas decides to stay back, claiming his arms are tired. "Lace can stay with you!" she says, then looks to her sister with bright, scheming eyes. "Right, Lace?"

Helpless at the insistence, she nods. As soon as Tilly leads two of the humans into the underbrush, Lace's arms cross defensively in front of her as she avoids the gaze of the third.

"So..." Silas begins. "How old are you?"

Older than you can even imagine, Lace thinks. "Sixteen," she says with a scratchy voice.

"And you don't go to public high school?"

"Home schooled," she says in a clipped reply. She adds quickly, "We all are. My sisters and I."

"Cool. Where do you guys live at?"

"Oh." The unpreparedness makes her jaw twitch. "... around."

It earns a laugh from him even though it isn't her intention. She needs to ask him something next, right? Is that how humans perform this small talk?

Lace clears her throat. "And you... go to the public school here?"

He nods. "Good old public school," Silas says, but there's something in his tone that makes her tick. She wants to stifle her interest, but the curiosity seems to leak from her like sap from a tree.

"You don't like it there?"

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he amends, face coloring slightly. “I just... sometimes wish I could do more. I know I can,” he says, “but people there prefer to pity me instead of encourage me.”

Talking to humans, Lace has discovered for this first time, is like holding shards of glass in her hands. Like trying to carry them without slicing either her or him on sharp, brittle edges.

It takes her a moment to settle on a reply. “You don’t seem like anything can discourage you, though.”

He gazes at her thoughtfully. His face wrinkles, and the freckles form new constellations. His constant smile makes her skin prickle in irritation, finally breaking through her attempt at indifference. Why isn’t his spirit as weak as his body? How can he laugh and joke with friends and *live* when she has made his living so difficult?

“Aren’t you angry?” She doesn’t mean to blurt it out, and wishes she could shove the words back into her mouth as soon as they leave.

“At what?” Honest perplexity creeps into his expression.

Finding the words is like searching for a foothold on a rocky hill. “At whatever made you like this.” Her voice comes out in a whisper. She doesn’t mean for it to.

Silas shakes his head. “It doesn’t define me. My family and my friends know that, and so do I. Sure, maybe other people think it does, if they just look at me,” he shrugs. “But if anything, it’s like I can choose to prove them wrong, or prove God or whatever caused this wrong.”

Not God, Lace thinks, but something far more wicked.

He’s still considering the question. “So, no, not angry,” he finishes. “Inspired by challenge, I’d say.”

Lace doesn't know what to say, so she lets the stillness take over. She shuffles, suddenly uncomfortable in her own skin, in her role. A small laugh bubbles in his throat.

"Can you hear it?" Silas asks.

"Hear what?" The way he leans closer makes her want to take a step back.

"The Connecticut River. It flows right past here." He even closes his eyes, savoring whatever sound he hears. She watches the moonlight caress his face.

Lace doesn't hear it. Her mouth opens to respond, but the voice that breaks the silence isn't hers.

"Hey! We're back!"

Tilly's greeting rings out. The undergrowth parts as she steps into the clearing once more with Anne and Jay in tow, both looking rather pale from whatever horde of insects her sister had shown them. Lace isn't really listening as Tilly makes an excuse to let them leave, as Anne and Jay say their goodbyes. She's stuck elsewhere, tugging on Silas' thread, reading and thinking of his fate.

"It was nice meeting you," he says, looking between the two sisters.

Tilly's grin is as sharp as a crescent moon. Lace simply nods, not trusting herself to say any more. *Was it, though?*

She catches her sister's eye. Tilly is gazing at her, black pupils widened, with amusement. There's something underneath it, though, like a trap hidden beneath a pile of leaves: suspicion. Lace brushes it off.

They leave the humans there in the clearing. Lace doesn't afford herself a last glance, telling herself there isn't any point. Silas will soon be gone. A tumor still presses against his

spine, waiting in time to knock on his vertebrae and invite itself into his entire body. His thread is unraveling, preparing for Aisa's cut. She does, however, pause for the slightest of moments as she strides out of the forest.

Lace frowns; she still can't hear the river.

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The encounter in the forest weighs on her mind like a branch piled with snow. She can't shake the surrealness of seeing a human again after her giving of the fate — let alone even speaking to one. Part of her wishes to meet again, for even if Silas had built that bridge between them all those years ago, she knows she will be the one to take the first step across it.

She doesn't think her sisters suspect this, however, until she's standing between two white wooden cribs decorated with an obscene amount of bows that sparkle from the glow of the nightlights.

Deciding the fates of more than one mortal at a time broke up the usual monotony of Lace's work. In this instance, twin baby girls sleep silently in their cribs, both suckling on their thumbs. Twin lives, twin fates. Will she have them live and die together? Or have one die eventually while the other continues on?

She ponders this, waiting in the mostly dark room as Tilly spun the thread at her left. Aisa stands at her right, so quiet that it is as if Lace only imagines her presence. Tilly refrains from making conversation, concentrating on the thread she must produce, now double the amount. To Lace's surprise, it is Aisa whose voice shatters the silence.

"Clotilde tells me you spoke to mortals recently," she asks. Aisa doesn't feign nonchalance; her tone is like ice so cold that it burns.

Lace looks to Tilly in the darkness, but her younger sister acts as if she didn't even hear herself mentioned. She turns back to the sleeping twins.

"We did." She emphasizes the first word. "There was a sickly boy from about 17 years ago who is supposed to meet his end soon. Perhaps you remember him?"

Aisa remains motionless. "No," she replies. "I don't."

And you shouldn't either are the unspoken words between them, Lace knows.

Tilly makes it known that the threads are spun. She places the first into Lace's hand, the shimmering coil like the beam of a lighthouse. Lace has already chosen the girls' fates, and as she prepares to guide the thread into the first child, Aisa speaks.

"Remember the consequences of this choice, Lachesis."

Lace frowns, but doesn't falter with the thread at Aisa's use of her full name, at her words. She almost scoffs; it's an odd thing to say considering that Lace has been distributing fates to mortals for centuries.

"I know very well what the consequences are," she states as the first thread is sealed inside the first baby girl. "And so will they. Though it is a small consolation for them, I suppose, that they will have each other through it." The second thread settles into the other twin, and the light in the room dims once more.

"Will they?"

Her voice is soft like falling snow and it makes Lace turn. All she can see are the whites of Aisa's dark eyes trained on her. The stillness that sits tense and heavy between them reminds her of something she can't put into words in that moment. Aisa says nothing else, only stares,

and it makes Lace think that perhaps she wasn't speaking about the twin girls sleeping soundly in front of them.

After they leave and move on to the next newborn and the one after that, Lace realizes what the silence between her and her sister reminds her of that menacing quiet of a predator watching its unwitting prey.

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She's familiar with hospitals, but not like this. Lace only deals with the beginning of life, not the end. Many babies don't make it out of the nursery within the first three days, leaving her and Tilly to spin threads and decide fates amid recessed lighting and spotless, sheet tile floors. It's efficient, really; all the infants are already neatly lined up to receive their fates.

But despite familiar colors and sounds, the pediatric unit now smells like death. Lace follows the essence of Silas' thread to his room. It's the middle of the night, so surprise hits her when she sees Anne and Jay sleeping in those uncomfortable chairs next to the hospital bed. Anne is curled around like a withered leaf, while Jay is twisted and bent like a tree that has been blown over by a gusting wind; tears have dried on all four cheeks, the remnants of rain after a storm.

Lace moves to stand by Silas' sleeping form. He's rigid and pale, sunken into himself, a completely different human than he had been just a week ago. She'd known that whatever surgery he had did not completely remove the malignant tumor in his spine. A small part of it remains, taking over his entire body and bringing his end ever closer. Just as she decided.

The maddening metronomic drip of the IV reminds her that she isn't supposed to be here. She has no excuses — just a ravenous curiosity that tears through her entire being. She tugs at

his weakening thread; he has a few days left. A week at most. Lace studies the constellated freckles of his face. It's like looking at a brightest stars in the sky, yet knowing they've already burnt out.

Does he deserve this? She had given him such a wretched fate; yet, for the little time he had, Silas reclaimed it for his own. He laughed in the face of her devised fate and became strong not despite his body, but because of it. All on his own. He proved her wrong.

She watches the weak rise and fall of Silas' chest, listens to the irregular beeping of his heart monitor. It's the first she has ever felt time slipping through her fingers like sand, as an idea slips into her mind.

There's something she can do. It's wild and reckless and defies every unspoken rule of her and her sisters' job. But how else can she remedy an ache that's been burning dormant for 17 years, one that she has only just noticed is there?

She reaches out to Anne and Jay, whose threads are bright and robust in their still bodies. Just a couple years — will that suffice? A short length from their lives so that their friend may have just a few more? Perhaps they would even voluntarily give that themselves.

Lace shakes her head. It's an absolutely awful idea to mess with more human lives. She's already dismantled an innumerable amount. But an immortal life, she thinks, is something that should be strong enough to tamper with.

Her hand is steady when it reaches out to grasp Silas' with two fingers. Reaching into herself, at her own eternal, indelible thread, Lace pulls, twists, and then it's done.

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There's a twinge in her spine, like the tiniest shot of lightning has been injected into her vertebrae, rattling and jolting her bones. Then an ache appears, gnawing persistently at her marrow. It isn't until her legs begin to buckle as she tries to take a step that Lace wonders if there is a price she must now pay.

Silas is shaking. Seizing. His body is an earthquake in itself. His heart monitor makes a shrieking noise, then shuts off.

Lace's legs still quiver as she looks between herself and Silas, at their entwined threads. Their blinding glow doesn't allow her to keep her eyes open for more than a few seconds. She grasps the bedside rail, knuckles protruding from her skin.

A figure appears next to her, tall and solid like the concrete arches. Aisa. She has her shears in her hands.

If her older sister is here, then death will follow.

Aisa glances at Lace, at Silas, and at the connected thread between them. Lace has never seen fear in her eyes before. Her lips move to speak, but all that escapes is a pained gasp.

Aisa looms over Lace, her frame blocking the glow from the thread like a thunder cloud blocking the sun. "*What have you done?*"

Her lungs scrape together as she tries to form words in response. Her throat is too dry. Every feeling that Silas suffered in his life crashes down on her at once in a karmic wave.

Aisa won't stop questioning her, won't stop staring with her blade sharp gaze.

Her sister seems to ignite, and in a swift moment her great shears are in her hands. Lace jerks in shock, pushing her hands out over Silas's rigid body to stop her. "You can't cut it." Her voice cracks. "He'll die."

“He’s already dead,” Aisa declares as her shadowed eyes meet Lace’s. She lifts her shears.

A strangled noise comes from Lace. If she cuts it, Silas will die. But it appears he’s already in death’s grasp as he convulses in slow waves, eyes rolling into his head.

Is this her punishment, then? To lose the one thing she tried to save?

She swallows once, twice. Perhaps it is his time. For all of his triumphs and struggles, Silas didn’t deserve to live how he did. Even if he has made the most of it.

Lace doesn’t know what will happen if Aisa cuts their joined threads. Maybe she’ll perish someday, somehow, too. But, perhaps it is her time, as well. If she feels the need to change her decisions, then perhaps she isn’t fit to be the alotter of fate.

“Cut it,” she whispers. Aisa has to lean closer to hear it. “Cut it.”

Aisa slowly lifts her shears once more — the only time Lace has ever seen her tremble — and then what remains is darkness without stars.

Haley Madges