A Crown of Laurels

by Katie Bloomer

Life once filled our house: English and Swedish ivy hanging in the windows, orchids resting on the kitchen counters, eucalyptus and aloe vera lurking in the bathroom, lilies in the living room, succulents in dad’s studio − since he couldn’t be trusted to keep anything alive − the entire house littered with ferns and begonias and elephant ears. My dad used to tell me I had an exceptionally green thumb, that I could cheat death itself.

“Daphne, my little flower,” he’d say, cupping my face in his large, rough hands. “My beautiful, perfect little flower. You’re going to live forever.”

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The city of Delphio flashed by as I rode the green line into downtown, the setting sun bouncing off the skyscrapers, lighting up the city much more vibrantly than any other time of day. Granted, I never saw the city much during the day anymore − not since middle-school trips to the aquarium and science museum − but that was fine with me. I preferred the nightlife, when the city shone under neon lights. Here, the night wasn’t any darker than the day, it was just a different kind of light.

By the time I hopped from the green line to the red, jumped ship at Union Station and walked just over four blocks to Parnassus Tower, the sun had vanished. My thick heels clacked loudly on the smooth marble floor as I made my way across the lobby and toward the employee elevators just past the receptionist’s desk. I ran to catch the elevator as a man held it open for me, and I felt proud when I didn’t trip or stumble a single time.

“What floor?” he asked after pressing twenty.

“Fifty-six.”

“Ah, going all the way up,” he said with a playful smile as he pressed the floor number with a large thumb. I smiled back but began to squirm slightly when I saw him perusing my uniform. “I assume you work at the lounge? Haven’t been there myself yet. Maybe I should try.”

I smiled back and gave a slight nod before maneuvering farther away. He seemed to get the hint and left me alone for the rest of the short ride, looking down and mindlessly scrolling through his phone. He said a quick and courteous goodbye when he got off, and I was finally alone.

I leaned my back against the railing and let out a long sigh before catching my reflection in the metal door. The image was warped and unclear. My long black hair framed my porcelain face − making me look far paler than I was − and disappeared into the black vest, the large, carefully primped curls lost in a sea of stark black and white. I pulled on the hem of the black skirt, begging for it to be just a few inches longer. Even with tights and knee-high boots I felt too exposed. It was a miracle they let me wear a tie (black and white checkered) instead of keeping the collar open; they couldn’t legally enforce it, though they pointed out time and time again that the other girls raked in more tips that way.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened, and I walked out with my chin high and my step sturdy. The lobby was blindingly white, the only color coming from the few waiting customers and the neon green sign. I nodded my usual greeting to the hostess on duty and walked through the solid double doors. Inside, I breathed fresh air.

The glass ceiling gave way to a pitch-black sky. The ceiling was retractable, as were portions of the glass walls, and in the spring would open up and allow the space to breathe − though I hadn’t worked there long enough to see the spectacle before. *The Floral Lounge* was a jungle − hot and steamy, even in these late winter months − filled to the brim with all manner of greenery. A greenhouse full of plant life from the tropics to the mountains − the towering pines and maples, the weeping willows and peaceful palms, the twisted junipers. The air saturated with the sweet aromas of vibrant roses and lilacs, dainty jasmines and delicate magnolias, their fragrances joining together in a symphony. All around, ornate fountains flowed into babbling streams, the crystal-clear waters tainted by the neon lights underneath, shimmering orange and red and purple.

In the center stood the bar − surrounded by tall tables and stone benches, couches and picnic tables − and scattered throughout the rest of the cobblestone maze you could find a variety of private seating areas. The lights were strategically placed, mostly on tables and carefully poised on stone pillars in the middle of walkways. The plant life lived in shadow, dim lights strung among their branches and soft lanterns flickering along the squat stone walls at their feet. Just enough of their features stood out to reveal their beauty, but enough of them remained hidden to call their true nature into question. But I was one of the few who paid such close attention to them. For most, they remained at the periphery of their vision, noticed just enough to establish the ambiance, to entice seekers of the exotic. Afterall, the greenery wasn’t the main attraction.

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Our tree stood tall against the riverbank, growing between the jagged rocks of the shoreline and the lush grass of the park. I remember lying underneath that emerald canopy, blades of grass running through my fingers, the ever-present lullaby of flowing water. The light green of the leaves’ soft underbellies shimmered, sunlight trapped on the other side. It was dad’s favorite spot to paint, and when I was only five or six, I had told him I wanted to be a painter when I grew up.

“I want to be the best!” I said. “Just like you.”

He pulled me into his arms and held me close as we gazed out over the grassy hills, the drum of traffic buzzing in the air, the sun bouncing off the glass-stained horizon. The next day, he gave me my first sketchbook.

Under our laurel tree, I learned how to sketch the landscape, how to capture beauty. There I learned that to create something new was to taste immortality.

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I felt the bass of the music through the floor motivating me to keep up with its rhythm as I made my rounds, tray poised delicately in my hand. The lounge was always busy on Friday nights, but it seemed more cramped than usual, and as I wound my way through the thick mesh of hot bodies, I felt more than one hand at the end of my skirt. I just rolled my eyes and nonchalantly swatted away any hand bold enough to linger.

I made my way to the bar and plopped down my tray lined with empty glasses, giving the bartender the next round of orders. I sighed and leaned back against the counter as I waited, staring out at the sea of faces. More than one pair of eyes stared back at me, though none of them remained on my face for very long. I really didn’t mind the ogling, or even the occasional daring hands, because in a way it made me feel powerful. They would never get what they wanted, but I would, and the drunker they got, the more my pockets swelled with greenery.

I started working at the lounge the previous fall, soon after graduating high school − still underage, though the manager has managed to cover up that little fact. I was in search of a lot of money in a short amount of time. Of course, I found it. I used the money to rent my own apartment closer to downtown − a small studio with outdated appliances and cracks decorating the faded white walls, right on the divide between city and suburb, where the freight trains whistled in the middle of the night. It wasn’t much, but it was mine. Plus, it allowed me to fill up a savings account on the side − something my dad never had, living paycheck to paycheck.

More girls began congregating at the bar, tapping their finely manicured nails on empty trays. We chatted idly while we waited, chatted about the good-tippers and must-avoids for the night, who got to wait on the hotties and who got the obnoxious pricks, who got pinched where and who was about to punch the next dick that touched her. We were a united front in our work, an underestimated, underdressed army fighting off the encroaching invaders. I took this job for the money; I stayed for the comradery.

The girls suddenly grew quiet, and I followed their gaze to the front door. A man walked in surrounded by an entourage of lackeys. The girls stared, transfixed, and some began to blush. He was beautiful, with golden hair and honey-kissed skin that glowed like the sun. Sporting a spotless white suit and standing a good head taller than those surrounding him, he seemed to float through the room like a ghost or a cloud. He seemed out of place in this world − this world of dark skies and neon lights − but he strode in like he owned the place, with confidence in each step.

“Who is he?” I asked the other girls. He wasn’t a regular customer; I certainly would’ve remembered him.

“That’s Phoebus,” said one girl. “He’s the founder of Patron Records down on fifty. They’ve had a lot of famous talent, like *Cali and the Muses* and *Pan the Man*.”

The girls continued talking about him, their soft gossip and giggles eclipsed by the robust clamor of the lounge. They had a lot to say about a man so rich *and* gorgeous. Yet for all his beauty, there was something off about him, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Don’t trust him,” I heard a voice say in a loud whisper.

I turned to find Cassandra behind me, her broom hanging limp in her hands, mid-sweep, her eyes fixed on the ground. Her uniform, simple black slacks and a matching vest over a white dress shirt, looked two times too big on her thin frame. Her long, curly orange hair was streaked with white and braided in a single line down her back. I seemed to be the only one who noticed her.

“What?” I asked.

The old kitchen hand raised her head and looked at me with hard eyes. “Don’t trust him,” she repeated, and walked away.

My eyes followed her steady retreat into the kitchen, the double doors swinging shut behind her. There was a long moment before I realized I was still staring at the closed doors. I shook my head free of wild thoughts and turned back to the other girls, who were wrapping up their gossip and returning to work. I smiled widely as I grabbed my tray off the bar, but I felt a cold sweat suddenly trickle down my spine. I turned to find the golden man smiling at me, a smile which should have given his face a charming appeal, but instead made him resemble a wild beast baring its teeth.

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I found Diana waiting for me in the parking garage, like always, and I couldn’t contain my excitement. I ran into her arms and kissed her, sinking into her tall, lean frame, my arms draped around her neck. She looked down and smiled at me, the corners of her eyes crinkling and her usually scrunched-up eyebrows softening.

She was beautiful, with olive toned skin and hair dyed a deep mossy green, curls tumbling just past the nap of her neck. She shimmered in the moonlight like a ghost, and I wondered for a moment if she was real.

She wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and we walked to her car. She inherited her mom’s old Porsche Cayman, a gift from Diana’s father. Well, more like a bribe; a bribe to keep Diana and her mom quiet and away from his wife, who wasn’t known for her forgiving nature. White with gold trim and a light beige interior, the car was almost ten years old but in pristine condition thanks to Diana’s nurturing touch. She held the door open for me and I slid into the compact frame. She leaned in to kiss me before running around to get in herself, and I sunk into the seat, relishing in the luxurious feeling of real leather.

Growing up, I never owned a car, and neither did my dad. For the most part, we didn’t need one: a grocery store on the corner three blocks away, a 24-hour convenience store across the street from that, a Walgora-mart just over two miles away in the other direction, fast food on every corner and three or four Starbucks within a five-mile radius. My elementary school was three blocks away, about a quarter mile, and the middle school was just over half a mile, the high school just under two. The local flea market where dad usually sold his work on weekends was just over a mile down the main boulevard, the public library right next door, where I would often find myself wandering after growing bored at the market.

Whenever we needed to get somewhere far, we rode the bus or the train, or both. I always loved those rides, despite the occasional sticky seats and musky air of too many bodies pressed too closely together. Mostly though, I remember empty seats and a somber aura interlaced with my own ecstatic energy. I would press my hands against the windows and peer out at the world as it flew by, trying to take in every sight, every hectic noise and wild smell, every howl of unseen dogs and babies and sirens, every spicy aroma spilling out of busy restaurants, every glint of the sun off the distant skyscrapers and every sparkle of life in the eyes of perfect strangers.

I loved that busy feeling, that feeling of life happening all around you and, although you existed among it all and you contained a spark of that life, it still felt as though you were separated from it all. Cars didn’t provide that feeling. They were more intimate, personal, closed-off. But I saw their appeal; I definitely enjoyed the comfort.

I would’ve ridden the train or taken the bus home, but Diana didn’t like public transportation. Instead, she picked me up in her car; even after working double shifts or when she worked early the next morning, she always tried to pick me up. We both knew what happened to young women who traveled alone at night.

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I had barely walked in the door when our manager, Mr. Hart, pulled me aside. A middle-aged man with a high-quality toupee and a beer gut disguised underneath a girdle, his breath always smelled like chocolate and bourbon. On the occasion when he’d pull me in close to whisper, his hot breath clung to me, and I feared I could never rid myself of the smell. That smell had been the first thing I noticed when he hired me. I had come for an interview, but it was cut short when he smiled cordially and pulled out the paperwork from underneath his desk. His smile was always warm and inviting, his hand gentle when he placed it on my back or shoulder.

Now, he pulled me aside by the arm and told me I would run bottle service for booth three.

“He’s a very important guest,” he said. “Owns over half the building − *us* included.”

He lightly squeezed my arm to emphasize his point, then handed me an ice bucket. Inside was a bottle of *Bacchus Merlot* − top shelf. I smiled and patted his forearm, reassuring him I would treat his guest well.

I walked through the cobblestone maze, enjoying the scenic stroll before coming to a remote outcropping, the entrance hidden with vines. Inside I found the usual assortment: about a half-dozen young men, their jackets thrown over the backs of chairs and their ties loosened, their shirts unbuttoned. The few women, three in this case, sat on their laps with a variety of floral arrangements adorning their heads, crowns of daisies and sunflowers and roses. Mr. Hart was known to give these out to any pretty guests who graced our lounge, a mark to identify the favored. They laughed and drank dark red wine, staining their lips.

Among the group, one stood out like a blinding light: the golden man. Phoebus. My heart stopped as his gaze found me. He pinned me down without lifting a finger. I took a deep gulp and approached him with the bottle, which he took in his hands to examine more closely.

“Compliments of Mr. Hart,” I said with a smile.

He smiled and handed me the bottle, our hands almost touching. They were large, and looked softer than silk.

The unruly group drank all night − glass after glass, bottle after bottle. I waited, watching, just out of reach. While the men grew rowdier and the women sleepier − the men shouting and roaring, the women slurring and stumbling − the golden man remained silent and vigilant. When I caught him staring at me, I turned away, the back of my neck hot under his gaze, a predatory look in his eyes.

Near the end of the night, when the guests were beginning to trickle out the doors en masse and my shift was nearing its end, Phoebus called me to his side.

“Sit,” he said, patting the armrest of the couch. “You must be tired, being on your feet for hours on end.”

The last of his friends left and we were alone in the secluded alcove. He was patient while I mulled it over, his eyes soft. I sat down, straightening my skirt and crossing my ankles. He placed a hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, a gentle half-touch like the caress of a ghost.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said softly.

I smiled but avoided his gaze. I wondered if he could feel the sweat trickling down my back.

“Have you ever thought about modeling?” he asked. “You’d be a star.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I remained silent, my body stiff and my eyes fixed on the ground. After a moment, he removed his hand from my back, and I tried not to let my relief show. He reached down the length of the couch to the opposite side table and grabbed one of the women’s discarded crowns. He gently stroked the rose petals, soothing them, comforting them after the woman’s mistreatment. He placed the crown on my head and leaned back, watching me.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. “A true work of art.”

I blushed and turned away, squirming uncomfortably and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. He lightly grabbed the hair and pulled it back down. Then he brought it to his lips and kissed it. I restrained the impulse to reclaim my hair, to pull it out of his grasp. He looked up at me as my hair fell from his fingertips and smiled.

Then he stood up, placed four crisp hundred-dollar bills on the table, and walked away. Not a single sway or stumble marked his departure, every step sure and sturdy despite the exorbitant amount of alcohol.

After sitting a moment longer, stunned by a foul feeling − as though a layer of grime coated my skin, something I couldn’t simply wash away − I stood and pulled the crown off my head. I held it delicately in my palms, and for a moment considered crushing it, thorns and all.

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I was seven the first time my dad disappeared. I waited for him on the school’s front steps for half an hour before giving up and walking home. He had never been that late before, not without any warning. We only lived three blocks away, so my teacher let me go so long as I walked with my new classmate, Kora, and her sisters, who lived at the end of my street. They all sported the same curly hair, spring flowers perpetually intertwined with the golden locks, the colors of both made more vivid from the combination.

I always carried an emergency key, but I didn’t need it; the front door was unlocked. When I called out there was no response except for more silence. I tossed my backpack on the couch and explored every room. Empty. But I noticed something missing from dad’s studio: his sketchbook, the one he always left open on the desk by the window, next to the small barbed-wire cactus.

I lightly tapped the cactus’s prickly form, no larger than a softball with a single yellow bud. Before anything, I needed to water my plants. This little guy hadn’t been watered in a week and seemed to be getting thirsty, the poor bud straining to live. I quickly filled the green watering can I kept under the kitchen sink and made my rounds, finishing with the little prickly bud, and headed out the door.

I zigzagged between the mixture of chain-link and privacy fences, through the maze of quiet streets and narrow alleyways, across the middle school parking lot and, finally, through the Greentree apartment complex. On the other side lay Tempe Hollow, a large expanse of thick grass, dispersed trees and shrubbery, and a paved walkway that rang alongside the winding Pinios River.

I found my dad standing by the river under our laurel tree. He wore his new light blue sweatshirt, which accentuated the sharp silver that was beginning to curl through his thick black hair. His sketchbook lay open on the grass beside him, the thick, starchy pages flapping against the wind. He had a wistful look in his eyes, as though he were looking somewhere far away. He didn’t look at me or acknowledge my presence.

“Dad?” I asked softly, reaching out a tentative hand. “Are you okay?”

“You were born in this river,” he said, so quietly his voice almost vanished in the breeze. “So was I, though I fear the water has long left me.”

He still didn’t look at me, only ahead. I grabbed his limp hand and felt it twitch. He finally turned to face me, tears brimming his eyes, a sad smile on his lips.

“We are gods, you know,” he said. “Great gods of the earth and sea, no less than those of the sky.”

“Really?” I asked.

His smile broadened and he knelt in front of me, enfolding my hands gently in his.

“Really,” he said. “And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

He tapped his finger on my nose and chuckled softly. I laughed and he pulled me in close, tickling my neck with his scruffy beard. I squirmed and wriggled in his grasp, laughing ever louder.

“You’re so weird, Daddy,” I said, breathless.

His eyes lit up, and for the first time I noticed how they shone with the color of melted glacial water.

We walked home hand in hand, the sound of flapping pages and coursing water slowly fading behind us.

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 The golden man came back day after day for weeks. Sometimes he requested my services, but mostly he just watched me from wherever he lounged. I felt his eyes on me like hot iron.

I told Mr. Hart about it; he shrugged it off and told me it was well worth the money. I called my best friend, Kora, and told her about it; she offered to kill him in a number of distressingly disturbing ways. Her boyfriend could cover it up too − he was a mortician. I told Diana about it, but there wasn’t much she could do. She picked me up more frequently, insisting more adamantly than ever that I ride home with coworkers if she wasn’t available. A couple of times, when she had enough time off, she’d sit quietly in the lounge and keep an eye on me, like a mama bear watching her cub. I felt safe with her there, but knew it couldn’t last forever.

I didn’t have to tell the girls about it; they knew the look of panic in another woman’s eyes. They offered to help out however they could − giving lifts, taking orders, switching shifts − but they couldn’t understand my reaction. They adored him, and enjoyed any opportunity to bathe in his light. They couldn’t see the beast that lurked in the shadows behind his eyes.

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About halfway through my senior year, well before I started working at the lounge, the life had been snuffed out of our house, and carcasses littered every room; the ivy hung limp and brittle, the orchids and lilies drooped low and turned brown, the cacti shriveled into themselves like imploding stars. Boxes were scattered throughout the living room and stacked along the walls of my bedroom, my mattress bare and lying on the floor, the frame disassembled and leaning next to the boxes. Dad’s things were already gone, his room and studio emptied. I kept a single box of his things − things I couldn’t bear to part with, like his favorite coffee mug and most recent sketchbook. Everything else, I donated or sold for a quick buck. It broke my heart to sell his paintings for next to nothing; they were worth so much more.

I held his last hand drawn birthday card − “The Big 18!” written over a rough sketch of us in the park − close to my chest, careful not to crinkle it. I was on the verge of tears when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Kora, my best friend since second grade, smiled tenderly as she wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me in tight.

“Take your time,” she said softly. “It’s going to take mom a while to get the truck here.” She let me go and took a step back. “Want me to wait outside?”

I didn’t respond right away, just stared off into the empty space, but she waited.

“I actually think I want to go for a walk,” I said, my voice hoarse. I gingerly opened the nearby box and placed the card inside, then grabbed the old light blue sweatshirt. I held it to my lips and wondered why it smelled faintly like the sea, then pulled it over my head. “I’ll be back in a bit to help load up everything.”

“Don’t worry, we got it,” Kora said. “Just be safe. Call us, and we’ll pick you up when you’re ready.”

I hugged her again briefly, then headed out the back door.

The sun bore down from its position high in the sky, not a cloud in sight, but the late-autumn air hung around me in a protective barrier. As I ambled down the narrow alleyway, crunching dried leaves beneath my boots, I tried not to think about the future. The landlord wasn’t interested in my sob story; he needed renters. Thankfully, Kora’s family wouldn’t charge me rent, but I refused to mooch off them forever. I needed to start making some real money. I wondered for a moment if dropping out of school and getting a job would be the smart thing to do, but I knew my dad wouldn’t have wanted that.

I kept my eyes on the light concrete as I walked, aware enough of my surroundings to avoid the one place I didn’t want to be. I gave Tempe Hollow a wide berth, and soon found myself wandering well outside the neighborhood I knew. Aimlessly, I roamed the quiet streets until the sun began to set. In the faded evening light, I found myself alone at the train station. A train idled quietly in the bay, doors open. As its horn began to echo off the surrounding buildings, I hopped on, the doors slowly closing behind me. I took one of the many empty seats and slumped against the window, hoping an attendant didn’t come through anytime soon.

I watched the city pass by in a blur, the sky darkening into a pitch-black canvas streaked with neon paint. My head leaning against the cool window, my breath fogging up the glass, I remembered what it felt like to hold my dad’s hand whenever I was scared. Like when we watched scary movies on Halloween, or when a big dog lunged at me from the end of its leash, or when doctors had to prick my arm or drill into my teeth. Like the first day of middle school, when I had rubbed my hands up and down my new jeans a thousand times, wiping the sweat off my palms. Kids were scattered around the drop-off zone saying goodbye to anxious parents − including Kora, who’s mom was hovering and fussing before letting her go. I looked up to find dad staring off into the distance, looking at some unseen horizon. Lightly biting my lip, I wiped my palms on my jeans one last time, then grabbed his hand. He startled − only slightly − before looking down at me with eyes filled with both sadness and affection.

“You’re growing more beautiful by the day, my little sprout − too beautiful for your own good,” he said, resting his hand on the top of my head and running it down the length of my long, tangled hair, soothing out the rough edges. Then his eyes turned hard, as though he were in pain − but he still smiled. “If you’re not careful, some guy will snatch you up before you know it.”

I huffed, ripped my hand out of his and crossed my arms, my hair getting tangled unceremoniously in the mix. Dad laughed as his eyes softened.

“I won’t let anyone snatch me up, especially no man!” I said.

He laughed harder and I stomped my foot at him.

“I’m serious!” I said, perhaps a little too loudly. “I got a lot to do! I want to see the world and become a famous artist. No one’s gonna hold me down!”

He rested his hand on my head again and I felt my body soften under his touch. His large fingers pinched my cheek before grabbing my hand once more. I held his hand fiercely, my chin stuck out; suddenly, my new situation didn’t scare me.

“That’s my girl,” he said. “You can do anything − don’t let the world stop you.”

Years later, on my solitary train ride, the memory lodged itself in my throat; I clenched my fists and bit my lip and tried not to cry, but the tears came anyway. Only when I found the strength to breathe again did I get off the train.

I had never ventured into the city at night before, and I felt a wave of ecstasy wash over me. I stared up at the blinding lights and tried not to lose my footing. The crisp night air blew through my hair, the breeze carrying with it a sweet scent. I leaned my head back, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. An odd sensation washed over me, like floating on the surface of lukewarm water. When I opened my eyes, I saw a green neon light − *The Floral Lounge­.* It was plastered on the side of a tall building, near the doors. A slew of trees surrounded it, punctuating each word. I raised a hand as though to touch it when I heard a strange voice behind me.

“You shouldn’t be out here on your own, you know,” the voice said.

I jumped and quickly turned around, clutching my hand close to my chest − as though I could defend myself by curling inward. The woman had a low, rumbling voice, but a tender look in her deep-set eyes. Her jeans were faded and her black hoodie was a little too big, her short hair dyed a deep royal purple. She was quite a bit taller than me, but she didn’t look much older. She took a step back and put her hands in her back pockets, rocking on the balls of her feet, waiting for me to say something.

“Well… you’re out here on your own,” I said.

She smiled and I felt my heart weaken at the sight. She held out a hand, and after a moment, I took it.

“Diana,” she said. It took me a moment to realize she was saying her name.

“Daphne,” I said.

“Well, Daphne,” she said, the corners of her eyes crinkling and her brow softening. “Perhaps we should keep each other company. There’s safety in numbers, after all.”

She squeezed my hand, and I felt my whole body soften. Together, we walked back toward the station; the station where, only moments ago, I feared I would float away into the dark sky, alone. We walked in silence, our breath filling the empty space. At one point, I grabbed her hand and never let go.

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It was the night they opened the glass ceiling, the first day of spring. I thought the stiff city air might pollute the space, but instead I felt the warm touch of the plants’ breath long before I entered the building. The trees shook their leaves, stretching their branches and dancing in the open air. The budding flowers unfurled their petals and reached for the stars, the tips of their fingers curling like those of a newborn baby grasping for its mother.

The lounge came alive, and I basked in its beauty. I leaned my head back, my shoulders falling away, and felt the life around me through my fingertips. I felt power surge through me. For a moment, I no longer feared the eyes which bore into the back of my frame.

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Later that night I caught him staring at me again out of the corner of my eye. I refused to turn his way, refused to let him ruin my good mood. Light on my feet, I danced from table to table, practically twirling drinks in the air as I hummed. I could’ve sworn I stood an inch or two taller, just like the surrounding vegetation.

Then there was a hand on my upper arm and I froze.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” the golden man said.

He was smiling, but he said the words through clenched teeth. His breath smelled like rotten red wine, and it clung to my clothes, my face. Breathing felt impossible; but my eyes settled on the surrounding canopy of trees, and they showed me how to breathe again, the subtle sway and swell of their bellies. I took a deep breath and felt my chest heave, my lungs filling with the flower-perfumed air, my heart swelling with nectar. I bit my lip − the blood tasting like sweet honeysuckle − and turned to face him.

“You’re very perceptive,” I said.

I paused for a moment, let my eyes speak for themselves, my mouth remaining silent. His smile only deepened in response, his eyes narrowing like the slits of a hawk in flight. I was losing my resolve − I had to act quickly.

“Now,” I said, rolling my shoulders and jutting my chin out. “Take a hint and *let go*.”

He leaned back slightly, a smug smile lighting up his face. I was growing desperate, flexing my hands − ready to claw out his eyes − when he finally let go of my arm. I slowly walked away, careful not to be too obvious and careful not to fully turn my back on him.

“That’s okay,” he said.

He spoke so softly the din of the lounge should have drowned him out. I wasn’t sure if he had really said anything at all.

“I always enjoy a good hunt.”

When I turned around, he was gone, and I was left massaging the knots and bruises I hadn’t realized he’d left.

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The parking garage was empty. Diana was supposed to be there, waiting. I reached into my brown satchel and dug around for my phone, hoping that when I checked the time I would find out I’d gotten off early and she was still on her way. I poked and prodded every inch of the bag, dug through every item, but my phone wasn’t there. I ripped the bag off my shoulder and tore it open. Wallet, spare clothes, emergency tampons, hairbrush, extra deodorant, toothbrush and travel-size paste. An empty sketchbook. But no phone.

I tried not to panic, tried to control my breathing and just walk back inside and find a phone − any phone. *Just get inside*.

“You know, you shouldn’t be out here on your own,” a familiar voice said.

Loud footsteps echoed off the concrete walls and I wondered where the hell he came from, how the hell he got so close without me realizing sooner. Was I that dense, *that* oblivious to the world around me? I turned around and there he was, standing in the middle of the path, the door no more than ten feet behind him. The usually dull, flickering lights seemed to shine a surreal light down on him, a golden crown circling his head, casting his face into shadow.

He took a single step towards me − just a single, meticulous step, but I felt the threat behind it. I flinched and tried not to tremble.

“I’m not alone,” I said, purposefully too loud. “My girlfriend’s picking me up, she’s just paying the attendant.”

Phoebus shrugged his shoulders, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. He looked at me with narrow eyes.

“I think we both know she’s not coming,” he whispered.

I slowly reached into my bag, but I knew there wasn’t anything there to help me. I grasped the handle of my wooden hairbrush − *if nothing else, I can throw it, maybe use it to beat him back?* My best bet would be to run − *but where?* Running out into the dark empty streets wouldn’t do me any good − *maybe down to the next level, find another entrance to the building?* There were still a few parked cars lingering within the concrete cave − *maybe I could scream for help, hope someone hears me?* I liked to think I could handle my own in a fight, but I didn’t want to test it that night.

I lightly bounced on the balls of my feet, my eyes darting around without letting him out of my sight, when suddenly the lights flared, sparks shooting out in a dazzling firework show, and I backpedaled a few steps. Within the instant darkness fell over the lot and my heart stopped, he disappeared. It took a moment for my heart to find the correct rhythm again, for my eyes to adjust. I stood there slack-jawed and immobile, my spine frozen in a tightly wound knot, rigid and unbending. My legs shook underneath me, though I begged them not to.

“What the *fuck*?” I whispered, wide-eyed and breathless.

The space lay bare before me, no cars or pillars within the vicinity for him to hide behind, no shadow for him to crawl under. He was gone. Slowly − unsteady, like a baby deer taking its first steps − I crept to the door. I clutched my brush until it began to splinter in my hand, then I clutched it even tighter, the stinging sensation keeping me on my toes, reminding my body that this was really happening.

\* \* \*

A pale wooden palette splattered with dark blues, greens, purples and grays. A speck of yellow and orange, a dash of red deeper than the setting sun.

Dad loved landscapes, especially when they lay against the backdrop of the city. That’s why he loved the park so much. Afterall, what could be more captivating than the cool river which cuts through the cold, callous city streets? What could be more beautiful than the luscious trees and grass which grew amongst towering steel and glass?

\* \* \*

The bright corridors I walked through only moments before − bordered with dimly lit business lobbies and the occasionally well-lit private office − had turned dark and cold. Abandoned. I wandered − lost − turning corner after corner looking for a way out, a way in, a way to anyplace else. I stumbled and slipped on my heels, finally tearing them off my feet, abandoning them on the tiled floor, and running with more vigor than before.

I swore I heard the echo of footsteps. I moved more quietly, sliding across the floor rather than risk picking up my feet. I tried not to breathe, took shallow breaths as though I were fogging up a glass. Then I saw the neon green light creeping out from around the corner. Following it felt like a trap, but also like salvation.

I don’t know how I ended up back on the top floor, but I didn’t care. I dashed past the glowing sign and creaked open one of the heavy doors. Nobody − just the sound of running water and leaves blowing in the breeze. I slithered through the doors and made my way across the empty clearing to the cobblestone path, quickly ducking behind a short wall. I laid my back against the cool surface and felt the chill soak through my clothes and into my back. My heart rate slowed and my breathing steadied, the water and the trees whispering soothing lullabies. I clutched my bag to my chest and waited − for the sound of footsteps, for a voice, for the rotten stench of red wine. Nothing came, and eventually, I fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Roughly a week after my eighteenth birthday, I returned from school to an empty house, a regular occurrence by that point. I tossed my backpack on the couch, swiped the green watering can and went about my rounds, giving my plants the hydration they craved. Little did I know that was the last time I’d water them.

I expected to find my dad by the river, under our laurel tree, as I had for almost every day over the past decade. But as I stood in the clearing, I saw no one, the only sign of life the tall grass and dainty leaves swaying in the wind. I walked up and down the paved walkway calling out his name. Nowhere. I traversed every inch of the open fields, pushing aside tall grass in the hopes of finding him lounging on the ground, not a care in the world. I ran along the rocky riverbed, shouting at the top of my lungs. I ran back home, searched every room twice, then ran down every street and alleyway. I ran until my lungs burst, yelled until my voice ran dry like sandpaper.

The sun was setting when I found myself back at the park. I fell to my knees and dug my fingers through the grass. The wind picked up, the impending chill of winter tiptoeing over the land. I felt the cold creep in through my thin sweater and seep into my bones. I dug my fists into the dirt, rocked back and forth on my heels, and screamed, screamed as loud as I could. The river howled louder in response, water gushing past me, mist splashing off the rocks, anointing the air.

“You were born from this river,” he’d said, all those years ago. “As was I.”

I walked home alone in the dark, my eyes puffy and sore. The police came, asked their questions. I stared blankly ahead. Their presence felt more like the company of ghosts − or perhaps I was the ghost. They promised they’d do the best they could, that they would contact me with more news. They never came back; I never expected them to.

\* \* \*

The chill air, heavy with morning dew, soaked into my clothes. I ran my hands up and down my arms, my eyes heavy and crusty from sleep. I had no idea what time it was, and for a moment the horror of the previous night felt like a vivid yet fleeting dream. Then reality settled in.

I slowly maneuvered onto my knees and peered over the stone wall, through the dense shrubbery, to scan the lounge. No one. My breath slowed to a shallow pace as I listened for the faintest of sounds: branches scraping against the wind, birds humming their morning song, the rhythmic manmade streams and buzz of distant traffic. Nothing. As far as I could tell, I was alone.

I stood up on shaky legs − worn out from running − and slowly emerged into the lounge’s main clearing. The stone floor was ice cold against my bare feet as I tiptoed across the empty space, crouching low and careful not to make a sound.

I had never seen the lounge so brightly lit before, and it seemed like another world. Though it now looked like your standard greenhouse or backyard garden − lush and vibrant in the light of day − something was off, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. The space felt alive − I felt its breath on my neck as it sighed − but barely. Instead of basking in the morning sun, everything moaned protests against the light. The flowers drooped and the trees sagged under the weight of the blue sky, shying away from the sun. Everything turned away from me as though ashamed to be seen.

I lifted myself onto the squat stone wall nearest the bar, my hands lingering in the soil before standing. The cold stone beneath my feet had kept me on my toes, but when I stepped onto the moist morning dirt, I felt like I could finally breathe. I closed my eyes and dug my bare toes into the ground. The surrounding trees sighed in unison with me, but when I opened my eyes, I saw their true nature.

Bodies thin and robust, short and tall; lean and sturdy limbs wrapped in skin softer than silk and rougher than sandpaper; layers of defined muscle, sinewy, sharp bone and pinchable fat − all transformed into motionless life. I stumbled back, gasping, a shiver running down my spine and bare arms. My weak legs gave way and I fell to the ground, my palms scraping rough dirt and gnarled roots. How had I never before noticed their gnarled feet? Or how their legs twisted in a subtle dance, slightly bent at the knobby knee? Fingertips laced with leaves, their arms reached out to the sky − to each other. Warped faces cried out, hidden under layers of scarred bark, their voices muffled. The towering pines and maples, the weeping willows and peaceful palms, the twisted junipers − all women.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” that familiar voice rumbled behind me.

My breath caught in my throat as a cold sweat trickled down my back. I clawed my fingers into the ground, clutching fistfuls of rough dirt.

“True works of art,” he whispered, a rotten smell tickling my neck.

I slowly turned toward the rising run, as its head began to peak over the glass-stained horizon, and in the blinding light stood the silhouette of a man − a beast. For a moment I felt my heart stop. Then I jumped to my feet and ran.

“Wait!” Phoebus called out. “Why are you running?”

My feet tore through the sodden ground as I lurched my body forward, tender soles tearing.

“Stop!” he cried. “You’ll get hurt if you keep running like this!”

My arms and legs, unprotected amongst the dense foliage, grew red and swollen as I scraped against thorns and thistles.

“What if you fall?”

Rough bark slashed my palms where I grabbed hold, steadying myself before plowing ahead.

“Come on, Daphne!”

I hated the way my name sounded coming from him − like acidic spit.

“I’m not the bad guy here!” he called out. His voice, growing tighter with each syllable, seemed to have no one source, but echoed.

I dove behind bushes and snaked between trees, but every turn seemed to be the wrong one, every step taken in the wrong direction. The lounge I knew so well was now a strange and sinister forest with no cobblestone pathways or glowing exit signs. At least I was managing to outrun him; I just had to keep up the pace. Then I found myself falling face first into the dirt, my feet tangled in a brambled mess.

I scrambled to my knees and felt thorns digging into my ankles like a bear trap. I saw crowns of daisies, sunflowers and roses strewn across the ground. As I wrestled with the stubborn stems, tearing my palms, I heard the distinct sound of shoes rustling through undergrowth. With all my remaining strength I wrenched my feet free, crawled forward and lurched into a run.

I was so tired − my legs wobbling, shoulders sagging, vision blurring − and much slower now − my body torn and weary. Frustration and fear built up and tears streamed down my face, leaving a trail behind me. I didn’t have any strength left, and when his hand clasped tightly around my wrist, I didn’t have the strength to pull away. My legs slid out from under me and I landed hard in the dirt. My body covered in mud, he stood above me in his pristine white suit.

I dug my feet into the ground and pulled, but he only tightened his grip. With my free hand I dug into the tender flesh of his wrist. I gritted my teeth as he pulled me to my feet, and screamed and thrashed frantically as he grabbed my arms and pushed me against a tree. I felt the tree twist and bend, contorting to my body.

“Why are you fighting me?” he asked. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

When I refused to look at him, he grabbed my chin and jerked my head up. His brown eyes had specks of gold in the middle.

“I could make you a star,” he pleaded. “All the money and fame you could ever dream of. You would live on forever − just like them.”

He turned my head toward the dense copse of trees.

“They were nothing before − *nobodies*,” he whispered.

He leaned in closer, and I nearly choked on the scent of rotten red wine that poured from his lips.

“You’re nothing without me.”

My body suddenly felt light as clarity returned to my senses, like lifting away a grimy film. The sound of rushing water hit my ears, water which seemed to grow louder. Mixed with the gushing sound, I heard a voice, a whisper from the past.

*We are great gods of the earth and sea*, it said. *Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise*.

“No,” I croaked, swallowing a lump in my throat.

The ground shook slightly, and I took a deep breath. I jerked my head back to face Phoebus, my eyes set in stone. He looked confused, like he had never heard the word before.

“No,” I repeated louder. “I am a god.”

Roots sprouted from the ground like striking snakes and wrapped around his feet. In shock, he let go of me, and I quickly stepped back as the roots continued to encircle his legs. He grabbed the knotted bark and tried to pry himself free − for a moment I thought he would succeed. Then water flooded the ground and started weaving around him too, nourishing the growing sapling. He screamed as his body was further consumed, his suit muddied and torn. The surrounding trees leaned in closer, eager witnesses.

The ground began to shake violently and split open beneath him. More greenery burst out of the chasm like a geyser, leaves and bark and yellow blooms exploding in the open air. I stumbled back as he was dragged into the ground, his screams muffled by the surrounding trees as they converged on top of him. The hot breath of the lounge rushed over me as the plant life ran wild − the shrubs and vines crawled across the ground, flowers shot out of their young buds and unfurled like umbrellas, tree branches expanded and enfolded one another. Everything melted together into something new − something monumental, untamable. It grew to unfathomable heights, roots feeding on fresh fertilizer.

\* \* \*

The calm waters of the Pinios River lapped at my feet as I sat in my dad’s favorite spot, sketchbook in hand. Our tree was gone, the only sign of its presence a scar etched into the soil. On the distant horizon, among the sea of steel and glass, a shadow loomed − a giant laurel tree eclipsing the sun. Yellow blossoms floated on the breeze, carrying with them the sweet and spicy scent of spring flowers and freshly turned soil. For days the petals scattered across the city, coating skyscrapers, roads and train tracks; the bustling metro came to a halt overnight. For weeks the fire department tried to penetrate the tower, only to find, with every cut, the roots dug deeper, the trunk grew thicker, the branches stretched higher. For months people gawked at the sight; helicopters buzzed in the air, tourists flocked in, cameras captured every angle. Every news channel covered the spectacle, though no one could figure out how it happened.

They never found Phoebus; I never expected them to. An anonymous source uprooted evidence of his crimes − the harassments and rapes covered up with money and extortion. (It was easy enough to dig through his empty office before the entire building was consumed.)

I would miss my coworkers − my sisters − but it was comforting to know they all had other work lined up. We had said our goodbyes, exchanged contact info.

Diana sat beside me holding two bus tickets in her hand, our suitcases littered on the grass. I didn’t know where we were going; I didn’t care. With her, home could be anywhere.

We could travel the globe, hopping from bus to train to plane, wearing out the soles of our best hiking boots. I could paint the landscapes of the world − the snow-capped mountains and arid deserts, lush wetlands and endless prairies, tropical beaches and hidden meadows − and sell them at local markets and fairs. Perhaps, one day, we could settle down in a quaint little house of our own. Maybe someplace dark and stormy, where we’ll wear sweaters and drink hot cocoa all year long. Someplace by the sea, where we’ll walk hand in hand down the jagged coast and hear sacred songs on the breeze. We’ll spend our days trekking through the evergreens, our nights lying beneath the stars. We’ll plant red amaranth in the yard, and hang ivy in the windows. They will run wild, emerald veins tearing through the streets and threading through cerulean drapes. Under our care, they’ll live forever.