

“Solemn Hands”

Rosalie’s knuckles grow white as she wrings the wash rag out in the rusty basin. The water beads at her fingertips and drips down, interrupting her reflection. She dunks the rag again and again, pressing deeper into it with her fingers each time. A bluebird lands precariously on the windowsill next to her, idyllic and graceful and the only real witness to the blooming, blasphemous smile on her face. If the bluebird is a vestige of the judgmental god she prays to, it does not show it. It just cocks its head at her and stares.

“Sister Rosalie?” Fern wheezes from his bed, and the bluebird flies away. Rosalie turns her attention back to him, washrag still in hand. His hair is a splash of muddy-black against the yellowed sheets, the cotton of his shirt clinging to his skin as he lazes in his cot. He squints at her from his position.

“Forgive me, Fern,” she says as she returns to his bedside, readjusting her dark blue habit with damp fingers. She gently pushes the sweat-drenched bangs from his forehead and drapes the wet cloth over it.

“S’okay,” he murmurs, closing his eyes. The fever keeps him delirious. His eyes glaze over as she pulls away, her knuckles grazing his cheek as she does. If her hand betrayed her now and cupped his hollow cheek, or traced his neck down to his collarbone, surely he wouldn’t believe it. He’d mistake her for a daydream, an illness-ridden fantasy of a fairy visiting him in his weakest moment. Fern would only have to believe in fairies for it to work.

“You don’t always have to come here,” he whispers then, interrupting her thoughts. It takes her a moment to process the comment. Then when he opens his eyes to look at her, solemn and apologetic, Rosalie shakes her head.

“It’s no trouble at all. I love the woods this time of year.”

“Yeah, but... Don’t you have—” And he groans, tired and sluggish as he sits up, the old cot creaking beneath him, “—Prayer things to do?”

“Prayer things?”

“Y’know, *prayer* things. *Nun* things. Vows and confessions and stuff.”

“No,” she says. And as she looks at him, upright and wilting, face flushed red and punctuated with a pout at the mouth, there’s only one vow she thinks she’d like to make. “No. It’s my duty to look after those who need it. And nuns don’t hold confessional, only priests do.”

“You’d do it better than any priest though,” Fern argues, reaching for his chisel and the hunk of ruined wood sitting on the nightstand. Rosalie reaches for the dustpan and places it next to the cot. Fern holds the wood over it as he begins to carve, continuing to chatter. “I’d confess all sorts of stuff if it were you.”

“If you’d like to confess, I’m sure we could arrange for someone to drop by,” Rosalie says. Fern grimaces at that, looking up from his work.

“I don’t think anyone but *you* wants to come all the way out here.”

“Well. Just let me know if you change your mind,” and they fall into a comfortable silence after that. Rosalie pretends to busy herself with surveying the room, occasionally

adjusting one of his lumpy sculptures on the shelves or sweeping the floor. She watches Fern carve from the corner of her eye. When he finishes, he offers it to her silently.

“What’s this one supposed to be?” Rosalie asks, placing it on the top shelf. Even after eight months of knowing Fern and staring at his work frequently, she has not once correctly guessed what any of his sculptures are. Fern beams with pride from the cot.

“You can’t tell?”

She frowns at the sculpture. Four thin appendages jut out from the backside, with nubby arms and legs sticking out from the torso in all directions. A crude, misshapen smile is carved into the oblong head.

“A fairy?” she guesses. Fern’s face drops at that.

“No it’s—It’s an angel, obviously... What kind of nun *are* you?”

“One with eyes apparently. I believe God made angels with *elbows*, Fern.” Rosalie flicks the figure’s blobby arm, causing it to wobble on the shelf. Fern huffs and plops back down onto his pillow in defeat. He pulls the rag down from his forehead to cover his eyes.

“Fairies probably have elbows too, it’s not like that’s a better guess, Sister.”

She watches him breathe through his mouth, his lips red and chapped, framing his exhales as dry and staggered. Rosalie swallows, then asks, “Do you believe in them, then?”

“Fairies?” Fern thinks for a moment. Rosalie folds her hands, stepping away from the shelf and closer to his cot, only stopping a foot a way from the edge when he finally replies, “Probably about as much as I do angels... Just sounds like a load of crap to me. No offense.”

“None taken,” Rosalie sighs, mentally discarding her previous fantasy. He lifts the corner of the rag up to peer at her for a moment. Then, sitting up, he grins.

“If you want though, I’ll carve a fairy next. *And I’ll get the elbows right, just for you.*”

“Only if you’re feeling up to it,” She says, forcing herself to look away from him as she finishes her cleaning with rosy cheeks.

...

If Fern did believe in fairies, he might believe in Artrys. Matron spirit of blood, goddess of nothing but wanderer of all, that was her. That was Artrys. Through her mercy, she allows the people to live. Allows them to thrive off her lands. Reap what she alone can sow. She is the lifeblood of the town, and as such, she requires a vessel.

All gods need humans, Artrys told Rosalie once. They were sitting on the edge of the forest, Rosalie leaning up against the trunk of a young oak while Artrys sat cross-legged in the dirt next to her. Her long dark hair hung in dirt-heavy ringlets, cascading down her naked back and landing in coils all around the forest floor. Artrys’s face was always covered by a massive, ivory bird skull, the beak carved like a sickle and ending in a crescent point. A pair of matching antlers protruded from the sides, scraping against the trunk of the trees as Artrys passed between them. Rosalie was thirteen at the time. Artrys was one-hundred and eighty-three.

We exist to serve you, and you exist to be grateful to us. Artrys explained. She reached out with a long, spindly hand, allowing a butterfly to land on her jagged fingernails.

“But why do you need us? Couldn’t you just... Be grateful to yourselves?” Rosalie asked, hugging her journal tighter into her chest. Artrys chuckled at that, a harsh, throaty noise that made Rosalie uneasy.

No god needs to worship another. We have nothing to want for. Through your desires we have a purpose.

“That’s a weird way of putting it, but sure.” Artrys hummed in response. Rosalie opened her journal to write again, then paused. “So why do we have to sacrifice anything to you at all? If you exist to help us, why not just... Help us?”

Artrys looked down to her, milky, bloodshot eyes piercing into her from underneath the skull. *It was all humans knew to offer me in the beginning. Now I’ve grown too fond of the taste.*

...

By the time Rosalie makes it back to the convent, the evening is well underway. The other nuns are buzzing about the halls, frantically finishing their chores before the evening round of prayer. They all shuffle past her, flocks of black habits all rushing towards the same double doors leading into the chapel. One sister—One of the younger ones—Shoves past Rosalie in the hall. The girl completely trips over herself, crashing against the stone floor and scraping her hands. She hisses in pain as she sits up, glaring first at her hands, then up to Rosalie. Upon recognition, however, her face goes from an angry bright red to placid, pale regret.

“S—Sister Rosalie, I—I’m so sorry, I was distracted,” she stutters. She’s beautiful, this girl. Rosy lips and big green eyes, the kind that get rumors to spread like wildfire outside the convent. This girl could be someone else’s, a wife, or a mother, or a well-paid woman-of-the-

night, but instead she chose celibacy. Sisterhood. The Lord. She's either a happy ending or a cautious tale and Rosalie isn't much of a reader either way.

"Just be more careful in the future," she says, offering a hand to the girl. The girl does not take it, instead scrambling to her feet and bowing profusely as she backs away from Rosalie. A flood of near-unintelligible apologies spews from her mouth as she quickly sprints off to the chapel. Rosalie stands still, watching as the other nuns rush around her from all sides. The hallway is crowded, clamorous, and then the flock thins. Five becomes three becomes two becomes just Rosalie, staring at the chapel doors as they close. A stray sister looks at her from the doorway. The sad look she gives Rosalie is enough to remind her she's not welcome here, and she never will be. Rosalie gives her a nod, not knowing what she's nodding for. Then the doors are closed.

The lamps hanging in the hall flicker in solidarity with her as she turns to walk to her room. The sound of the evening sermon starting echoes against the stone walls, a chorus of psalms beginning. It's almost comforting.

The door to her dormitory is knotted and old. It's at the end of an even longer hall, up four flights of stairs in the east wing. The lamps hanging outside are not lit, causing the corridor to look like an overwhelming void from afar. Rosalie pushes open her door with a huff. Like her corner of the hall outside, it's dark, save for the single window in the room. The moonlight pours in through the old pane and reveals the room as bare. A simple bed. A dusty desk. A bookshelf, home to one untouched copy of the Vulgate Bible and a ratty leather journal that's more sparse kindling than book. If Fern's cabin is an eclectic coffin, Rosalie's bedroom is an empty grave.

She collapses onto the bed with that in mind, burying her face into the pillow. Fern would hate her room. He'd scold her for living so drearily, probably shoving an assortment of his wooden trinkets into her hands and ordering her to place them everywhere. With his hands on his hips, he'd survey the room with a judgmental eye and a playful grin.

"You've got so much to work with here," he'd tell her. "Why not *use it?*"

But the fantasy ends with his chin ruined by the blood he coughs up, as he doubles over suddenly to the floor. Fern would never survive the trip up the stairs, let alone the hike from his home to the church. The only way he'd ever make it through the gate is if he was being carried out to the graveyard behind it.

Rosalie groans to herself as she rolls out of bed, knees hitting the floor hard. Stomach pressed up against the bedframe, she clasps her hands together tightly, nails digging into the knuckles as she bows her head. Might as well, she thinks. Might as well.

"I offer you, Lord, my thoughts. To be fixed on you," she whispers into the space between her palms. The mattress creaks as her elbows sink into it. "My words, to have you for their theme, and my actions to reflect my love for you."

She does not think of Fern while she prays. She tries not to think of Artrys either, but that proves itself harder as the familiar throbbing pain in her temples begins to set in. *All gods know when they are being two-timed*, Artrys told her once.

"My sufferings, to be endured for your greater glory," Rosalie continues. The bedsprings squeak as she dips further into it. She can feel the metal coils under her elbows as they threaten to break through the thin sheen of padding.

“I want—” Her throat tightens, causing her voice to come out wrong and hoarse. “I want to do what you ask of me, in the way you ask, for as long as you ask.”

The sensation grows to a searing roar. She tries to remember the next part of the prayer with heavy breaths. She’s recited this a thousand times, the pain just as much a part of the prayer as it has always been. Her head grows foggy and dull.

“*Please,*” she finally manages. Weak, small, pathetic. “Just... Please.”

And the pain is gone.

The relief is addictive. It always is. She relishes in the weightlessness as she finally pulls her habit off and crawls into the bed. The night wind blows through her window, bringing with it a cacophony of crickets and frogs undisturbed by her prayer. Her hands are still entangled in one another as she drifts off to sleep.

...

Artrys is there waiting for her in the morning. The way the beast curls in on herself to sit in her windowsill is comical, save for the dead squirrel being flayed apart in her lap.

You were with that man again yesterday, she says. Rosalie rubs at her face, groaning as she sits up in her bed.

“I didn’t realize you needed me.” Artrys pulls a small, bloodied chunk from inside the squirrel, and sticks it under the beak of the bird skull. Rosalie tries not to gag as Artrys begins to chew. She turns her back to the scene and pulls the sheet over and tucks it under the mattress.

Leaving a man’s house after dark? Artrys pauses to swallow before continuing. *Seems rather intimate for that God of yours—*

“—*Was* there something else you needed, Artrys?”

Artrys stills, talons seemingly frozen inside the belly of the squirrel. Rosalie puts down her pillow and turns to face her. Through the hollows of the skull, she can see Artrys’s gold-flaked irises glowering down at the corpse in her lap.

The tithes is in five days, she finally says, and there’s an air of regretful inevitability she exhales the statement. Rosalie smiles, tight-lipped and cold.

“I haven’t forgotten.”

Artrys hums in affirmation at that. Her talons plunge deeper into the squirrel, pushing past its ravaged front. She pinches them together and pulls out a small, feeble spine. She holds it up in the sunlight, blood running down her leathery wrists.

I’m feeling generous. It should be a lovely spring, the statement comes out soft, whistling through the nostrils of the beak. The faintest smell of decay comes out with it, causing Rosalie to wrinkle her nose.

“I don’t doubt it. The people are hoping for a yield four times the size of last year’s,” Rosalie replies, turning her back on the goddess to pull her clothes out of the closet. “The Vellermans are expecting triplets, by the way. Their land will need an extra blessing this year.”

Artrys snorts. *You know I don’t grant those. Blessings give way to laziness*, and before Rosalie can protest, she quickly adds, *Besides, I have no sympathy to spare for children.*

“Surely you can find some in your cold, black heart,” Rosalie sighs. She pulls off yesterday’s habit, untying the belt and shrugging off the tunic to replace it all with a cleaner set. As she leans over her desk to look into the mirror, she catches Artrys’s mask angled towards her,

watching intently. Rosalie's eyes return to her reflection, as she carefully pulls the habit over her short blond hair. "You're quiet today. Normally you'd be lecturing me for that comment by now."

I'm not in the mood to argue. As Rosalie turns back, she sees Artrys pull her head back against the wall, exposing her clavicle to the sunlight. The squirrel skin is lying precariously on her lap now, as she leans an arm out the window and basks in the light. For a moment, past the gray skin and the bloodied claws, Artrys just looks *old*. Rosalie takes a step towards her, cautious and slow.

"You'll have your tithe, Artrys. I haven't forgotten," she repeats. Artrys doesn't look at her. Instead, Rosalie watches through the hollows as she closes her eyes.

I trust you, she finally says. *You've never been one to disappoint.*

...

The day turns out to be a better one for Fern. With wobbly legs, he clings to her arm as they step outside the cabin and onto the porch. Under the gentle spring light, Fern's skin almost looks translucent, with the veins along his thin arms clear as day.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Rosalie asks, for the fifth time since he's suggested the endeavor. Fern smirks at her.

"Don't worry, Sister Rosalie. The weather's too nice to die today."

"I didn't realize your health was up to the clouds."

Fern laughs then. Rosalie knows she should be watching his chest as he does, waiting for congestion and pain to bloom. But her eyes are frozen to his face, the way his top lip raises to

reveal his teeth, the way his flushed cheeks push his dark eyebags up with his hazel eyes, the way it all comes together to be so incredibly *him*.

“You’re making a face,” Fern says, nudging her with his elbow as they step down onto the path. Rosalie turns her eyes to the green grass on either side, trailing over the strewn pinecones and fallen branches.

“I haven’t seen you outside in a while, that’s all.”

“That’s true. I think the last time was just before winter, wasn’t it?”

“I remember,” Rosalie sighs. “You came out to greet me that day, half-naked and running a fever. You were practically coughing up a lung just to say ‘Hello’.”

“I thought it I was being charming!” Fern scoffs. “You make it sound like it was a chore.”

“It *was* a chore, you refused to lie down for hours after.”

“Well, *next* time,” Fern stops in the middle of the path to look her in the eye. He squeezes her arm gently, the notion setting off a warm feeling inside the pit of her stomach. “Perhaps I won’t be so sick.”

“I’d like that very much,” Rosalie replies. They stare at each other in the silence that follows, the sunlight filtering through the leaves above them. For a moment, his eyes flick to her down to her mouth, and it looks like he might say something, something about the tension, something about *her*—

Then, a branch snaps.

Rosalie jumps, whipping around to the trees behind them. Her eyes dart between the trunks, looking to pinpoint the sound. A few squirrels scamper off, easing her nerves until she squints and sees a familiar pair of antlers circling around a tree and fading into the distance.

“A deer,” Rosalie mutters. As she turns back to Fern, he gives her a concerned look.

“I didn’t see one... Are you sure?”

Rosalie nodded, regaining her composure with a curt smile. “Let’s continue on.”

...

The vessel before Rosalie was a woman named Patience. She was a charismatic housewife of eight, with a pair of large, meaty hands and a booming voice to match. Though it hardly mattered to Artrys, Patience made sure to always choose a felon for the blood tithe. The people would cheer her on as she guided them to the sacred creek. But they would cheer even louder when she returned alone.

On the fourth year of her vesselhood, there was no criminal to offer Artrys in the spring. Patience had created a utopia. The people were thriving off the blessings of the land and living in harmony. Patience was desperate. She’d watch the townspeople like a hawk from her porch, looking to catch what the law could not. No one dared to stray from the righteous path before her. As the days went by, Patience watched her children play whilst biting her nails and tearing at her hair.

Then, three days before the tithe, there was a knock at her door. What stood before her then was an angel clad in the tattered rags of a beggar. She was a thin, spindly woman, her skin covered in blooming patches of yellow, green and purple. There was a quiet, congested

conviction in her tone, pushing aside dirty strands of ragged blond hair as she asked Patience if she had chosen anyone for the tithe. Patience replied no. The woman then stepped aside, revealing the gift she had in tote—Her daughter, just as pale and sickly as herself.

“How much will you give me for her?” The woman said. Patience gawked at the display, looking back and forth from the child to her mother.

“We should discuss that inside,” Patience finally said, and after taking a deep breath to recompose herself, Patience placed a gentle hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Why don’t you tell me your name first?”

The girl kept her eyes to the ground, her hands clasped together tight over her stomach. With an impatient sigh, her mother gently pushed her forward, and with a squeaky, congested voice she finally said, “It’s Rosalie, Miss.”

“How polite. Come on in, Rosalie.”

The next day, all of the townspeople gathered in Patience’s garden. They watched on in indifference as she took the young girl’s hand and paraded her through the town. Patience held her head high, and with a firm grip, she took the little girl into the woods. They passed under the trees and listened to the sound of the wind as it rustled through the leaves.

When they finally arrived at the creek, Rosalie stopped. Patience let go of her hand and turned to face her, waiting on the tantrum, the fear. But Rosalie just looked up at her with such hollow eyes, and in the quietest voice, she finally spoke.

“You’ll pay my mother?”

“I’ve already done so,” Patience said. Then, with a polite smile and an open hand,
“Come.”

Rosalie stepped forward into the creek. The water was clear and frigid, and Rosalie grimaced as Patience motioned for her to lay down. The creek trickled into her ears and ebbed at her arms and legs. Rosalie watched Patience’s mouth as she began the incantation, trying to follow the syllables over the sound of the water.

Then, Artrys appeared. Patience looked afraid, clasping her hands tightly. Artrys leaned down to Rosalie and pried her up from the from the water. Rosalie squeezed her eyes shut as the smell of decay suddenly filled the air.

This is a child, Artrys hissed, looking back over her hulking shoulder.

“Blood is blood, isn’t it?” Patience squeaked. Artrys leaned in close, the beak of the bird mask grazing Rosalie’s cheek.

She reeks of disease. You’ve delivered me foul cattle, Patience. The talons behind the back of Rosalie’s head flinched, pinching the nape of her neck. Rosalie whimpered. *Girl. Look at me.*

She snapped her eyes open immediately, biting hard into her bottom lip.

Do you know what will happen to you? Rosalie nodded quickly, and with a low growl, Artrys added, *Why didn’t you run?*

The fear was overwhelming, but Rosalie swallowed hard, and against her dry mouth she spoke.

“My mother told me not to.”

Do you want to die then? And Rosalie didn't have an answer to that. She was still just a little girl after all. So she just stared ahead and waited. The creek continued to run past. The birds chirped in the trees, and the air rung loud with the sound of spring. Then, it stunk of rot and decay again, as Artrys laughed.

Such a good girl.

...

The knocking is the first thing that comes for her in the morning. The dreadful morning light, the tumble out of her sheets, the resounding *thwack* of her arm against the bookshelf, that all happens after. Rosalie does what she can to make herself presentable and flings herself at the door with as best a smile as she can manage.

The priest—The *new* priest, not to be confused with the *other, older* priest she does not know—stands before her, hand mid-knock.

“Good morning, Sister Rosalie!” He’s all gold and brimming, an overwhelming show of confidence seeping into each syllable. Rosalie almost slams the door in his face for the morning bravado alone.

“Good morning, Father,” she says. “How can I help you?”

“Well, I was hoping I might pin you down for a chat. I’ve spoken with Father Coolidge and he says that he hasn’t seen you in the booth for a month now.” It’s been well over four years since her last confessional, but she doesn’t bother to correct him.

“I’m afraid I’m rather busy today, I’ve got a house call—”

“—To Fern Yorvick, yes? Mother Generva tells me you go almost every day! Your dedication is remarkable.” The priest leans against the doorway, crossing his arms. “But, you know, you can’t save anyone if your soul isn’t saved first.”

“I appreciate your concern, Father, but Mr. Yorvick is very ill, and I would hate for him to be alone in his time of need.” The priest doesn’t even flinch at her response, nodding along instead.

“I thought you might say something that like that, so I went ahead and asked Sister Ivy to take over for you,” and whatever face she makes at that is too honest entirely, as he quickly adds “Only for the day. You can go back to your duties as soon we’ve finished our chat. Why don’t we walk and talk in the gardens?”

She doesn’t know which one is Sister Ivy. Everyone here avoids her like the plague during the year, so catching names is hard. Ivy could be one of the old veterans, with more wrinkles than face. But she could also be one of the rosy-lipped rookies who are less inclined to celibacy. Either way, she doesn’t really have a choice—The man is a priest after all. As a nun, the only thing she can do is follow.

“That would be lovely, Father.”

He leads her down the four flights of stairs with gusto. Keeping up with his dramatic stride becomes a challenge as he chatters over his shoulder about the weather and how *blessed* they are to live in such a lovely place and Sister Rosalie, you *won’t* regret taking the morning off at all, he assures her. She struggles not to roll her eyes all the way down.

The garden is massive, even for the size of the convent. From small brick plots, carnations in pinks, whites and reds shoot up from the soil and bloom under the springtime sky.

Several nuns roam the garden with their watering cans. They waive to the priest as he passes and try not to catch Rosalie's eye. The priest stops by one of the plots, squatting down to admire the roots.

"I can't thank you enough for your hard work here, Sister Rosalie. You're quite the pillar in our community." His fingers gingerly wrap around the stem of a pink carnation. He strokes it delicately.

"You are too kind, Father," She replies politely. The priest tugs the carnation up with a soft grunt. The stem gives a crisp *snap* as he bends it off its roots. He offers it to her. Rosalie takes the flower with an awkward breath. She twiddles with it between her fingers as he begins to move ahead again.

"It seems to me that no one has been kind enough to you! People are easily afraid of what they do not understand, and your relationship with Lady Artrys is, well," he pauses, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Hard to understand, to say the least."

"Quite," she says with a sigh. "I hardly understand it myself most days."

"You've been acting as her vessel for what, eleven years now?" and he stops to look at her with that. "That's very impressive."

"Thank you," she manages, squeezing the carnation.

"Mother Generva tells me the tithe is due in a few days. You must be very stressed about that." Rosalie holds back a scoff and says nothing. They pass by plots of daffodils and snowdrops, the number of nuns gardening growing less and less the further they go. Eventually,

the priest stops them at a bench. The stone, regal body of the Holy Mother towers over it from behind, her right hand raised. Rosalie straightens her tunic before sitting.

“I know why you’ve been seeing Mr. Yorvick, Sister Rosalie.” He doesn’t, he *definitely* doesn’t, but that’s neither here nor there. “The decision you’ve made is hard, but I’m here to tell you it’s *right*.”

“I don’t follow,” The carnation droops in her hand as her fingers squeeze the base. He cups her hands with his and forces eye contact between them. The carnation snaps in her hands, the head of petals scattering onto the stone bench.

“The work you do is good, Sister Rosalie. You are a good person,” he squeezes her hands tightly before finally letting them go. A wave of nausea overtakes her as the priest finishes, with such reverent sympathy, “I truly believe the Lord will forgive you for this.”

...

When she visits Fern the next day, Rosalie is quiet. Fern prattles on and on about the book he’s just finished reading, an old one he had forgotten his mother had given him for a birthday some years ago, but Rosalie only responds in curt nods. Eventually, he grabs her by the wrist as she passes his bedside.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he says softly. His fingers tremble around her wrists, his grip weak.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she replies, because Fern doesn’t believe in fairies, or Artrys, or God really, and she’s not about to change his mind on any of it. That’s not her job today.

“Sister Rosalie, *please*. I can tell something’s bothering you.” He lets go of her and pats the empty space in the cot next to him. Rosalie sits down on the very edge of it, her back straight and poised. “Is it work? Family? A secret lover?”

She snorts at that. Then, with a sigh, “Work, I suppose.”

“Not getting along with the other nuns?”

Never getting along with the other nuns, she thinks. “No, nothing like that. Lately I’ve just been finding it difficult to pray.”

“Oh. What makes it difficult?”

Rosalie looks at directly at Fern then. The way his eyes remain focused on her proves he’s too conscious to confuse her for a fairy, but maybe he could see her as vulnerable now. Maybe she could present herself as lost. Maybe she could blame God. *You make it difficult. You make it difficult to do anything*, she could say. Fern wouldn’t have to believe in anything for it to work. He’d just have to love her back.

“I’m just out of practice with some of the older prayers. I need to sit down and review the scriptures at some point,” Rosalie finally says. Fern huffs.

“Jeez, you had me thinking someone had *died* or something! If it’s just a matter of studying, I’d be happy to help you, you know.”

“But you hate it when I pray here,” Rosalie argues.

“No, I hate it when you pray for *me*. If you just need someone to listen to you, I can do that.”

“...Thank you,” she mumbles, the warmth of his hand still lingering after he pulls away.
“Perhaps I’ll take you up on that.”

...

Patience was a kind woman. Her heart was always in the right place, even as Artrys was pulling it from her chest and gorging on it in the creek. Rosalie just stood there, too terrified to move. Eventually, Artrys finished, dipping the beak of the bird skull into the water and running the tips of her fingers along it to wash off the stray specks of blood.

Leave, she ordered, rolling to stand to her full height. She glowered down at Rosalie then, pointing with one of her long dark talons back to the village. *Tell them the tithe has been paid.*

“Why d-did you do that?” Rosalie asked, beginning to shiver as the wind picked up and rustled through the leaves around them.

I was hungry.

“B—But! You were... You were supposed to... I...” The words clung to the back of her throat, an instinctual moment of self-preservation. Of course she didn’t *want* to die. But her mother told her she was going to, and Patience was a kind woman, and now she was dead and Rosalie was not.

Don’t think too much of it. Go, live. Don’t let yourself be brought here again.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go...” Rosalie said, sinking back down into the creek. The water ran over her scraped knees, as she buried her fingers into the pebbles below. Tears began falling from her cheeks, dripping down below.

You're such a miserable child, Artrys replied, walking towards her. Once she was hovering over Rosalie, her shadow completely engulfing the girl's form, she reached out and placed a gentle hand on her head. *You refused to cry over dying, but now you sob over being alive. It's pathetic.*

Despite her words, Artrys stayed there, until Rosalie's eyes were dry, and the golden hour was well-upon the forest. With a sigh, Artrys gave her a final pat, and began to turn away.

There is a church nearby. If you follow the creek east, you should find it. They'll take you in.

Rosalie was frozen for a moment, simply watching Artrys's retreating back. Then, springing to life, she stumbled forward and clung to Artrys's back, locking her arms around her bony, grey waist.

"Wait! Please," Rosalie sniffled into Artrys's long black hair as she spoke. "Please, let me stay with you."

I have no use for a child— Artrys began, turning around and prying Rosalie's arms off of her. But Rosalie stood stubbornly in front of her, puffing out her cheeks.

"Then let me replace her," she said, pointing to Patience's corpse. "I'll—I'll choose for you, every year. Until the day I die."

Artrys shook her head, but Rosalie pressed on, reaching for Artrys's forearm and holding to it tightly.

Please, I... I have to do something. I have to make up for this. She pressed her fingers into Artrys's flesh and looked up to her pleadingly.

They stared at one another for a long time, the water rushing around their feet as the sound of the forest filled the air. Finally, Artrys pulled her arm away from Rosalie, pushing her back. Before Rosalie could speak again, though, she offered a single leathery hand to her, and snorted under the skull.

Come with me, then. Let us try and salvage that body of yours.

...

Rosalie nestles her hands in her lap inside the confession booth. The priest sits on the other side. In the corner of her eye she can just barely make out the outline of his profile, the youthful glow of his jaw.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned,” she says. He hums in acknowledgement, encouraging her to continue. After a moment of bitter reluctance, she does. “It has been... A long time since my last confession. These are my sins.”

Rosalie stops. Her mouth feels dry, and there’s a slight pain blooming in her temples. It’s nothing like when she prays, but it’s enough for her to think that God may actually be listening in on this one.

“I’ve engaged in idolatry,” she says, exhaling the statement with an airy sigh. “Or sorcery rather, since... She’s real.”

“Do you always start by asking forgiveness for that?” The priest interrupts, and it’s a stupid question. Where else would she start? Everything seems so small after that. Envy and lust all fall short after blood sacrifices and perjury.

“I feel the Lord wants me to apologize for that one most.”

“But he chose you for this role, Sister Rosalie. He made you for it.”

Rosalie takes a deep breath, knocking the back of her head against the backboard of the booth. Mother Generva said something similar to her after the third tithe she handled. Back then, Rosalie would cry during the walk to the creek, regardless of who the sacrifice was. The people were disappointed in how she had sullied Patience’s performance legacy, and attendance steadily dropped as the tears kept pouring. Even though she had stopped crying, no one in town saw her off to the creek anymore.

“I am also guilty of envy,” Rosalie says quietly.

The priest hummed again at that, this time making a more expectant noise. “And what is it that you have felt envy for?”

“Everyone, I suppose... I see the other nuns about the convent, and I envy them. I see the townspeople going about their days, returning to their homes and their families at night and I envy them.”

She thought of Fern then. In that moment, when she isn’t supposed to, when it’s meant to be between her, God and the stubborn, worthless priest, she pictures Fern fast asleep in his cabin, and she envies his bedsheets, his clothes, the shallow breaths passing between his lips and the sweat running down his brow. It all touches him so easily, passes through him in such an ungrateful, simple way. Rosalie rolls her shoulders back, sitting up straight in the booth.

“I envy everything that isn’t me, Father.”

“Then it sounds like you need to take a better look at your life, Sister. Your burdens are heavy, yes. But you do so much good here, and I’m sure if you took some time to really get to

know the people here in the convent, you would find that you are not as alone as you think you are.”

Rosalie turns her face to the priest. His body is already angled towards hers, his eyes glinting through the mesh. “Is that your suggestion for penance?”

“It’s just some friendly advice.”

“I didn’t realize God allowed *friendly advice* during confession.” She winces as the priest laughs.

“Listen, Sister Rosalie... I can tell you’re unhappy. You’ve held in all of this guilt over the years, carrying the dead with you. Trust that the Lord has laid them to rest and move on.”

“I can’t,” Rosalie replies, because it’s easier than the truth— She’s only ever known God through the pain he has inflicted upon her. If he knows mercy, she’s never seen it.

“Find it in your heart to believe His word. Once you do that, you’ll find peace.”

...

It was never Rosalie’s choice to meet Fern. Mother Generva simply called her into her quarters early one morning and forced a carefully wrapped basket into Rosalie’s arms.

“Sister Cassandra has retired,” she said. “You are the only one who can take her place.”

This was, of course, a lie. There were plenty of other nuns lounging about the church. The fact of the matter was that Artrys kept Rosalie’s blood *clean*. A proper vessel shouldn’t ever be sick after all. Thus, Rosalie couldn’t catch Fern Yorvick’s incurable mystery disease, and the church wouldn’t have to worry about a plague among its prettier cattle. It was nothing but a practicality.

Still, when Fern jolted upright at the sight of her, screamed and threw the sheets over his face, it felt like destiny in an odd way.

“Relax, Mr. Yorvick. I’m your new caretaker.” She set the basket down on the floor and approached the edge of his cot, stepping over scattered wood shavings and mutilated chunks of wood. Rosalie made a face at the pile of blood-stained collared shirts at the foot of the cot. No one had taken care of the cabin in weeks, it seemed.

“You need to get out. You’ll catch it. Everyone—I told everyone, I—’m fine, you people needta stop *coming*, I told the last lady to *leave me alone*.” He was hyperventilating under the sheets. Probably suffocating himself by the sound of it. Rosalie reached over and pried the sheet out of his limp grasp, causing him to look at her in sheer horror. His dark hair sprung out wildly, his eyebags almost as dark as his pupils. Rosalie slowly let go of the sheets and stepped back while Fern quickly grabbed his pillow and shoved himself into the furthest corner against the wall, shielding himself away from her. With a tight-lipped frown, she shook her head, and decided to look for something to clean with instead. She saw a broom lying on the ground, buried under thicker wood scraps. Before her hands could wrap around the pole, Fern followed her gaze and leapt forward like a feral animal, tumbling off the cot and snatching the broom away from her. He scuttled backwards and shoved the business end up at her face. Her nose wrinkled at the dust it brought up with it.

“Leave,” he hissed, hands shaking. Rosalie yanked the broom away and glared at him as she planted it down next to her.

“Mr. Yorvick. Respectfully, God would not approve of me beating you back into bed, and I doubt your pride as a man would remain unscathed in the aftermath,” Fern grumbled

something at that, crossing his arms like a child. She rolled her eyes at the pathetic display. “You are *sick*. You need *help*. Just let me do my job and help you and I’ll be out of your way.”

Fern didn’t say anything to that. He pouted and glared at the ground, but he did not interfere as she swept around him. She pulled out bread and fruit from the basket and left a plate for him on the nightstand. Then she piled his laundry in the corner, occasionally having to pull a piece out from under him while he moped. After an hour or so, the cabin was livable, and Fern remained on the floor. Rosalie gestured to the bed, but he refused to budge. Fern looked up at her, no longer with anger or delirium, but instead in sorrow. In a soft whisper, he spoke.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Of what?”

“Of dying like this. Like me. I can feel my body turning inside out trying to die faster, and all I can do is sit here and die with it,” eyes brimming with tears and exhaustion, he looked away from her then. “The other lady got that. But you, you just... You come in here and you stand there, all upright like Joan of Arc or something.”

And she should have told him about Artrys right there. She should have said, “It’s because I have nothing to fear that I can be here at all.” She should have said, “If I were her, I would have left you too.” But something about Fern called to her then. Something in the way he looked up at her with emaciated cheeks and bated breath, his body another waning cycle of mortality’s moon. No one else saw her like that. No one else was desperate enough for her to be their saint. So Rosalie couldn’t say any of that. Instead, she offered a warm hand to him, and said nothing else at all.

...

The priest turns Rosalie's duties over to Sister Ivy for another three days.

"I think we ought to spend more time together," he says, with a possessive look in his eyes that makes her sick. "I believe that together, we could do some great things for this convent."

She can't say no. Not when he rambles on about "indoctrinating Artrys" and "bringing the whole ritual closer to God." None of the other nuns would understand, not in the way they'd pull up their skirts and part the Red Sea for him. She could tell Mother Generva her problems but her ear is likely already bent to the priest.

On the third night, she makes up an excuse. Something about Artrys and making sure the creek conditions are to her liking.

"It's rather dark, isn't it? Perhaps I should accompany you," the priest offers, once again leaning in her doorway as she shoves the untouched bible into a knapsack. She shakes her head, slinging it over her shoulder.

"Lady Artrys will protect me, I'm sure," Rosalie says with a thin smile. "Goodnight, Father."

She feels his eyes on her as she leaves the convent, pushing aside the grand wooden doors and pacing down the garden path. Artrys is there waiting for her, just on the outskirts of the woods. Rosalie does not stop to greet her, balling her hands into fists as she hears the creature's steady footsteps behind her.

"I'm in no need of your parenting tonight," Rosalie practically shouts over her shoulder.

I disagree. You're behaving like a child, Artrys huffs in return.

“I am *not*,” Rosalie says, shoving a branch away from her face. “I have never *been* a child, thanks to you.”

Do not take that tone with me. You chose to be my vessel.

“Because you made me choose between this and death!”

“*Stop.*” Artrys orders, her voice shaking the trees and sending innocent critters out of their homes and running for greener pastures. Rosalie turns to glare at her.

I told you to find a new home, and you chose to stay in the creek.

“I was just a girl!”

And you wanted to live, and I gave that to you. And Rosalie tries not to cry as she hears that, she really does, but the lump that rises in her throat proves impossible to swallow. Artrys steps towards her, slow and quiet.

“But it’s not fair.” Rosalie whispers, wiping at her eyes.

I know.

“No one else has to pay a tithe just to live.”

I know, Artrys repeats, this time reaching for Rosalie and pulling her close. With her head pressed against Artrys’s naked, gray chest, Rosalie sobs. Tears spill down her cheeks and plummet into the dirt below, reminding Rosalie that everything she has will go to the soil one day.

What do you want, Rosalie? What is it that you cannot have under me?

For a moment, there is nothing that passes through her lips. She holds her breath, eyes glossy and wild. As she tilts her head up to Artrys, the creature pulls back the habit and drops it to the ground. She looks into Artrys's eyes, two thin golden crescents reflecting the moonlight back at her now. Then, in a shaky voice, Rosalie speaks.

"I just want to be happy."

...

"...ster Rosalie?" Fern murmurs, sitting up and reaching for the candle by his bed. Rosalie reaches over and pushes it away, shaking her head.

"Shh, Fern... It's alright. Don't move."

"Sorry the matches are... Somewhere, I think..." He yawns, rubbing at his eyes and gesturing to the floor.

"That's alright. Our eyes will adjust." Rosalie pushes his legs further onto the cot, making room for herself just at the edge. Even in the dark corner of the cabin, she can tell he's making a face at her, one with his nose scrunched up and his eyes narrowed at her.

"You're not wearing your thing," he says.

"No," she replies, then slowly reaches for his hands. He flinches at her touch, but softens as she slips her palms under his. "This isn't a religious visit, Fern."

"What kind of visit is this, then?"

"Personal," Rosalie whispers, smiling as her fingers tighten against the back of his hands.

"Oh."

“Is that alright?” Fern’s breath hitches at the question, and for a moment, Rosalie thinks he’s about to start coughing. But just as quickly it happens, Fern stills, and leans toward her.

“Of course, you’re...” He swallows, then shaking his head. “You’re always welcome here, you don’t have to ask. What is it?”

The wind rustles the leaves just outside, and for a moment, Rosalie thinks about leaving. She thinks about begging for forgiveness and running back into the wild, back to Artrys. She thinks about how pretty the moon must look tonight, how she didn’t even bother to look at it properly before coming inside, how she’s missing the view to meander stupidly on the edge of Fern’s cot.

“Fern, I... I want you. I’ve always wanted you,” she swallows hard, fighting the rising lump in her throat. “I tried to keep it to myself, I tried not to think about you this way, but I just *can’t*... And I need you to know that I...”

The silence that follows hangs heavy in the air between them as she trails off. She begins to tremble, tears welling in her eyes. She squeezes her eyes shut as she continues.

“Please forgive me, Fern. I shouldn’t have—I—I didn’t mean to... *Please...*”

Fern reaches for her wrists then and pulls her closer to him. He moves to cup her cheek, stroking it tenderly. As he draws her closer, his hand falls to her neck, and once she’s close enough to feel his breath against her face, he finally opens his mouth to speak.

“You’ll have to forgive me first.”

His lips are chapped, the sensation foreign and rough against her own. But the warmth is gentle. He holds her still, only pressing his thumb into her neck before pulling away. All she can

hear is her own heartbeat, pounding hard as she chases his mouth again. She drags up her tunic to straddle him properly, kissing him down into the cot. His hands fly to her waist, fingers trembling in the fabric as he holds it tight.

“Rosalie,” he whispers into the corner of her mouth, as they pull apart for air, “Stay here with me. Don’t—”

“I will, Fern,” she says. And in the dark, there is no witness to the blasphemous smile blooming on her face as she leans down to him once more.

...

In the morning, Artrys pushes the cabin door open. Rosalie is already awake, wearing only her cream-colored underdress with her tunic folded neatly to the side. Fern remains unconscious next to her, rolled onto his side. Artrys nods, slow and heavy. Rosalie nods back.

“Come, Fern.” She pushes aside a stray lock of hair from his face, running her hand down his cheek and cupping it. “It’s going to be a beautiful day. We shouldn’t waste it.”

The day proves to be a hard one for Fern, as he coughs violently with every step forward. Eventually, his legs give out completely, and Rosalie pulls his body onto her back the rest of the way. Artrys is silent all the while.

“Where are we going?” Fern asks, his voice hazy and delirious. Without even looking at him, Rosalie can tell he’ll pass out any minute now.

“Just a bit further,” she says. “Trust me.”

She lowers him gently down on the edge of the creek, smoothing out his shirt and leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead.

“I won’t take long, Fern.”

He mumbles something unintelligible in response, eyes closed and breathing shallow. As she turns away, looking out across the sparkling water, she sees Artrys waiting for her up ahead. She kicks off her shoes, and steps into the creek.

What should I tell him? Artrys asks as Rosalie approaches.

“Tell him that you’ll cure him,” Rosalie replies. “He’ll want to hear that first.”

And what about the tithe? How will he handle that? Artrys huffs, crossing her arms and staring down at Rosalie. But the frustration gives way to something more melancholy as she asks, *What about you, Rosalie?*

“He has a good heart. I know he’ll be hurt, and it’ll take some time for him to understand, but he’ll get there. I think he’ll make a better vessel for you in the end.”

It won’t be the same. He’s not you.

Rosalie chuckles at that, closing the distance between herself and Artrys as she wraps her arms around her. Artrys holds her tight, shaking as tears begin to leak from the bottom of the bird skull.

“Thank you,” Rosalie says. Then, she pulls away from Artrys, and settles into the creek. As Artrys hovers above her, she closes her eyes, and takes her final breath.

