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S'QUATCH:
A NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

S'QUATCH is the story of Dori Thornton, a normal teenaged girl growing up in a small town in the foothills of the Cascades. When a local man strikes and kills a mysterious creature with his truck, a series of events is triggered that will change Dori's normal life forever. Soon, Dori goes from thinking that her biggest concern is convincing the dreamy Logan Ford to ask her to the Prom, to finding herself inexplicably transforming into a *skookum*, or sasquatch. As her transformation progresses, she must come to terms with both the physical change and the consequences that come with it. Drawing upon themes of mythology, metamorphosis, and the search for self-identity, *S'QUATCH* is a coming of age story that questions the boundaries between humanity and monstrosity.

S'QUATCH is intended as a Young Adult fiction novel, aimed primarily at upper-middle and high school readers. It is inspired, in part, by the author's interest in mythology, her college career in English literature, her love of a good monster story, and the fond memories of her adventures in Young Adult fantasy as a young reader.

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S'QUATCH: A Novel

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It's early April when Lionel Spark's truck collides with the creature that will become known in the tabloids as "the beast of West Pine, Oregon." The picture in *The Daily Pine* is blurry from the downpour, and Mom and I both squint at it over our Cocoa Krispies the next morning.

"Looks like a bear to me," Mom says. "Poor soul. I'll bet you anything Lionel was drunk as a skunk, too. '*Bad road conditions,*' my behind!"

Anyone growing up in West Pine practically learns to drive in a flash flood, thanks to the constant rain shadow from the Cascades. The wheels on Lionel Spark's pickup could slice through a foot of snow, let alone a little rain, without so much as a skid. It's well known amongst the good people of West Pine that the man has a knack for driving out to the bars in Eugene and knocking back whiskey sours until he can convince some pretty tourist to leave with him. Sure enough, a blonde totters on high heels next to Lionel in the photo.

I'm more interested in what's beside them, though: a hulking, black shape that's smeared across the road. Hair carpets its figure, but it looks too tall, too slim, to be a bear. It's difficult to discern too many details from the photo, but what looks to be its head is splattered across the asphalt, the brains strewn about like a dropped plate of lasagna.

“Disgusting,” Mom says, wrinkling her nose as if she can smell the carnage. “Do they even consider that people read the paper over breakfast?”

I scan the article. *It ran right out in front of me, real fast. Cheetah fast, Lionel is quoted. Scared the bejesus out of me, I thought it was a person. I tried to stop, but lost my traction in the weather. I’m just glad we’re both all right.* The headline reads: “TRUCK STRIKES MYSTERY CREATURE.”

Mom shakes her head. “I’d expect this sort of sensationalism from a trash rag, but not the *Daily*.” She sets a cup of orange juice down in front of me, and orders me to drink with that mama-bear ferocity only a single mother can muster. The cup is plastic and has Jesus plastered across the side, probably a freebie from one church function or another. The Holy Son is splayed out on the cross and his face is screwed up in agony. Somehow, the effect of his suffering is skewed by the Easter-egg pastels in which the scene is depicted. I roll my eyes.

“This is appetizing.” I nod to the cup.

“So are bear brains,” my mother retorts. “Drink your juice and throw that trash away.”

I toss the paper in the recycling as I head out the door.

At school, it takes a solid week for the mystery creature to filter out of the student body’s attention. Maggie Chase, who screws Lionel Spark on Mondays and Wednesdays after school, tells us that a reporter from the Associated Press dropped by to talk to Lionel. Rumors spread about a paranormal investigation

show coming to film an episode on the Willamette wilderness. Someone starts a Facebook group to petition for West Pine High's mascot to be changed from the West Pine Warrior to the West Pine Bigfoot. But by the following week, midterms are upon us, the theme for Prom is announced ("Soirée Beneath the Stars") and Lionel Spark's road kill becomes old news.

Ms. Calder assigns Logan Ford, certified Sex God, to be my partner for the semester project in English class, and all thoughts of anything else – the beast of West Pine included – evaporate from my mind.

For now.

* * *

"Remind me again why we're doing this?"

"Because," Katie sighs in exasperation, "we're not little punks anymore. This is Junior Prom! I'm not going to skip it based on some stupid principle."

I'm cross-legged on the turquoise beanbag chair in the middle of my bedroom and Katie looms over me authoritatively, as if the shadow her tall figure casts across my body will intimidate me into trying on evening gowns.

"You promised, Dori," she reminds me.

"Did I?" I did. She's been badgering me about it for weeks – just casually dropping it into conversation at first, and then becoming relentlessly irritating about it. I finally agreed to go with her, partially to shut her up about it, and partially as a compromise: I'd go dress shopping with her if she'd come with me

to see *Macbeth* at The Cottage Playhouse. My mother wouldn't go – she dislikes any sort of story lacking an upbeat ending – and I felt creepy showing up by myself, like one of those old guys who sit alone in the movie theater. Katie had spent most of the three hour production sighing under her breath and furtively checking her Blackberry, but she had come.

“Come on,” Katie says. She tosses my purple Converse in my direction. “Lace up, champ. We're going.”

“Wasn't it you who said – what was it? Oh yeah. That these kinds of things are a lame excuse to blow a bunch of money on a dress to make you look like an expensive prostitute, in order to get a guy to sleep with you who probably would anyway if you just showed up at his front door and asked.”

“Well,” she says, with a smug arch of an eyebrow, “you'll never grow the balls to ask Logan Ford to sleep with you, so you'll just have to do it the old fashioned way, won't you?”

In five minutes, we're pulling out of the driveway in Katie's red Toyota Corolla. Katie cranks the volume on the stereo, blasting some pop song loud enough that I can feel the bass pulsing through the car. I glance over at her out of the corner of my eye.

She looks... different. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail, with a little bit of a poof on top, and she's swapped the silver hoop in her nose for a tiny diamond stud. The blouse she's wearing – not t-shirt, but blouse – I can describe

only as expensive-looking. I shift in my seat.

Katie and I have been friends since both of us were pooping our diapers together in pre-school. I played hide-and-seek and made chunky, plastic beaded necklaces with her through the stretch pants and overall cutoffs years of our childhood, and we swapped CDs and bummed rides from Katie's mom to local indie shows together during to the plaid and band t-shirt years of our early adolescence. She once convinced me to put a magenta streak in her long blonde hair the night before her great aunt's funeral (after which the rides from Katie's mother dwindled considerably).

This *Cosmo* thing is new, though. It started innocently enough with a ridiculously overpriced and ostentatious Coach bag she got for her birthday last fall, but has been growing increasingly suspicious. The designer boots, the skintight, dark-wash denim, the flowing blouses - this is all uncharted territory coming from a girl who once claimed to have purposely wet her pants in the middle of a family dinner to escape having to share a table with her evil stepfather.

Spring is starting to bloom in earnest across the Cascades, though, and all it takes to push these gnawing thoughts to the back corner of my mind is a deep breath and an open window. We whiz past the hills and forests, and I roll down the windows to let in the spring breeze. The air is starting to warm. I hang my arm out the window, making a slicing motion, like the blade of a knife, with the

plane of my hand.

I drink in deep gulps of the wet, warm air, calming myself. Maybe Katie is right; maybe this isn't so bad after all. The thought of trying on dresses – the discomfort of wriggling in and out of sequined, poufy gowns and the harsh, unflattering glare of the fluorescent overhead lighting – makes me cringe. The prospect of catching Logan's eye, though . . . that's something else entirely.

As if reading my mind, Katie turns to me. "So, how'd that new bra work out in English today?" She grins wickedly as the blood rushes to my cheeks.

"Oh my God, you noticed?"

"Please, Dori. You were practically exploding from that shirt."

I cross my arms across my chest defensively, though the bra in question has already been swapped. I changed out of it the minute I stepped off the bus. "I wasn't *exploding*."

"Let me guess," Katie says, "Miraculous Push-Up?" It's not just a lucky guess. Katie spotted it while rooting through my closet a month ago, and has been giving me crap about it ever since.

"Be honest," I say, when I've regained my composure, "on a scale of one to ten...how miraculous was it?"

Katie laughs. "Definitely lived up to the hype, I'd say."

For the \$58 I paid for it, it had better. Not to mention that I've always felt just about as comfortable stepping into a Victoria's Secret as I would stepping

into a nest of snakes, a la *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It took every ounce of gumption I could muster to navigate through the alien racks of bow-and-lace body restraints and saleswomen attempting to wrap measuring tape around my breasts in order to buy the damn bra, so I hope to God that it will serve its purpose.

“Do you think I’m trying too hard? Is it too obvious?”

“Who cares, it’s Logan Ford! You’ve had a thing for him since like fifth grade. You’ve earned the right to play dirty. You work them boobies, girl.”

We spend the next ten minutes ruminating on the various substances we would eat off Logan Ford’s body, and are practically in tears laughing when Katie suddenly swears loudly and swerves. The seatbelt jerks across my chest as the tires of the Corolla squeal.

I look back over my shoulder. An old woman, the target of our near-accident, is crouched at the side of the road. She holds a bundle of what looks like weeds in her left hand. Honovi. I recognize her face immediately. It has the appearance and, I imagine, the texture of a crumpled paper bag. Even though she is behind us pretty quickly, her eyes snap onto mine from a distance in a way that suggests recognition. “Oh,” they seem to say. “You.” My brow furrows.

“What the hell is that woman doing skulking around in the middle of the road?” Katie’s voice shakes. Her knuckles are white as bone as she grips the steering wheel, breathing heavily.

“I don’t know. She’s lucky she didn’t become road kill lasagna like

Lionel's mystery creature," I joke, but the mirth deflates halfway through the sentence, and we sit in silence as we continue on toward Eugene.

Just the thought of Honovi's beetle eyes staring into mine gives me the willies. I'm not superstitious. I place zero stock in ghosts, magic, or even - to my mother's continued chagrin - God. But if anyone could convince me to believe in that voodoo crap, it would be Honovi. I've only actually met the old medicine woman once, but it was one of those experiences that stick to your brain like a wad of gum caught in your hair. Mom calls her a "miserable old charlatan," and occasionally sends church leaflets up to her in hopes of luring Honovi over to the side of Jesus. Usually I'm at odds with Mom on those sorts of things; but in this case, I'm inclined to agree.

I crank the window down further and hang my head out like a puppy, gulping in the fresh air. The forest zips by, the trees becoming less dense as we fly down the road. In the distance, snowcapped mountains rise above the tree line. They're particularly peaceful today. *Like sleeping giants*, I think to myself. It soothes me.

By the time we get to the mall, Katie and I are both considerably more relaxed. I survey the racks at Macy's with a critical eye. Katie is already snatching up dresses left and right, chattering about drop-hems and empire waists and sweetheart necklines. Even though I've committed to the task, the choices are overwhelming. I scan for basic black, but come up empty handed. Whatever

happened to the classic little black dress? It looks like a bag of Skittles threw up all over the Prom section. I try my best to keep an open mind, but mostly end up grabbing for gowns at random.

“What do you think?” I ask, holding up a gold cocktail dress with a cutaway back and plunging neckline.

“Too skanky,” she says, tearing her eyes away from her reflection in the mirror for maybe half a second. The marigold frock she’s snagged pops against her bronzed skin. It occurs to me that Katie must have gone tanning sometime recently. No natural skin tone is that golden in the early Oregon springtime, especially not a fair-skinned blonde’s. Weird.

I offer up a second dress, a navy blue ball gown embroidered with tiny crystals. “Verdict?”

“Not skanky enough.”

“I like this one,” I protest. And I actually do. It’s classy, and the contrast of the sparkly crystals against the deep blue satin reminds me of the night sky. Even more enticing: it’s on sale.

An image of Logan Ford flashes into my mind. He’s standing next to the punch bowl, the little spots of light that are scattered across the floor by the disco ball playing over his suited-up figure like something out of a John Hughes movie. He smiles at the sight of me, my pale skin radiant against the rich hue of the dress. A few auburn tendrils fall from my up-do to tickle my bare shoulders.

My boobs look impeccable. He has the whitest smile I have ever seen. I swear, it's blinding.

"Earth to Dori."

"Hmm?"

"I *said* do you want to go look at shoes?" Katie's hands are on her hips, and she's giving me a look like I have three heads.

"Oh, no. I'm just going to wear my silver heels." When you have the largest, flattest feet of any girl in the universe, you learn to wear your shoes until they literally fall apart - anything to save yourself the agony of combing the world over for another pair that fits.

"All right," she says. "Suit yourself, Bigfoot."

I take a sip from my water bottle, and suddenly feel a surge of gratitude toward Katie. Strange new fashion choices aside, I think, she at least hasn't given up on me yet.

"Hey," I say, as I follow the meandering Katie through the sale racks.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for forcing me to come."

"Hah! You see? I knew you had it in you."

"Yeah. You want to come over tonight?" I ask, on a stroke of inspiration.

Katie and I were inseparable as little kids. She didn't get along with her family - least of all her older sister - and spent a lot of time at my house. Dinner,

sleepovers, that sort of thing. Lately, though, we've been limited to school and quick afternoon outings like this. Between me busting my ass with schoolwork in hopes of having a decent shot at Stanford, and Katie joining the dance team, we've both been busy.

"Hmm?" Katie says. She flips the price tags on a few purses, replying without glancing up at me. "What did you say?"

"Do you want to come over tonight? I thought we could watch a movie or something. My mom has a church thing, so maybe we can do dinner, too. Make some pizza bagels."

"Um, actually, maybe some other time."

I pause. Katie continues to browse the purses. This is not the answer I expected. Katie is always complaining about my lack of social effort, my inaccessibility outside of school. She twines a lock of hair around her finger, squinting in concentration at the bag selection. The gnawing at the back of my mind takes aim and bites sharply.

"Why?" I ask.

She laughs, shaking her head. "I'm busy! What, do you think I'm reserving every time slot on my calendar to come at your every beck and call?" Katie's tone is light, but I feel like I can detect a hint of annoyance on the edge. Is she joking?

"No, I just..." I trail off. Now is not the time to be confrontational. "What

are you up to?"

"A dance thing," she says, simply.

I frown. Dance again. The West Pine High dance team is the epitome of bitchy queen bee sass. The captain is Jenny Baker, for God's sake. Katie has been dancing since she learned to stand on two feet – tap, jazz, ballet, you name it – but resisted the school dance team for years. She said her mom made her join, to bolster her activities list for college applications. I believe this, mostly.

"That sucks," I say.

"Yeah, it's stupid. I can't really get out of it, though, so you know..."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, let's beat it," she says, meeting my eyes for the first time. "I'm starving. Let's get a pretzel."

"Sure."

She saunters off toward the food court and I trail behind, watching her retreating back.

* * *

I make macaroni and cheese for dinner, a gigantic bowl of it, and settle myself on my beanbag chair with a spoon in one hand and a book in the other. It's *Frankenstein*. Not exactly the cheery fare that I would typically choose to self-medicate the anxieties that have been stewing in the back of my head since the afternoon. But it's required reading, and I figure I might as well get a head start.

Books have always been a comfort to me – a place to disappear to when the real world fails to deliver. It almost strikes me as cliché to frame it in that context. Everyone knows the token bookworm, the odd but harmless loner who’s always curled up in the corner with her nose in a book, alternating between eagerly flipping the pages and pushing her wire-rimmed glasses back up the bridge her nose. I prefer to think of myself less as the weirdo reader, and more as the cool reader. It’s not just about escape; it’s about discovery.

People in books, even the imperfect characters, or the unbelievable, or the downright unlikable ones, have a certain truth to them that’s difficult to find in the real world. There’s depth in their actions, their inactions, their words, and their silences. A person in a book never has to explain themselves to you, because all there is to know, all there is to understand about them in the context of the world in which they’re being presented, is right there on the page. Even the unreliable ones, the Holden Caulfields or Humbert Humberts, have a certain authenticity just by virtue of being all spilled out on the page like that. There are only so many black letters in so many combinations, and in the end, what you get is what you’re going to get. And books are contained. They have a beginning and they have an end; and whether or not all the mess that transpires between the first and final pages adds up to something like justice, the end almost always has a sort of poetry in it that encapsulates the whole thing. It’s neat, and it makes sense, and there’s hardly anything to worry about once the book is over.

I would never, of course, venture this assertion in front of a class full of my peers. Once, I tried it on Katie. She solemnly advised me never to divulge this particular treatise – to a male, especially – unless my life plans involved withering into a shriveled old virgin with a house stuffed full of old books and mangy cats.

Tonight, though, a part of me is looking for a bit of an escape. I skim through the opening pages of Mary Shelley’s book, not really processing (*I thought this was Frankenstein. Where’s Igor? And why are we in the North Pole?*), my mind still wrapped up around Katie. I scowl, scratching an itch on my left forearm with the base of my spoon handle. *Frankenstein*, I can’t help but think, is just fitting of all this nonsense. I think of Jenny “Barbie” Baker, resurrecting the remains of my best friend into some sort of monstrous cheerleader, cackling maniacally as lightning bolts burst around her evil, leotard-clad silhouette.

My dwelling is interrupted by three low beeps from my cell phone.

I’m a little embarrassed that two words – the name of the texter, flashing up on the screen – are able to lift me out of my funk in about half a second, after the immortal words of Mary Shelley have basically just been blurring across the page for the past thirty minutes. Then again, I doubt if any writer has ever fully captured the lyrical beauty of *Logan Ford*. Fortunately for me, at seventeen, I’m mature enough to spot infatuation when it’s wrapping its gooey tentacles around my neck, and still young enough that I don’t feel the least bit unjustified in

surrendering to its death vice.

Study date this weekend? the text reads.

The entire Olympic gymnastics team does somersaults in my stomach. My eyes read the word “date” over and over, *date date date date*. Suddenly, I forget all about my itchy arms and my shady, so-called best friend. The despair vanishes, and I am possessed again by that vision of Logan, tie tightened smartly at his collar, yet still somehow cool, casual, with his swingy hair gently grazing his eyebrows. He leans close and I can almost feel his breath on the side of my neck.

Struck by inspiration, I dive into the closet and pull out the coat bag I just stashed there a couple hours ago. I zip on the night-sky dress, and pair it with the most shocking pink lipstick I can find. I cue up iTunes, and spend the next twenty minutes dancing like a fiend to Lady Gaga. I jump on my bed. I do the sprinkler. I fist-pump the air.

It takes me a minute to dig my strappy silver heels out from the back of my closet. They’re buried under a mountain of clothes, an old purse, and the jewel case for a Hanson album. I plop onto the beanbag chair to pull them on my feet.

They’re tighter than I remember. I shove, but the straps feel like they’re about to slice my foot in thirds. I strain as I try to wriggle them on, but eventually give up. Whatever. Feet tend to be largest at night, swollen and spread from the day’s abuse. Not to mention that I’ve just done a ridiculous amount of dancing. I

shrug it off, tossing the shoes at the foot of my bed. I'll try them on again later.

Who gives a crap about shoes when I've got a date with Logan Ford?

As I change into my PJs, happiness hums through my whole body. I scratch absently at an itch on my elbow as I doze off to sleep.

* * *

The morning is gray, the sky heavy with clouds through the window in homeroom. Someone mentions a radio report issuing a flood warning, and soon everyone's chattering wistfully about being let out early. I keep to myself the reminder that the only time we've every been released before two-thirty for flooding was after Jeremy Boore "accidentally" destroyed the water main with a couple of cronies during fourth period lunch. Instead of joining in the wishful speculation, I rummage through my backpack in search of some lotion.

My skin has been crawling all morning. I can remember having an itch last night, but today the irritation is unbearable. Katie suggests eczema, hives, psoriasis, and ringworm all in the course of about three minutes while we ignore the low drone of the morning announcements over the loudspeaker. I thank her for her immensely useful diagnostic aid, to which she only replies: "At least it's on your arms and not on your cooch."

The truth is that it's everywhere. My limbs are the worst. They tingle and prick, and almost burn. Razor burn is actually the closest sensation I can relate to it, but even that is a stretch. This is considerably more intense. I fidget, and cross

and uncross my legs, but my jeans prevent me from really going at. Instead, I rake my nails over my arms vigorously. Oddly, my skin itself is clear. There is no rash, no mark of any kind, other than the red welts from my own nails.

By third period, I have already consumed about half of my mini Jergens bottle, slathering the cream onto my skin in thick, cold layers. I find myself purposely gripping my pen, a book, anything to keep my fingers occupied and not scratching. English isn't until the afternoon, but I am desperate to control myself before sitting in class for an hour with Logan three seats over. I can only imagine what he'll think if he catches me at it. No one is interested in taking some scabies-infested freak to Prom – and especially not a shaggy-haired, sad-eyed, remarkable specimen of the male teenage physique like Logan.

Katie watches me dubiously throughout the day. I try to minimize my compulsive itching in front of her, but there's no way she doesn't notice. My arms in particular are prickling, and I am so busy itching that I can just barely summon the self-restraint to raise my hand to volunteer once during each class – a marked step down from my typical participation level.

“Are you all right?” she asks, again and again, her voice more dubious than concerned each time.

By the time we're on our way to Ms. Calder's class for English, my left arm is raw from scratching.

“What is wrong with you?” Katie hisses, her fingers closing around my

wrist just as I move to itch again. I yank my arm away and shoot her a scowl.

“Quit nagging.” I slide into a seat in the middle of the second row. “My arm is killing me.” The itch is hot and prickly. It’s maddening not to scratch. It’s all I can think about. Logan smiles as he walks past my chair and sits, three seats down from me. I’m so consumed with my scratching that I almost miss the smile. “Oh, hey!” I call, a second later than is socially comfortable, flashing him what I hope is more grin than grimace. Inwardly, I kick myself.

Katie sighs, resigning herself to my weirdness. She settles into the chair next to mine, tossing her backpack onto the ground. It clunks loudly against the tile floor. In the row in front of us, Jenny Baker whips her head around and glares. She intones what I’ve come to regard as her “signature noise,” a high-pitched little huff that’s somewhere between a squeak and a sigh.

I wince. Jenny, as far as I can gather, had been perfecting this vocalization since our pre-school days. Long before Jenny became captain of the dance team, dyed her hair black (it complimented, in her words, her “sky blue eyes”), or became the most manipulative bitch ever to grace the halls of West Pine High, she was the prima donna of the West Pine Presbyterian Sunday School. She was also one of my first friends. Our mothers served together on the Women’s Board at church, a fact that they interpreted to indicate that their daughters would naturally be the best of pals.

I can recall playing Barbies with her in Kindergarten. My mother and I

were at the Bakers' house, and I had brought with me a duffle bag full of all my Barbies and accessories. With our massive array of Barbie dresses, blouses, pants, skirts, shoes, and jewelry scattered across the floor, it was difficult to keep the property straight. I accidentally picked up the wrong purple ball gown to slip Barbie into, a fact that became apparent to me only after Jenny had frozen in her administrations to her own Barbie, stared at me, and released one of those exasperated little sigh-squeaks. I politely (albeit a little confusedly) apologized and gave the dress back. Jenny merely eyed me coolly while slowly prying the head off of my poor Ken doll.

This was only the beginning of what would evolve into four years of arranged play dates, one coercive measure to enroll us in the same ballet class (a memory I have repressed too deeply to ever properly retrieve), and a complex that haunts me to this very day whenever I hear that stupid squeak pass her thin little lips.

"Excuse you," Jenny says to Katie, looking her square in the eye. I freeze mid-scratch, bracing myself for what will surely come next. Katie has many virtues, but keeping her temper is not her strongest suit. I offer a silent prayer of thanks for Jenny's obnoxiousness. In fourth grade, Katie was suspended for three days after pushing Jenny off the jungle gym upon being the recipient of the Jenny Baker squeak. Dance teammates or not, she won't let this one slide.

But instead of calling her a pretentious whore or breaking a blue pen over

her meticulously-coiffed hair, something odd happens: Katie opens her mouth, pauses, and said, "Oh – sorry Jenny."

My mind replays that afternoon on the playground, the way that Katie had smirked, holding her head high, as the recess attendant furiously dragged her to the principal's office. I cannot ignore the cold sinking in my stomach as I picture this Katie, the Katie I've known since elementary school, walking away – watching her back retreating farther and farther away from me, as I did at the mall, never to return.

Meanwhile, Jenny's face is impassive, cool – perhaps even a bit apologetic? "Whatever," she says at last, "It's fine."

I goggle at Katie, unable to believe what I have just witnessed. She avoids my eyes perhaps a bit too pointedly, focusing instead on rummaging through her backpack for the right notebook.

"All right, all right," Ms. Calder says from the front of the room. She claps her hands three times, not quickly but in a big, exaggerated gesture, like lunch ladies do in elementary school when calling for quiet. "We're starting something new today... William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*."

This announcement is met with the typical shuffling and moaning. I have mixed feelings. Although I enjoy Shakespeare, the memory of suffering through three weeks of *Romeo and Juliet* – during which Miss Calder consistently referred to Mercutio as "Ma-cur-she-oh" and bumbled through students' questions about

the text as if she had never read it or any other book written in the English language – is still fresh in my mind like a wound only partially healed, scabbed over for now but liable to be torn anew at any moment by God-knows-what kind of butchery of the poor Bard.

I lean over to Katie as Ms. Calder teeters around the room in her high heeled boots and hands out copies. “Five bucks says she thinks Lady Macbeth is referring to the dog when she says, ‘Out damned spot!’”

Katie shoots me a look as if I’ve just spoken in Greek.

“You know, when she’s coming apart at the end.”

Still, the blank stare.

“Come on, you went to the show with me! Were you asleep the whole time?”

“Seriously,” Katie whispers, “you are a weirdo. You know that?”

“Because I read?”

“And scratch yourself like animal. Stop that, already!” I realize I am raking at my scaly arm again. “You’re really starting to freak me out!”

“Says the girl who just apologized to Jenny Baker for – what? Putting your backpack on the ground? Loudly?” I can hear the sarcasm laying thick on my voice, but I find myself completely uninterested in suppressing it. I’ve never heard of a more ridiculous scenario.

Katie’s cheeks flush pink. “In her defense, I did put that bag down pretty

hard.”

“You’re full of –”

“Settle down,” Ms. Calder says, having resumed her place at the front of the classroom. She runs her fingers through her short blonde bob, raking the bangs backwards. I wonder if there are any brains located beneath that ridiculous bowl cut.

“Anyway,” Katie hisses at me out of the side of her mouth, “check out who’s staring at you again.”

My eyes flash, unbidden, toward Logan. He’s doodling absentmindedly in his notebook, his body slouched way back in his desk.

“Not him,” Katie says. “Your *stalker*.”

“Stop trying to change the subject,” I reply. But nonetheless, I peek over my shoulder.

Sure enough, there is Luke Bane. I meet his dark eyes for a moment as he looks back at me, but as soon as our gazes connect he turns his head toward Ms. Calder. His face is neutral, betraying not even the remotest hint of shame or embarrassment at being caught staring at me.

I have known Luke – or, rather, Luke has been around – since junior high. New kids are rare in West Pine. It’s not exactly a booming center of commerce. As such, every time a new student arrives, he or she is on the student body’s radar for at least a couple of weeks. Luke was no exception. He was a year ahead

of me - I was in sixth grade, he was in seventh - but even I heard the rumors and gossip that dogged him from the moment he showed up out front of the school halfway through October. As usual, Jenny Baker (I am convinced she will grow up to be either an ex-Victoria's Secret model or a reporter for some sort of trashy gossip magazine - probably both) made sure the whole school heard. He was an orphan. He had been in Juvie. He was part Indian and had been expelled from his last school for threatening a kid with a tomahawk. He was actually in his late teens but had been held back so many times for being an idiot that he was still in junior high.

The last part of this string of gossip seems the most plausible - mostly because, one, Luke is very tall; and two, he did in fact flunk the seventh grade. That was how he wound up in my class the following year, and that was where the stalking began. It wasn't anything too exaggerated - no creepy phone calls, no notes slipped into my locker, no secret messages pinned to my bedroom window in the middle of the night, not even a sense that he was in any way following me - just the fact that whenever he's around, he looks at me. It isn't even so much that he leers or undresses me with his eyes or anything overtly creepy like that; it's more of a watchfulness, a repeated acknowledgment of my presence.

The image of Honovi staring after us on our way to Eugene flashes quickly to mind, and I shiver, pushing the thought away.

“You’d better be careful,” Katie says. “That’s the kind of kid who goes through school all creepy-but-innocent, and then just snaps one day and goes Columbine on our asses.”

“I’m sure he’s harmless,” I reply. Really, though, who knows? It is impossible to gauge the validity of any of the rumors, as Luke himself is perhaps the most stoic kid ever to pass through the West Pine school system. Whatever his motivations, his back-story, his demons, he keeps them to himself.

“You say that *now*. Don’t tell me you don’t think he’d jump at the chance to rape you behind the locker room the second the opportunity arose.”

“That’s *enough*, girls!” Ms. Calder snaps. Katie and I both turn our heads back to the front of the classroom. I had forgotten that Miss Calder was even speaking. After a while, her words all tend to blend together in a monotonous, grinding drone.

As I guiltily flip through my book to Act I, Katie takes one last jab at my side with her pencil. I turn to brush her off, but am halted by the look on her face. “Quit. Scratching,” she mouths. Her eyes are wide with fear and disgust.

I glance down and my stomach flips over. Three little points of blood are blooming from my arm, where I have scratched, unconsciously, clear through the skin.

* * *

“It’s probably just eczema,” Mrs. Lenore says. I suppress the sharp cry

that threatens to escape my throat as, without warning, she sprays some sort of alcohol or antibacterial solution onto the open sores.

“Are you sure?” I wince. She barely looked at it when I showed her. I’ve never been to the nurse’s office in high school, but I can clearly remember the plump, smiling nurse from my elementary school days. She was a cheerful lady with a round face who gave out lollipops and early dismissal slips. This Lenore woman, on the other hand, is narrow and horsy, her whole face pinched as if from spending too many years around antiseptic and teenage boy B.O.

“Here, she says,” shoving some Band-Aids into my hands. “Put a bandage on it and go back to class.”

“But...” I begin.

“You have less than one period left.”

“I’m not trying to get out of class, I just want to make sure that...”

“NEXT.”

I’m in such a huff as I blow out the door that I run straight into the guy standing outside the office. I yell like an idiot and he stumbles back, winded. “Sorry,” I mutter. Only then do I get a look at his face, and nearly puke with embarrassment as I realize that it’s Logan.

“In a rush to get back to class?” he grunts, a hand on his diaphragm.

“Sorry,” I say again. My mouth suddenly feels full of cotton. Stupid, stupid.

“Are you all right?” he asks. “Not contagious, are you?”

“No. I – it’s nothing. Just – um – I just didn’t feel that good.” My inner elocutionist rages against my thick skull, kicking and pounding and screaming at my brain to quit dematerializing and to start churning out witty – or at least comprehensible – sentences. “I’m fine now, though.” *You’re with me*, I internally finish with a sappy sentiment worthy of a *Lifetime* television special. I’m gripped by a sudden fantasy that the rumored flash flood is indeed on the brink of ravaging the school, arriving any second now to wash me away to a merciful death rather than leaving me to endure this misery.

“About that study date...” Logan says, interrupting my reverie. I mentally shake out the cobwebs. My legs itch and crawl like a bitch. I desperately attempt to imagine that my feet are cemented to the ground, and my hands are sewn into the pockets of my hoodie.

Stay cool. “Yes! Yes. Definitely.” I grin my best non-spazz grin.

He scratches the back of his neck. “You’re sure you’re not, like, too sick?”

“No. I mean, yes. Yes, I’m sure I’m not sick. At all.” His concern brings a warm hum to my body. I firmly remind myself that this sympathy is only partially out of an interest in my well being, and probably mostly out of fear for jeopardizing his own health. After all, he did see me scraping at my skin like a mental patient all English class. Still, the fluttering in my stomach is hard to shake. “This weekend, you said?”

“I was thinking we could do something outside. You know, since it’s nice out and all.” Logan has always struck me as more of an indoor kid, with his hipster style and fierce dedication to his band, the Crazy Horses. But just the thought of trekking through the spring woods with him, the glow of the sun on his lightly-tanned skin, the breeze blowing his hair more perfectly than the fan the Crazy Horses set up behind them at every show, is enough to make my knees turn to putty.

“Sure,” I reply, trying not to sound too breathless. “Sounds awesome.”

“You wanna go biking? Like, out in the Willamette wilderness? There are some pretty sick trails around that area that I could take you on.”

“Yeah, awesome.” Great – my second “awesome” in under a minute. Classy.

Logan doesn’t seem to notice. He flashes those perfect teeth and bobs his shaggy head. “All right, cool.”

“Cool!” I say. “That sounds like an awesome time.” Again!

“Great. I’ll text you, Dori.”

“Okay!” My heart returns slowly to its normal pace as he gives me a little wave and then turns back down the hallway. He walks a few yards, stops, turns, and gestures to my purple Chucks.

“Cool shoes,” he says.

I just stand there for a while, forgetting how to unstick the feet I’ve glued

to the floor. I think about every scintillatingly acerbic comment I've ever made about *Twilight* or any romance starring Julia Roberts. I can't decide whether I'd rather slap myself hard across the face or start designing wedding invitations with little calligraphy "D & L"s.

Screw the rain. If this keeps up, I'll be nothing but one giant puddle, flooding the tiled halls of West Pine High. Maybe then, at least, I won't need to worry about itching anymore.

* * *

"What's the matter, honey, are you allergic to something?"

Try as I might, I cannot help but scratch at the dinner table. I switched to shorts the second I walked in the door to better access my legs, and the temptation to relieve my agony is too much to withstand.

"No, I'm fine, Mom. It's just an itch."

"Oh no, it's not the shellfish is it?" For a moment her eyes, ablaze with a terrible fear and horror, cast upon the shrimp scampi we're eating for dinner - presumably at the thought of her home-cooked meal poisoning her only daughter to death.

"No! No, Mom, it's fine. It's just a little bit of dry skin."

"Are you sure, Dori?" She stands up and starts rounding the table. "Here, honey, let me see."

"Mom!" I spring back, nearly knocking the chair over, as she stoops down

as if to examine my thighs. "Jesus! Stop! I told you I'm all right!"

"Well don't act like I'm trying to bite you!"

"I'm fine!"

"And for goodness' sake, *don't* take the name of the Lord in vain."

"Mom! For once in your life, please, just let it go."

The look on her face makes me immediately regret losing my temper. It's like a curtain dropping over her expression. She doesn't look angry, or even particularly sad – just blank, closed off.

I struggle to find the right words as she returns to her seat, sits, and delicately adjusts the napkin on her lap. "Mom, I'm sorry. I just..."

"No. You're right. You're seventeen now." She smiles tightly. It doesn't quite extend to her eyes. "You're a big girl. I know I breathe down your neck too much."

"It's okay."

We pick at our food in silence.

"I can give you some hydrocortisone cream to put on it later, if it's still bothering you. Only if you want it, though," she adds softly, avoiding my face.

"Nah, that's all right. I have lotion. It's not bad," I lie, keeping my voice light. "Mostly it just feels like razor burn. You know, like an ingrown hair or something."

She glances up at me sharply, fixing me with something in her eyes that I

don't recognize. Her fork pauses halfway between the plate and her mouth, but only for a second. The moment passes as quickly as it came.

"What?" I ask.

She continues eating. "Hmm?"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, baby. Could you pass the pepper, please?"

* * *

In my dreams, I fly through the Willamette forest. The night air kisses my face as I run, and I dodge tree limbs and felled logs with the grace of a ballerina. I lean to dip my lips into the cool waters of a stream, and when I rise from quenching my thirst, Lady Gaga is looking back at me. She is decked head-to-toe in a shaggy fur bodysuit.

"Looking fierce, Gaga," I tell her.

"Thanks, Little Monster."

* * *

I rise with the sun and stretch like a cat. There's something about the way the sun angles low through my window and creeps across the bed that fills me with a strange energy, sending happy little vibrations humming through my body. It's Friday and it's warm out, and the air that flows in through the window smells green. More importantly, it's group-work day in English. I already have a skirt picked out.

I practically skip to the bathroom, stripping down and hopping in the shower. The water caresses me as I lather my hair and then my body, letting my soapy hands run down the length of my torso. I imagine Logan's breath on my shoulder as we lean together over our stack of books and notes, imagine him breathing in the scent of my Pomegranate Mango body wash, imagine him trying not to stare at how killer my gams look that skirt. I run my hands down to said legs. I freeze. Something is not right. I look down, and shriek.

My legs are coated in thick, dark hair. Like, man hair. It's long enough to curl. I barely resist the urge to jump out of the shower, run naked to the kitchen, and chop off these alien legs that have replaced my own. I rack my brain. It can't have been *that* long since I shaved.

It takes me no less than twenty minutes and what I swear must be half a bottle of shaving cream to remove the growth from my legs. It clogs the drain, and I nearly sob as I fish the matted mess out with my fingers. There's barely time to toss on the skirt and a top and grab my bag before speeding off to school.

Trying my best to drive with one eye and hand, I apply what makeup I can in the rearview mirror. My mission is accomplished without driving off the road to a fiery death, and I only poke myself in the eye with the mascara applicator once, but none of this can save my scraggily wet hair or my shattered mood.

"You all right, Dori?" Logan asks later, as I halfheartedly shuffle through

notes with him. "You seem a little stressed out today." Bless his soul. Not that "seem a little stressed out" isn't code for "look like a hot mess." But still.

We're supposed to be organizing citations for our semester project, which entails leading a class discussion on a "controversial issue" in *Frankenstein*. Normally I would be prepared with half the quotes we needed, all printed on hot pink index cards and filed in a box; but the unexpected morning delay has set me back further than I anticipated, and the truth is, we still don't actually have a controversial issue, per say. I rifle through the pages, tossing a few random suggestions at Logan. He drums his pencil on the edge of the desk and shrugs and smiles at every option I give him. "Do you have any ideas?" I finally ask.

"Nah. We still on for the weekend?"

"Huh?" Blood pours into my cheeks. "Oh - yeah, definitely."

One of the hazards of being a redhead is that I constantly wear my emotions on my face. The mere thought of being put in an embarrassing situation is enough to send a hot flush burning across my face. I hope it's not too obvious.

"Good, good. We could pack some food and our books and ride out there on Saturday, if you want to make a day of it."

It has dawned on me since our prior exchange that I am physically incapable of riding a bicycle without crashing headfirst into the bushes - but Logan looks so cute in his Muse shirt with his messy boy hair and that smile of

his that I can hardly say no.

I grin throughout the rest of class, and almost forget about the horror of my morning, until my hand brushes up against my thigh. My throat contracts. I peek down. Impossible. It's like my legs have developed a five o'clock shadow. I can't focus for the rest of the period. I know that what I should be most afraid of is the fact that there is something seriously wrong with me – a hormone imbalance, some sort of strange, hairy-leg disease? – but all I can think about is Logan gagging when he sees my scrubby legs. This is not how this is supposed to happen. I cannot start turning into some frightening, French-vegan-manwoman just when things are finally starting to come together with Logan.

I wave Logan to go ahead without me when class is over, feigning staying after to talk to Ms. Calder, so as not to expose him to my beastly legs. Vaguely, I register the little nod Katie gives me before walking out, side by side with Jenny Baker. It feels like a stone has plopped right in the middle of my stomach.

When the coast is clear, I race to the locker room and dig the extra sweatpants out from the back of my gym locker. I don't care if they reek of grass and old sweat. As I pull them on, my hand brushes against something that makes my stomach plummet through the floor: my lower back is now coated with thin, coarse hair. I punch the metal door shut with a clang that reverberates through the locker room.

“Ouch!” I yelp out a curse as I cradle my sore hand, tears of frustration

spilling down my cheeks. I am practically hyperventilating as I sink to the floor, arms gripped tightly around my knees. The hair on them is darker, too – not thick enough to curl, like on my legs, but a deeper auburn, far darker than the almost invisible red wisps that typically line them. “What is happening to me?”

No gym classes are scheduled for the last period of the day, so I hide out on the locker room floor until the bell rings. My phone vibrates in punctuated bursts – Katie, a watery glance confirms – but it goes off only twice before she presumably gives up. Jenny Baker. My mind casts itself involuntarily back to the mall. *A dance thing...Yeah, it's stupid.* Yeah, right. And here I am, balled up on the floor, alone, turning into Wolf Girl while Katie plays dress up with Jenny Baker. I think I might be physically ill.

Only the threat of the girls’ lacrosse team showing up for afternoon practice can motivate me to finally drag myself from the floor, my arms gripping across my chest and clinging tightly to the baggy old tracksuit. Tears blur my vision all the way home, undoing the work I completed during my ride in the opposite direction. Mascara and eyeliner stream in black rivers down my cheeks.

This afternoon cannot get any worse, I think, slamming the car door behind me and hoping that with half an ounce of luck Mom will leave me mercifully alone.

Luck, of course, has never really been my strong suit.

Honovi greets me at my doorstep. The old Indian is sitting on the porch

swing, perched so stilly that I don't see her until she speaks.

"Bad day?"

I jump, dropping my keys. "Jesus! What are you doing here?" I wipe an arm across my snotty, besmeared face in an attempt to make myself decent.

She smiles, baring her yellow teeth. "Better not let your mama hear you talk like that. She takes that Jesus very seriously!"

I wonder if Mom even knows that Honovi is sneaking around out here. Briefly, I entertain the silly fear that she has come to hex me for almost mowing her down with Katie the other day. I consider apologizing, but before I can form the words into a coherent sentence, she says, "You look like you could use some calming. Care for a sip?" She pulls a flask from the folds of the tatty flowered sack that swims around her frame. I eye it suspiciously, wondering what kind of potion it could be.

"What is that?" I ask. "Some sort of tonic?"

"Whiskey," she says, laughing. "Takes the edge off." Her voice is like sandpaper, and I consider suggesting that being spared from her presence might be the best medicine at the moment.

"Look. Is there something I can do to help you?"

She tut-tuts, an effect produced by sucking her tongue against the back of her teeth. "No need to be rude, child. I came here to help you. But if you don't want my help, you don't need to take it. I have a whole list of things to fetch

today!" She produces said list, scribbled in some sort of shorthand on the back of an envelope, from her dress.

Honovi is obsessed with lists. They scatter her shop, scraps of paper stacked on tabletops and pinned to the wall, listing ingredients to be purchased, payments to be made, and appointments to keep. As weird as she is, the woman does a good amount of business. In addition to the Native American remedies she hawks to tourists and other holistically-minded folk, Honovi is known among the teenaged crowd as the best and only source of recreational drugs. Marijuana. Shrooms. Salvia. That sort of thing.

She runs her business from a cabin out in the boonies. It's tucked away down a dirt path off the main road that looks like something you'd see in an axe-murderer flick, with a hand-painted wooden sign pointing the way to "Honovi's Medicine Shoppe" hammered into the ground by the turnoff. Katie and I ventured down there in junior high to buy some weed. I remember the shop as a jumble of oddities, like the National Voodoo Museum threw up all over it. Vials lined every surface, some filled with clear liquids, others with what looked like the organs of small forest critters. There was a whole shelf of religious relics – crucifixes, locks of animal and human hair she claimed came from various deities and holy beings, and other assorted trash that allegedly held sacred powers. Honovi also reads palms, tarot cards, and psyches. She offered to throw in a free reading for Katie and me, but I've never been into that mumbo jumbo. Katie

thought it was a funny marketing tool, using her success as a dealer to draw clientele into the business she actually wanted to run. I just found it disturbing.

I scrunch up my nose at the leering woman. "Help me how?"

"Let's just say I'm an expert at guiding people through... hairy situations."

My heart thuds in my chest. How could she know? I remember the way her eyes locked on to mine the other afternoon. Perhaps she *did* hex me, and now she is offering to remove the curse.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask.

"I want you to come with me."

* * *

Honovi leads me into the mountains. Following a gnarled, old, narcotics-peddling medicine woman into the forest is probably not the best idea I've ever had, but the carpets of hair itch and bulge beneath my clothing. If Honovi asks me to sacrifice a bunny rabbit to Satan, I will gladly hold out my hand for the knife and butcher it on the spot.

Eventually, we reach a small clearing, tucked up against a cliff. Honovi directs me to lean my back against the rock face as she sits Indian style before me, plopping her satchel on the ground.

"Sit," she commands. I fold my legs beneath me on the mossy forest floor.

"Breathe."

"Excuse me?"

“Breathe.”

I close my eyes and inhale the scent of the mountains. “Umm, yeah. Breathing. Now what?”

“Shhh! No, *breathe*. Deep.”

I suck in another breath, this time slow and even, like a yogi. The air is crisp. It tastes like water, like snow melting off the glaciated peaks. As I breathe, I can suddenly picture it so clearly that it’s as if my brain is wired to a video camera, hovering over the Cascades. I can see the white peaks glimmer in the sunshine, and feel a very particular set of snowflakes sweat in little rivulets down from an apex. I can almost taste each drop as they run together in a trickle, and I slide down the mountain with it as it flows ever more strongly into a stream, a tributary that feeds into bigger streams that feed into the Columbia, until those little snowflakes shoot out into the river’s teeming waters.

I can see the Chinook salmon that wriggle their way upstream, and taste the icy meat of their flesh as a bear bites into them. I feel the refreshment of the elk that drinks from the river, the warm thermals that swell beneath the wings of the hawk circling above. I feel the tight, cool press of the earth that wraps around all the creatures that crawl beneath it, and the comfort of the hemlock where meadowlarks are nesting. Somewhere in a valley, a swallowtail butterfly lights upon a wildflower; and I can feel the tickle of its spindle legs as if the petals were my own arms.

Honovi's voice grates through my vision. "You feel it?"

I gasp, jerking back to the here and the present. My head is swimming.

"Holy shit."

She chortles, throwing back her head so that her long braid snaps over her shoulder like a whip. "Now do you think I'm crazy?"

"What is going on? What's wrong with me?"

Honovi fishes in her sack, and pulls out yet another list. She flips it over, and I realize that it is printed on the back of a newspaper clipping. Nodding with satisfaction, she pushes the scrap into my hands. I recognize it instantly. Lionel Spark and his bimbo stare back at me, the splattered carcass looming up behind them.

"I don't understand."

"That's your papa."

"Lionel Spark? He's a horndog all right, but he'd have had to get with my mom when he was like six years old in order for that to be possible." No one is that disturbed.

"I'm not talking about Lionel Spark." Her crooked finger taps against the photo.

My eyes dilate as I realize what she is pointing to. "No."

Tap, tap, tap. "Yes."

"No. No way. That... that *thing* is my dad?"

Honovi nods.

I laugh. Not a chance. I can accept turning into a manbeast. I can accept having some sort of out-of-body, pseudo-psychic experience. Those things, there could be explanations for. But this is just absurd.

“Don’t laugh. It is a great tragedy. Your father was very important, and very old. I have known him since I was a tiny girl, and my Mama knew him since she was also small. He protected the forest. Here, and across all of these mountains. Now he is gone. This stupid man,” she spits, gesturing to Lionel, “killed him. There is no other like him. Now the forest reaches out to you. You are half *skookum*. You must take his place.”

By now, I am practically in hysterics. I laugh until my sides ache. I laugh until tears run down my face, and I’m not sure if I am still laughing or just choking on my fear.

“Do not laugh,” Honovi repeats.

“I’m sorry, but what am I supposed to do? You’re telling me that my father was some sort of animal? Some sort of prehistoric bear-man or something?”

“He was not a bear. He was *skookum*. Sasquatch.”

My mouth gapes open. “Bigfoot. My dad was Bigfoot. Will you listen to yourself? How the hell is that even possible?”

The old woman smiles. “Your Mama was not always such a good girl. She

came out into the forest with wild men, before you were born. She was drunk with youth and cheap liquor.”

“Drunk enough to screw a monster? Somehow I doubt that.”

“He was not a monster. He was a guardian. It was nighttime, and she was confused. She thought he was another man. When I found him, I brought him away at once. She does not realize her mistake.”

I am speechless.

“Your feet have always been big, yes? And now you are changing. Soon you will grow. Your body will adapt to the forest. You must be strong. You must be able to withstand the cold, and to blend in among the trees.”

“Blend in?” My pitch rises to a near screech, causing a few birds to scatter out of the ponderosa pine beside us. It doesn’t help that I find myself miraculously able to feel the flutter of their wings on my face, even from so far below. “Blend *in*? Listen, lady, it’s painful enough trying to navigate through high school without turning into a freaking monster! I don’t care about the goddamned forest. I don’t care about the goddamned telepathic-nature-communion, or whatever the hell powers I seem to have spontaneously developed. And I don’t care if my father was a goddamned gorilla! All I need to do is get through this... figure out some way to at least get through my date this weekend with Logan Ford, which, by the way, is going to be pretty difficult if *I’m sprouting foliage thicker than the Willamette wilderness across my goddamn body*. That

is the opposite of blending in!"

Honovi shrugs. I have a strong urge to hit her, but she is an old lady and I'm still somewhat suspicious of her casting a spell on me.

"Can you help me stop this, or not?"

"It's already happening. I do not know how long it will take, but I can't stop it."

"Well then." I can feel my vocal cords strain, the sinews in my neck growing tight. "I guess we're done here." I spring to my feet, practically spitting with rage, and stomp off through forest. I crack every felled limb I can step on with my gargantuan feet, relishing the sound of splintering wood.

"You can't stop the change," she calls after me. "You can slow it, if you resist, but it will happen anyway. And it will be far easier if you adapt willingly."

"Adapt my ass!" I call over my shoulder. "There is a perfectly logical explanation for this, and I am going to find it."

"You already know that I am telling the truth."

"Fuck you, you crackhead charlatan. We should have run you over when we had the chance." I am practically sprinting now, intent on leaving Honovi in the dust.

"Then who would you have to help you?" she calls out.

The camera in my mind switches on again, unbidden, and I can see her yellow smile, and feel the earth compress beneath her moccasins as she pads

away. She pulls out a pencil and scratches out an item on one of her innumerable lists. It has my initials, *D.T.*, and, scrawled beside them, *S'QUATCH*. Just another shorthand note, jotted down beside reminders to pick up more rhododendron petals and meet with her six o'clock palm reading appointment. The words are as clear in my head as if Honovi were holding them under my nose. As clear as the wolverine gnawing on some abandoned carrion to the north, or the slow breath of a spotted owl roosting high in a Douglas fir above my head. *D.T.*, *S'QUATCH*.

I clamp my hands over my ears and clench my eyes shut as I run. My feet navigate the maze of rocks and branches and trees. I do not stumble.

* * *

My fingernails rasp against my upper leg through my jeans as I sit in the waiting room. Catching myself, I clasp both hands together in my lap and try not to breathe in that institutional smell. I hate doctors' offices. Even the music is sterile. One flip-flop (the only shoes that I can now fit on my feet) jiggles from the end of my toes as I fidget in the low-backed chair.

Dr. Guiliardi is out sick, and I'm told that I'll be meeting with a Dr. McSuber instead. McSuber turns out to be a man. As if it wouldn't have been embarrassing enough to talk to a female I actually know about my unusual body hair.

Dr. McSuber's mustache enters the room before he does. It's about half a foot long and curls up at the end, evoking some French villain in an old cartoon.

“Hi there, sweetie,” he says as he plods into the examining room. “You can call me Dr. Mack.” Great. I rack my brain for any memory I might have of this man from Dateline. “Your file says that you’ve been experiencing problems with...” he glances down at the folder in his hand, raising his glasses a little and peering beneath them “... unusual bodily developments?”

“Yes.” I am distracted by an illustration of a black bear hanging on the wall behind him. He has this sort of manic leer on his face, and his front paws are thrown up in the air as he bares his snaggleteeth. My stomach turns, and I wonder what sort of sick cosmic force (beyond Hovoni’s mystical forest powers) is out to get me.

“What exactly seems to be the problem?”

If I’ve already come all the way down here, I may as well get on with it. “I’m experiencing, well, hair growth. On my body.”

“Ahhh.” He nods. “Hair growth can be scary at first,” he says, in a voice that one might use to speak to a small child, “especially in places where there wasn’t hair before. But it’s perfectly normal. All part of growing up!”

Oh, gag me. It takes all of my willpower not to run, screaming, out the door. “No. That is not what I mean.” I thought that awkward period-talk stage ended six years ago. Apparently not. “I’m talking about hair in other places. Like, where it shouldn’t be.”

“Is there a possibility that you could be pregnant?”

“No.”

“On birth control?”

“No.”

He frowns. “Hmm. Mind if I take a look?”

“No!” The objection springs from my mouth with such ferocity that I almost feel sorry, and I flush. “Sorry. I mean, I’d just prefer to, you know, not.”

He smiles. “It’s all right, Dori. You probably have nothing to worry about. Just remember, hair is a perfectly normal part of all of our bodies. It sounds like you might have a little more than some people do, but a stray, longer or darker hair here and there won’t hurt anyone. Just pluck them out if they bother you. No harm done.”

I picture the forest that is currently spreading across my back, and imagine plucking out each little hair with the tweezers. Dr. Mack will be of no use to me. I try to muster a smile. “Thanks, doctor,” I say, my voice limp and distant in my own ears.

He beams at me. “Here,” he says, holding out a red lollipop, “have a sucker.”

* * *

I cancel the date with Logan.

The sky is streaked with pink as I stand beneath it in the backyard. It’s beautiful. A little flicker cuts through my consciousness, and for a moment I’m

soaring through the air, my wings bolstered up on a warm thermal. My heart hammers in my chest, and I shake my head fervently until I'm positive that my feet are planted squarely on the ground. *This is crazy, Dori, I think. You're crazy. You're really going insane.*

The message is already typed out on my cell. I stare at the little blue phone in my hand for a long time as the cursor blinks at the end of the text: "Not feeling too hot, sorry I have to bail on tomorrow. Soon, though! Please?" I consider deleting the "please." I don't want to sound too desperate, after all. But I am desperate, so I press send anyway before my psychotic brain can convince me not to; and then I fall back against the trunk of the big tree I'm standing beside, and all my energy feels sapped from my body.

My eyes fall shut. I'm sprinting through the woods. It smells so good, so green. The dirt is cool beneath my feet.

"Urgh!" I launch my phone at the ground, breathing hard. It sticks in the soft, wet ground.

I want to call Katie. I want to tell her everything that's happening to me, to ask her what to do. I want her to recommend me waxing products and depilatories. I want my old life back.

My old life. Whatever that means. Honovi says it's in my blood. It doesn't get much more real than that.

I know what I have to do, but of course I don't want to do it. Only after I

pry my phone from the mud, spend forty-five minutes meticulously cleaning out every possible crack and crevice on its figure with a pack of toothpicks, and take a long, hot shower, do I finally walk into the kitchen and sit down at the table across from my mother.

She's flipping through a Macy's catalogue and drinking tea from a big, oversized mug. I try to imagine her cavorting with a giant forest creature. She circles a pale lavender sweater embroidered with tiny, crystalline beads. Nope. Not possible. It just isn't.

I can feel the hair lying thick under the sleeves of my hoodie, though, and I can no longer put it off.

"Mom," I say, my voice calm and steady, "I need you to tell me about my father."

Her eyes, large and round, rise to meet mine. "Your father."

I try not to visibly gulp. "Yes. My father."

She busies herself with the catalogue, quickly circling items at an alarming speed. I cannot imagine that she's actually looking at any of them. "We've talked about your father before. That's in the past, sweetheart. I thought you were comfortable with that. No looking behind," her voice falls into a singsong.

"Always focus the gaze ahead."

"I want the truth."

The truth. The truth is that, whether or not I want to believe that my father

is Bigfoot, I have known since a very young age that he was not, in fact, a soldier that went off into battle and was killed heroically in some unspecified war. That was the second story my mother told me about my father.

The first, of course, was the traditional fare with the stork. I read a lot even as a little kid, and had a huge imagination – but even I wasn't inventive enough to be gullible to that load of crap.

After we did Heroes Day in school, my mother made amends for telling me that my father had not only died in battle but that he'd been heavily decorated for it – a fact that I had relayed to the entire school before my teacher, wiser than I, sent a cautiously-worded letter to Mom asking her not to indulge her daughter in lies and fantasies.

I spent the greater part of elementary school believing that I was immaculately conceived – a word I recognized from church when my mother said it, but had no clue as to what it meant -- until fourth grade rolled around, and my beautiful illusion was shattered. The last time I asked about my father was on this occasion, so many years ago.

At school, we had just watched "The Movie." It's a traumatizing experience for any kid – the graphic images that hold our gaze like a car crash, the embarrassed squirming while previously benign teachers say shocking words like "penis" and "vagina," the vague sense of dread as we all try to block the inevitable slide reel of our parents clunking together in some awkward,

pornographic tableaux. This last part, for me, left the most jarring impression; not because I was traumatized at the thought of my sweater-set-wearing mother performing sexual acts, but because that image – for better or worse, I couldn't say, but certainly to the provocation of my curiosity – was only half complete. I now had scientific evidence to support my suspicions that the empty space where my father might have been was not just a void, but a tangible vacancy. There was a bracket around that unoccupied air that denoted the space where my father once had been. Half of me, according to the video, was donated by a man – a man I had never met, but one whom, now that I was assured of his existence, I itched to discover more about.

The trouble, of course, is how to go about asking your mom who “did it” with her over a decade ago.

She was not waiting for me at the end of the driveway when I got off the bus that afternoon. This was unusual, but not unpleasant. In kindergarten, I loved bounding down the school bus steps and into my mother's waiting arms. By third grade, I still appreciated the gesture but began to grow wary of folding into her hug while twenty pairs of eyes leered out the window at me. By this point, I dreaded the daily choice between disappointing her by hurrying past, and playing along at the risk of tomorrow's jeers.

“Does she still wipe your poopy butt?” Jenny Baker would ask in a whiny drawl that made me want to rip her blonde pigtails right out of her skull.

I figured Mom was preparing my after-school snack or maybe caught up on the phone with Gram. I was surprised to find her sitting at the kitchen table. She had a glass of iced tea in front of her and was flipping through a book entitled *Daily Devotionals for the Godly Woman*.

I dropped my bag to the floor and slid onto the chair across from her. She smiled at me a little – a quick glance and a tight stretching of the corners of her mouth – and then continued to rifle through the book. I glanced around. There was no snack in sight. Mom took a little sip of her tea and then said, “Oh!” She nodded in the direction of the pantry. “Why don’t you grab a pack of peanut butter crackers from the pantry, Dori.” I rose, bemused. “Pour yourself a glass of milk, too,” she added; and then, as a quiet afterthought, “You need your calcium.”

I moved to the cabinet and found the crackers in question. It was unlike my mother to serve a snack that came pre-wrapped in cellophane, but I was too consumed by the question that threatened to leap from my mouth at any second to care or even to notice very much.

I sat at the table and ate my crackers, barely aware of the taste as I transferred each from the package to my mouth, chewing robotically as Mom began to chatter about the weather and her plans for dinner. It was not until I finished the last drop of milk from my glass and could delay no longer that I finally opened my mouth, took a deep breath, and said: “I know I have a Dad.”

My mother froze. She had been mid-sentence in a debate with herself about whether or not she wanted to serve chicken or pasta for dinner when my outburst interrupted her. Her mouth was still open and she hadn't yet bothered to close it.

"I want to know where he is," I added quickly, before my nerve could fail me. "Who he is."

My request hung suspended in the air between us for a moment. Mom's lips had pressed back together, but she was silent. Her fingers wrapped slowly around the side of her glass as she inhaled, her eyes squeezing shut. In my chest, my heart jackhammered against my ribcage with an almost painful persistence. Had I crossed the line? I knew she had lied to me, had been withholding this vital information for years; but still a fleeting panic jolted through my chest, as if she might wheel back her hand and slap me at any moment.

Instead, she opened her eyes and raised the glass, tilting the amber liquid into her throat. She exhaled deeply as she replaced it on the table, and my nose wrinkled at the sharp smell that suddenly stung my senses.

"This is about the movie, isn't it honey?" she said at last.

I nodded.

She took another gulp of her drink, wincing slightly. It occurred to me for the first time that perhaps the liquid in the glass was not, in fact, iced tea.

"I knew this was a bad idea." She shook her head. "I should have pulled

you out of class. Fourth graders..." Now her voice was trailing away from me, addressing no one in particular. "The way society is forcing kids to grow up so fast. It's indecent." She had not spoken to the air like this for many months, and it made an inexplicable chill run through my bones.

The telephone rang. I jumped in my chair. Mom made no move to answer it. "Should I pick it up?" I asked quietly.

"No. No, let it ring." She finished her drink. "If it's important, they'll leave a message." She gazed down at her empty glass for a long time before she spoke. "Listen, baby. The world - well, it isn't always the nicest place. You know how we talk about sin?"

I nodded.

"Well, sin isn't just something we do because we're bad because. People who have good hearts, good souls - those people are the ones the Devil is the most jealous of. He can't understand what it's like to be a good, pure, happy person, and that makes him angry. He puts traps out in the world, obstacles to trip us up and try to make those good people do bad things. You understand, baby?"

"Yes." I didn't, though. All this was familiar from Pastor Jim's weekly sermons, but I couldn't understand how it connected to my father.

She continued. "There are people and things out there that will try to trick us, to lead us astray. It's our job as Christians to be strong, and to stay away from

this darkness. Sometimes, though," she paused for a moment, not meeting my eyes, "Sometimes we screw up. Sometimes we lose our way in the forest, and when that happens it can be awfully hard to find our way out."

"Did you get lost?"

"Yes, baby. For a long time I did."

"What happened?"

"It doesn't bear saying, Dori. But listen, eventually I found the light again. I found God, and he helped lead me out of the dark - to this life, to you. You changed everything. You were my second chance."

I frowned. "So what about my dad? He was from the... the bad time?"

"Yes. That's why it's not important for us to talk about him. We're different, Dori. We're living in the light. And we're safe, and you're healthy and happy. Right, baby? I just don't want to expose you to the same evils I faced. That's in the past now."

"Was he a bad man?"

"Yes."

"So half of me is bad."

"No, no Dori. You're good. You're a good girl, you're my good girl."

"But if my dad is bad..."

"God is your Father, Dori. God is your real Father, not some ghost from the past. Listen. I love you, very much. There are good things in this world, too."

Let's focus on them, all right? Forget the past." She held her arms out. I went to her, letting myself be folded in. "I love you, Dori. I just love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

"Dori?"

"Yes?"

"Let's not talk about him anymore. All right?"

And I didn't. I haven't, even after all this time.

But I can't shake the thought, now. *Half of me is bad.* Half of me is not even human. As much as I cannot bring myself to believe Honovi, what other possibility do I have?

I feel sorry for Mom. Her face is very white. For the first time, I notice her freckles. They're minuscule, tinier and paler than my own, almost translucent against her creamy skin.

"Please," I say. "I just want the truth."

Mom is silent for a moment. She opens her mouth, closes it again, and then squares her shoulders and faces me. "Listen, Dori," she says, "I know this might be hard for you to believe, but before I found the Lord, I went through some rough times."

I try to picture my mother as a raging alcoholic, partying in the woods with a bunch of hippies, but it just won't compute. This is a woman who teaches

Kindergarten and arranges flowers in her spare time.

“I had just lost my job, and your Uncle Jimmy came up with a bunch of those wild buddies of his for a week of camping. One thing led to another and, well...” She trails off for a moment, clearly uncomfortable. “Well, things just happened, like they sometimes do, sweetie.”

“So, one of Uncle Jimmy’s friends is my father?”

She nods. “Bob Johnson.”

“You told me, when I was little, that he was a bad man.”

Mom exhales deeply. She looks as if she wishes the floor of the kitchen would open and swallow her up. “To be honest, sweetie, I really didn’t know him very well. Bob and I never talked about it afterwards. I was embarrassed, ashamed. And I guess maybe he was too. I’ve seen the man maybe twice since. And that’s just fine by me. You’re my babygirl, and I never had any doubt about raising you by myself. You, me, and God’s love are all I ever needed, and I pray every night that that’s the same for you, Dori.”

I search her face for some confirmation that this final story, at last, is the full truth. “So, you’re sure this Bob is my father?”

“Yes, there’s no one else it could be. Though you don’t look a thing like him. I mean, it was very dark, and I was very... intoxicated...but it was definitely Bob. He was a very distinctive man. Very tall. Very...” she pauses, as if to find the right word, “masculine.”

Masculine? I think about the hair sprouting across my lower back. The contents of my stomach curdle. That settles it, then.

I can tell I'm in a fragile state by the fact that I'm not sure whether to laugh at the thought of my pious mother getting drunk enough to obliviously knock boots with Sasquatch, or to throw up all over the linoleum at the sheer perverseness of it all.

"You could meet him if you really wanted to, honey," Mom says. "I'm sure I could arrange for you two to meet."

The image of the hairy road kill from the *Daily Pine* comes to mind. "I don't think so, Mom."

"You sure, baby?"

"Yeah."

Mom hugs me tightly then, and I almost feel like telling her the truth. If nothing else, the woman clearly loves me. But that's all the more reason why I can't. I can only imagine what advice Father Michelson would give her about her daughter turning into a mythical beast.

A hot itch across my torso implies that the re-growth has already started, and I am anxious to go and shave before I start my chemistry homework.

I glance back at my mother before I leave the kitchen. Her body is turned away from me, her hands braced against the pale green counter beneath the cupboards. The line of her shoulders is stiff, tense. For a moment, I wonder if

she's telling me the truth about Uncle Jimmy and Bob Johnson. Not the *truth* truth, perhaps, but at least the truth as she believes it – or if this is just another story, cleverly constructed to hide the reality from her daughter. Or maybe, I think with a shiver, to hide it from herself.

* * *

I stumble through the next week in a fog. I tell Mom that I'm sick, which is honestly how I feel, and stay home from school. She frets that I'm overreacting to the discussion about my father, and offers to pray with me. I politely decline. Apart from meals, I only venture from my room to seek out extra razors and shaving cream from the downstairs bathroom.

It gets worse. The hair is darker and coarser, and has spread down my arms and is looping around to my front. On Thursday morning, I remove my bra to reveal the unspeakable: a light coating – thinner and more fine, but just as dark – now lines my breasts. I mourn for the girls. I lock myself in my room with the window shut and the curtains drawn, despite my increasing suffocation from the lack of fresh air, and eat a full pint of Ben & Jerry's while listening to My Chemical Romance. I think about every cutter from West Pine High, and despise them for making such a big deal out of surely-far-less-tragic circumstances. I scratch the itch that covers my body as I shave, re-grow, and shave again. I create a Twitter profile, post several dark song lyrics, and then delete them. I cry as I sweep tumbleweeds of hair from the bathroom floor. Logan texts me that he

hopes I'm feeling better, and I eat a second pint of ice cream. An inhuman belch rips through my throat like a snarl as I gulp down the last spoonful. Katie doesn't text me at all.

* * *

After a week of seclusion, I determine to quit moping and kick this thing in the ass. The fluorescent lights of West Pine's Wal-Mart Super Center glare against my aviators as I park my cart in the toiletries section, right in front of the hair removal products. I lean forward and squint at my options. The dark glasses make it a little difficult to see, but I'm not taking any chances.

The Super Center (or "the Super," as people like to call it) is for West Pine what the mall is for your average town. As a corollary to being really the only place to go for household, grocery, and sundry needs, the Super is also the primary site of local socialization. When the only place in town worth driving to is the Super, a strange phenomenon occurs: a ritualistic pattern wherein large herds of students go from slamming their lockers shut at the end of the school day to drinking black cherry slurpees while perusing the hardware aisle.

As such, I've come prepared. I readjust the baseball hat covers my head, and hunker my neck as far down into the folds of my hoodie as I can manage.

Shaving cream is "buy one get one" this week. I reach for a can of Venus Passionberry, but my hand freezes midway to the shelf as the image of this morning's carnage bubbles to the surface of my mind. It took me no less than

three separate blade changes to get through the thickets that carpeted my legs, and I was still covered in nicks and scrapes when I had finished. I long for the days when my greatest leg woes consisted of accidentally staining them orange with self-tanner.

The wax is more expensive, and scarier. Then again, nothing is more frightening than the prospect of Logan seeing me looking like some sort of demonic ape. He slipped a get-well card into my mailbox after I called in sick on our date last week, a gesture so sweet that I have determined to steel myself against the effects of this genetic curse even if it means burning the fur off with acid. I take a quick glance around, and slide a full row of Nair into my cart. Twenty-seven bottles. Man, am I going to need to get a job.

* * *

My spirits lift once I put my battle plans into motion. Well, sort of. I'm coping now, an activity that takes up too much energy to panic, and leaves little time to consider the future beyond my next bottle of Nair. School is a rigidly scheduled affair, which I carry out with the precision of a Marine. Class, bathroom, wax, class, bathroom, wax. If I slip into a different lavatory during each interim period, I can mostly avoid suspicion. This is a high school girls' bathroom - there's typically weirder business going down in there than a little between-class hygienic maintenance.

Katie has begun sitting with Jenny and the rest of the dance team at lunch,

in my absence. At this point I'm struggling to really care. There's a strange sense of victory that comes along with taming the fur – and it's distracting. I've regimented my life, gone into survival mode.

I sit with my brown bag in the corner of the cafeteria and stare at Katie and Jenny, aware but unconcerned that I must look every bit as much like a creeper as the perpetually leering Luke Bane. Pretty soon the lesbian rumors will be flying. Jenny Baker will take care of that. Then again, I'd rather be regarded as gay than as a monster.

Jenny's mouth moves, whatever she's said prompting a loud fit of laughter from Katie. The other girls at the table titter like goofy little birds, but Katie guffaws in her Katie way, a big, open-mouthed laugh that I can almost hear even from the far corner of the room.

I triple check my bag – reassure myself that I have enough Nair packed to get through the second half of the day, and that I have a spare long-sleeved t-shirt rolled up at the bottom of my backpack to pull on in case of an emergency.

Katie is still laughing, and this time I can hear her for real. It's like someone slamming an ice pick into the armor I have so tightly secured around me. I'm abruptly on my feet, and they're carrying me out of the lunchroom. Her big laugh reverberates in my head as I rush past the burly female lunch monitor (I mumble something about feeling sick in response to her protests), fly down the hall, and finally find refuge in the girls' bathroom in the first floor lobby. It sits

beside the auditorium and, apart from the odd assembly or evening concert, can usually be counted on to be empty.

I collapse onto the sink, wrenching the faucet open and splashing cold water on my face. It stings my wet cheeks again and again, but I splash faster, nearly choking on all the water. I'm practically hyperventilating. The backpack is at my feet, filled with hair removal products, but I don't want to touch it. The thought of the thick, gloopy wax, the fuzzy tearing sound the sheets make when I rip them and the hair off my skin, is enough to make me retch. I feel physically ill. I'm sick of fighting back.

"Woah there. What, are you trying to drown yourself?"

I'm so startled by the deep voice that I literally jump and let out a little scream. It's a strangled, croaking cry that sticks in my throat like old peanut butter.

"If that's a 'yes,' it looks like you're doing a pretty decent job of it," Luke Bane says in response to my gurgle.

He's standing right inside the door, which is closed behind him, his body centered right in the middle of the way. His shoulders are broad, and it occurs to me with a sinking feeling that he's blocking the exit. My mind flashes back to English class, the day we started *Macbeth*, and Katie's comment about Luke.

I fully intend to scream, but when I open my mouth, the best I can muster is a lame, "You know this is the girls' bathroom, right?"

“Yes,” he says, glancing around thoughtfully at the pastel pink walls and the missing urinals. “Apparently it is.”

“So what, do you have ovaries or something?”

“No.” He shakes his head solemnly. His eyes are so dark they’re nearly black, and they sit like twin flints in his head. If he were a character in a novel, he’d be the one with active eyes, the eyes that are always “cutting” or “piercing” or “penetrating through to the soul.” I can picture how I must look through those eyes, sopping wet, the hairs on my head frizzing in humid little curlicues around my face. I wonder how long he has been standing here. Already I can feel the blood rising to my damp cheeks with embarrassment.

“So what brings you to the girls’ bathroom?” I ask, my voice echoing unnaturally loudly the tiled room. I’m still not entirely sure he isn’t here to rape me.

I half expect another wisecrack, but instead, he simply says, “You should go see Honovi.”

I blink. “What?” Maybe I misunderstood.

“Honovi,” he says, slowly and loudly, as if I’m hard of hearing. “You should go see her.”

My heart thuds. I can barely believe what I’m hearing. The question hangs on my tongue but I can’t ask it. Does he know? How does he know? I feel utterly exposed. “What, you mean Honovi the medicine woman? Why would I go see

her?" I ask, cautiously, as if neither of us knows.

Luke cocks an eyebrow. "Why do you think? Just do it. She says to tell you, it's only going to get worse if you stay away," he says. "She says to tell you, she can help."

I stare at him blankly.

"Well," he says, "I think that about covers my end." He casts his eyes around the bathroom again. "Pink, huh? I always wondered. Well, see ya."

And with that, he turns and strides out of the bathroom, leaving me standing in the little puddle of water more confused and frightened than ever.

* * *

Luke Bane's words echo in my head as I pace in circles around my bedroom. I kick at the little pile of dirty laundry that stands at the foot of my bed, sending tank tops and spare socks flying.

"You all right up there, honey?" Mom calls up the steps.

"Fine," I lie.

It isn't until late afternoon, though, that I notice the hair darkening across the backs of my hands and fingers.

I don't even stop to tell my mother where I'm going. I simply walk down the steps, march out through the back door, hop onto my mountain bike, and take off as fast as my legs will pedal me towards Honovi's. I wobble off the road twice and nearly run down a woman pushing her baby in a stroller. By the time I

reach the pull-off for Honovi's shack, I've gotten a firmer hang on staying upright; but I'm so flustered from the trip that I barely recognize the reflection of the girl in the window when I approach the house. She's ruddy-cheeked and disheveled, her red hair floating in a shock of a tangled mane around her white and freckly face. At least, I remind myself, my face isn't hairy. Yet, anyway.

I knock twice on the wood-paneled door of Honovi's cabin before it swings open, almost sending my closed fist colliding with the old Indian woman's weathered face.

"Good," she says, simply, as if she's been waiting for me. "Come." She turns away and walks back inside, leaving me to close the door behind us and follow her in.

The interior of Honovi's cabin smells just as I remember it. The light fragrance of herbs wafts throughout, mingled with a sour tinge of mildew. The walls of the front room are lined with shelves, each cluttered with moldy books and jars upon jars of God-knows-what. Some are filled with random greens and flowers, others with a thick, pulpy substance, and one (I turn my eyes willfully away) contains what looks like some sort of rabbit fetus.

Honovi bustles around, disappearing behind the large animal hide that hangs from the ceiling in the doorway between the main room and the back of the cabin, and then reemerging with what looks like a stack of tableware.

"Look," I begin. "I'm sorry I was rude before. I just have a lot of..."

“Sit,” Honovi commands, cutting me off. She gestures toward the table and chairs that sit in the middle of the room. “I made dinner.”

“Dinner?” It’s barely five o’clock. I glance from my watch back to Honovi. “That’s really nice of you, but thanks anyway. My mom is probably already preparing something.”

“Sit!” She snaps this time, and firmly pulls a chair back from the table. I have no choice but to oblige.

“Really, I’m not very hungry. I just really wanted to ask you some questions.”

“Questions, yes. Questions can wait for later, though. There will be no questions on an empty stomach.” She goes about setting the table, placing not two, but three plates down.

“Are you... expecting someone else?”

“Yes,” she says, “my nephew.”

As if on cue, there’s a knock on the door. Before Honovi has a chance to cross to the other side of the room, however, Luke Bane is striding through it.

“Well,” I say. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“What I say about being late, hmm?” Honovi demands.

“Oops,” Luke says, “sorry, Honovi.”

She strides over to him and grasps his cheeks, giving them what I guess is intended as a loving squeeze. It mostly looks like she’s pinching him. I wince.

“Now come and sit,” she says, “the soup is almost ready.”

“Thanks,” Luke replies, stripping off his jacket and hanging it on one of the pegs by the door.

“Well! You two know each other,” Honovi states cheerfully. And then she disappears back behind the partition, leaving Luke and me alone. I shift in my chair, focusing my eyes on the table. Luke doesn’t seem to catch the drift.

“So,” he says almost immediately, “you’re the new s’quatch in town.”

“Allegedly.”

I regard him with suspicion as he drags a wooden crate across the floor – ignoring the other chair – sits, and crosses his arms in front of his chest. He gives me that stupid, staring look of his. Up close I can see that his eyes are not themselves black, but that they are rather dominated by his enormous pupils. They’re huge and dilated, the deep brown rims of his irises circling them in a thin band. He reminds me of an owl, with those eyes.

“So,” I say, “you’re Honovi’s nephew?”

“So it would seem.”

I’m unsure what to make of this, but I don’t press the issue. Both of us are silent for a moment. Studiously, I examine my nails. The awful thought creeps into my mind that Luke could possibly have told Honovi about my freak-out in the bathroom this afternoon. Oh God. I can just imagine the look on her face, the sound of her creaky laugh, punctuated by her little tutts as she shakes her head.

Honovi appears in the doorway, carrying a tray with two steaming mugs. "Tea!" she announces, maneuvering the tray onto the table between us. One mug is cream colored, the other green. I stretch out my hand to take the green one, but Luke darts his own front of mine, snatching it away.

"Really?"

He grins. "Trust me," he says, with a nod toward the other mug, "that one is yours."

My blood pumps hotly through my veins, but I keep my mouth shut. I'm too exhausted to argue. It's as if every one of my nerves has been zapped, frayed, and abandoned to fizzle.

As I sip at my steaming tea, Luke begins to gulp his down one swig after another. He seems immune to the boiling hot water as he chugs, and barely flinches until he has drained his mug. He picks up his napkin, blots his mouth, and squares his dark eyes, yet again, with mine.

"You know, you don't look anywhere near hairy enough to me."

I almost spit out my drink. "Pardon me?"

"I knew your father, and he was a pretty hairy guy. You look more or less, well, human."

"Yeah. You ever hear of Nair?"

The corner of his mouth twitches. Luke, I've begun to notice, is one of those people who smiles with his lips shut, a lopsided grin that almost never

exposes teeth.

“So,” I ask, “how long have you known?”

“About you? Years.”

This time I really do spit out my tea. “*What?*”

Luke leans back, looking a little alarmed. “Say it, don’t spray it, sister!”

“What do you mean, *years?*”

I’m utterly stunned. How could he have known for years? How is that even possible? All those times – staring, just staring at me – was this what he was waiting for? Was he just watching for me to suddenly have a massive growth spurt? To show up to school one day, hulking and furry?

“Why do you think I moved here?” Luke asks. His tone is light, laced with a hint of nonchalance. I’m seized by the overwhelming urge to leap from the chair and pummel him into the ground. “Why did you think I was always so interested in you?”

At this point I’m seething. Irrationally, I find my anger nearly double at this last question, at the incredulity of it – as if there couldn’t possibly have been a reason for a boy to be looking at Dori Thornton other than to stay on the lookout for signs of a beastly transformation.

“Are you drinking that tea?” Honovi interrupts, emerging through the hide flap. “Go on, drink. It may help slow the change. That is what you want, right?”

“What I want is to know why I seem to be the last person to get the memo on this whole Bigfoot thing.”

I sniff at the tea suspiciously, suddenly struck by how stupid I am to accept a drink from a known druggist and all around crazy lady. Never leave a drink unattended; never accept a drink from a stranger. Life Advice 101. “What’s in this, anyway?” I demand.

“Never mind. Just drink!”

It’s steamy and aromatic, though my nose isn’t trained to sleuth out the particulars.

“It will calm you,” she explains. “It gets worse when you are worked up, yes?”

I consider the hair fanning across the backs of my hands as I paced, the growth on my legs after working with Logan. “Maybe,” I concede.

She nods. “This is new to me, too, you know. You’re the first half-breed I know of.”

“Hey!” The term stings, perhaps even more than the name of the creature itself.

Honovi ignores my protest, but continues, “I have heard rumors of such things, though. That the change sets in at puberty, that it attaches itself to the hormones.” She disappears for a half a second, and reemerges with a big crock of soup. “That sort of thing.” She ladles the soup amongst the three bowls.

“So, you had Luke come to school here when I started junior high? To watch me, in case I began to change?”

She nods once.

“You told a complete stranger about what was going to happen to me, but you didn’t think it might be a good idea to, I don’t know, mention it to *me* at some point?”

“Luke isn’t a stranger, he’s my nephew.” She begins to shovel the soup from her bowl to her mouth with an intense ferocity, slurping and gulping as if she hasn’t eaten in days.

“He’s a stranger to me!” I say.

“I did not want to upset you,” she says clumsily, around her soup. A little dribble leaks out the corner of her mouth. “These things are not certain. The change cannot be forced. And I was never sure that you would change.”

“And you didn’t,” Luke adds, “for a long time. Not until after Big Daddy Foot died. Ow!” he cries, as Honovi smacks him over the head with her spoon.

“That is not his name!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Show some respect! And in front of his daughter, too,” she adds in a disgruntled mumble.

I shake my head. “Stop! Just – just tell me what I need to do.”

Honovi answers, “I told you, there is nothing to do to stop the change.

You can slow it, though. Drink the tea I make for you. Try to be calm. Avoid triggers, like stress, or things that make you angry.”

“And Logan Ford,” Luke says, a sly grin creeping across his lips.

I’m about to protest, but Honovi nods enthusiastically. “Yes, yes! Stay away from the boys! The last thing you need is the hormones flying every which way.”

Luke nods, his face a mask of sternness. “Yes, Dori, you heard her. Stay away from the boys.”

“Guess that includes you, huh?” I retort. “So you should probably leave.”

“Don’t worry,” he says, “I spent years refining my creepy stalker persona specifically so that when the time came, you would be able to withstand being in my presence without any risk of you wanting to jump me. Particularly because you’d be subconsciously too worried about me, well, literally jumping you.”

“Yeah. You’re still forgetting the ‘avoid anger triggers’ part.”

“Luke will look out for you, especially at the school” Honovi interjects, slicing through the tension that is rapidly mounting between us. “He’s stupid,” she admits, shooting him a sideways glare, “but he is also helpful.”

As I gingerly sip at my soup, avoiding Luke’s smug face, Honovi explains that I must come to her throughout the week for “lessons,” as she calls them – to learn to control the change, the powers, the strange flashes and out-of-body experiences.

“The more you learn,” she says, “the easier it will be.”

She says it like it’s so simple, as simple as breathing, as simple as getting up in the morning and brushing your teeth.

* * *

Of course, it isn’t simple at all.

School becomes a ritualistic torture, sapping every ounce of energy from my body. I offer up a rare prayer of thanks to the powers that be, if they’re out there, that the hair has not spread to my face.

“Your papa was the same,” says Honovi, who I visit after class when new questions pop into my head. “No hair on the face. It will become more ape-like soon, though. You should consider moving into the woods. It is only a matter of time.”

I keep up my Nair routine between classes, but the hair is no longer the only issue I have to contend with. I’m also getting taller.

Prom is two weeks away when I wake up one morning, cross my room, and am whacked smack in the forehead by the star ornament that dangles from the pull chain of the ceiling fan. I slap my palm to my head, initially in pain from the hit, but then in terror at the realization of this new phase of the change.

“What are you wearing?” Katie asks one day in homeroom, after I wander through the door dressed in a pair of boys’ sweatpants (borrowed grudgingly from Luke) and an oversized hoodie. Almost nothing of my own fits me. I’m so

surprised at her speaking to me that I almost don't answer.

When I finally do find my voice, I simply reply, "All of my clothes are dirty."

She stares at me a moment. For a second I think she's going to say something. Her lips part slightly, but then she closes them again, gives her hair a little toss, and says, "Yeah, whatever." Like she's in elementary school or something.

About the only people I do talk to in school are Logan and Luke - the latter of whom seems content to offer little conversation beyond the perfunctory "hello" in the hallways. Despite his unexpected verbosity when we're both around Honovi, he remains as surly as ever in school. Things are going great with Logan, though, despite my constant string of excuses to avoid anything more than brief, public hanging out (even with the change under control, the possibility of him getting through the barrier of my clothing for even a second is too dangerous to risk).

There's another challenge, too - one I did not see coming.

It's Honovi, of course, who calls me out about it.

"I've heard you at night, you know," she says, one afternoon, while we lounge alone in her house and I drink her tea.

I grunt in response. Guilty as charged. For the past week I have been sneaking out after dark and running through the forest. The first time, I woke up

in the middle of the night, and was already out the door before I was properly awake. I can't help it. As freaky as it sounds, there is something about that connectedness that allures me and satiates me like a drug. It's like knowing every part of the woods as intimately as my own body. More intimately, considering how foreign that body has recently become. Sometimes I consciously let myself out the back door, but more often, like the first time, it just happens. One minute I'm asleep in bed, and the next I'm in the middle of the woods.

Sometimes, Logan bikes on the trails and I can smell his scent lingering in the hills for hours.

"You should tell him, if you like him so much," Honovi says.

"Really? Because I was thinking pretty much exactly the opposite." I can imagine it now - pretty much the romantic equivalent of telling your partner you have herpes. Potentially worse, considering that I won't just be having short-term "outbreaks" of being a hairy beast.

"If he loves you, he will not care. You will grow very powerful. He should be honored to be in your presence."

I roll my eyes. "He would take one look at me and bolt. And anyway, I'm not sure we're at the point in our relationship where we can start revealing our bizarre medical conditions."

"Your father embraced his duty with pride." Honovi hocks up a loogey and spits it into the brew she is concocting. "Who knows, maybe he was human

too, once. And I never saw him complain.”

“He was a dude! If he was a human man, he was probably jazzed to start growing enormous and hairy!” This would be so much easier if I were guy. I think of *Beauty and the Beast*, and wonder if things would have turned out so nicely if Belle were the creature.

Some days are harder than others. The temperature hits almost seventy one afternoon, and I am hot and uncomfortable all throughout the school day, my skin prickling with regrowth beneath my jeans and long sleeves. Jenny and Katie both wear denim skirts and floaty, floral blouses. All throughout English, I keep convincing myself that Logan’s eyes are sneaking across the room at them as we work together on our presentation. It makes my stomach churn; but I can’t blame him. Their skin is silky and clear, their legs long and smooth. I think of my own nasty gams and grip my pencil so hard that it snaps in half.

At Honovi’s that afternoon, I beat a large paper fan to cool myself as I perch on one of the chairs at the little table. Luke is there, too, to pick up the clothes I borrowed from him. I finally went out and bought some larger things, so at least I no longer need to wear his ratty boy stuff.

“I hate this.” I say, to no one in particular, stirring my tea listlessly. “I hate that I can’t stop it. I don’t want to change. I just... I just want it to stay the same.”

Honovi laughs. “The same? Everyone changes, girl,” she says. “Do you think they like it?”

“It’s not the same.”

She ignores me. “What about you? Did you like it when you started the monthly bleed?”

I’m more than slightly mortified. “Ew! Honovi, that’s not what I’m...”

“And what about Luke, hmm? You think he liked it when his voice changed? Think he couldn’t wait for his balls to drop?”

“Oh my God.” My face is scarlet, I can tell. Luke, in the corner, makes a noise that suggests that he’s either suppressing a snicker or swallowing his own vomit.

“What about me?” Honovi blusters on. “Forty-five years, almost half a century, of nothing but natural foods, natural life, and I get the breast cancer.” She clicks her tongue in disgust. “You think I liked that? You think I jumped for joy when they took my tits?”

My mouth is completely dry. Luke is silent. I’m shocked, partially at her language, and largely at this revelation. For the first time, I notice the flatness of Honovi’s chest, the smooth plane of her torso. I try and fail to picture her in a hospital, far removed from the floating dust and light of her cabin, her layers of ragged and hodgepodge clothing swapped for a clean, crisp hospital gown. It’s unimaginable.

“We all change,” she continues. Her voice is lower now, but every bit as hard and even. “The world and all of her creatures. At every moment, we

change. Your body, what about that, hmm? What is your body? Just a bunch of cells, a bunch of specks of dust, being born and dying and replacing the ones that were there before." She adds more leaves to the bowl and grinds them hard with her pestle, so I can hear the stone scrape, scrape across the bottom. "And yes," she adds, her voice sharp, "I know about cells. You think you're so smart, with your fancy school and your fancy house. But I will tell you something. I may know the woods and the mountains, and I may live off the land, and I may not have gone to your fancy school. But that doesn't make me stupid." She grinds with gusto, her knuckles white and her face ruddy. "I will tell you something. I'm older than you, and I'm smarter than you. You know nothing, Dori Thornton."

Honovi rises from her seat, scrapes the paste from the bowl and into a little jar, seals it, places it on the shelf, and then, calmly, strides straight out of the cabin.

I stare after her, completely blank, until I jump at Luke's finger tapping my shoulder.

"When she does that," he says, nodding to the door through which Honovi has just departed, "it's usually a good idea to follow her."

I shake my head. "No way. Not while she's pissed at me."

"Well, maybe if you didn't whine so much..."

"Shut up!"

“Both of you,” Honovi interrupts, her withered old face appearing through the doorway, “stop it. Dori. You come with me.”

“Told you so,” Luke says under his breath.

“Get in the truck,” Honovi says, as soon as I step into the driveway. For a minute, I’m not sure what she’s talking about. It takes a moment for me to realize that the truck she’s referring to is the beat up, old, forest-green pickup parked up against the mulch pile around the side of Honovi’s house. The bed of the truck has virtually been converted into a flowerpot, with vines and blossoms and even weeds sprouting and winding around the whole back of the pickup. It never occurred to me that Honovi might actually use this car for practical purposes. I always assumed it didn’t even run.

Honovi digs around in one of her many pockets and produces a key. She climbs in the driver’s seat. “Well, hurry up,” she says.

My feet are still rooted to the ground. After watching Honovi blow a fuse inside, I’m not exactly sure how willing I am to get into a truck that looks like it barely runs and go driving off into the great unknown with a medicine woman who is not at all happy with me. I’m reminded of that first day, following Honovi out into the woods, not knowing what to expect, and fearing that she was about to cast some sort of hex on me. I trusted her then. Hopefully I can trust her now.

I climb in through the creaky door and we’re off. I ask where we’re going,

but Honovi keeps her lips sealed. “The source,” she says, finally – whatever that means. “You need to understand. I will show you.”

We drive for a long time. Despite my earlier fears, I feel my eyelids weigh heavily down over my sleepy eyes. My life, I am forced to admit, is exhausting. The hiding, the sneaking around, the lying – even at home, I’m not truly safe. My mother knows nothing. I barely see her these days, but I tell her I’m spending a lot of time with my friends, or I lie about having group work to do for school projects. The fact that Honovi and Luke, two of the most caustic and awkward people I have ever met, are the only people I feel semi-comfortable around is a testament to how mind-bogglingly draining my life has become.

I watch the dream catcher that hangs from Honovi’s rear-view mirror dance back and forth as the truck bumps along the road. It’s like a pendulum, and my eyes flutter shut as I watch it. I doze. I’m not sure if I actually sleep, but it seems like only moments later that Honovi touches my arm and says, “This is it.”

As soon as we step outside of the car, I know that something is different. The air... “It smells old,” I say, without thinking. We’re parked at a pull-off on the side of the road, but Honovi leads me immediately into the woods. She ignores the marked trail, picking her way instead through the tangle of trees and undergrowth.

“Luke says you like stories,” she says at last, still facing forward as she speaks.

“Books,” I say, a little surprised, “yes.” I suppose it’s no secret that I’m a bit of a geek, but it strikes me as funny that Luke would notice such a thing, let alone relay it to Honovi. We are, I remind myself, in the same English class.

“I will tell you a story,” she says.

“What kind of a story?”

“The story of the skookum.”

“Oh – sure.” I thought she might be about to offer up her history – an account of the breast cancer story she had let slip earlier in the afternoon, perhaps – but that fact that she is instead offering me a slice of my own is even more intriguing. “Is it true?”

“Of course it is true. All good stories are.”

The air around us is still and dense. This is old growth forest. I’ve seen pictures of these types of areas. The trees are towering and ancient, wreathed in twisting ivy and carpeted in moss. Even with the birds chirping in the trees, there’s a sort of hush that blankets the woods that’s almost ethereal. The undergrowth is so soft and densely carpeted that our feet are nearly silent as we pad across the forest floor. A feeling of déjà vu creeps up on me, sending a little shiver through my body.

“Nobody knows when the skookum were born,” Honovi begins. Her voice is low and lyrical, sinking immediately into a rhythm that makes me certain that she’s told this story before. I can just imagine her as a child, sitting

beside a blazing fire as her mother passed the legend along to her, just as her mother's mother passed it on to her before. "All we know is that they are an ancient species, a race born from the spirit and the belly of the earth in order to protect her and her creatures." There's even a haziness to her voice that evokes the smoke winding up from the fire, that dreamy veil that never fails to accompany tales told around a campfire.

"So wait," I say. "There's more than one? There are other skookum out there, like me?"

"Not like you."

"Well I know there probably aren't half-skookum, but I mean just in general. Others like, you know, my father." I force this last word from my mouth, but it falls more naturally here in this place. It doesn't feel as wrong to say it.

"No."

"None?"

"Not anymore. None that I know of, anyway. I heard stories as a girl of times when there were many – hundreds, maybe even thousands – of skookum, who wandered the whole of the earth."

"What happened to them?"

"They died," she says, shrugging. "Or were killed. Or vanished, back into the earth. *He* was the last one, at least that my people knew of. This, maybe, is

why you were born.”

“Skookum don’t typically knock up humans, huh?”

“Never. But if he was the last of his kind, what else could he do?”

“Leave my family alone?”

She shakes her head somberly. “Protecting the source is more important than worrying about a human family.”

“What exactly is this source?”

“The source of life.”

“Of life? You mean, of *life* life?”

“Shhh. You will see.”

“So the skookum aren’t just animals. They’re guardians?”

“Yes.” She nods her head firmly. “If you think of Nature as the woman, the mother of the earth, then the skookum are her protectors – the male spirits destined to protect and guard the children that Nature brings into the world.”

“Yeah, let’s stick with ‘guardian,’” I suggest, feeling my hackles rise at being called a man – even if strictly metaphorically.

“Really, the skookum are neither male nor female. They are spirits of the forest. They come from the earth they must protect, and in their physical form they are a part of it. That is why the skookum can feel the forest, feel the life that connects everything together.”

I let my eyes fall shut, feeling what she describes. “So,” I say, “that’s the

reason I can sense the woodpecker sitting in that tree right above us, and feel the elk sleeping half a mile to the north.”

Honovi nods. “The skookum part of you is part of all of those creatures.”

“What about humans?”

“What about them?”

“I mean, are they connected, too?”

At first, she hesitates. I drink in woody scent of the trees and listen to the quiet stirring of life around us as we walk, until I almost forget my own question. Finally, though, Honovi responds. “Yes,” she says, “Humans are also a part of nature. But humans choose to go against it. They want to master nature, instead of living within it. We cause destruction to the earth. The skookum protect what we humans may destroy.”

“The source?”

“Yes, the source. We are not the enemy, though. The skookum guard against our actions, but it is for us, too, that they protect this land.”

We walk in silence for a while as I mull over Honovi’s words. So many questions threaten to burst from my mouth, but I suppress them as we hike deeper into the forest. For some reason it doesn’t feel right to speak in this place. Excitement buzzes below the surface of calm, though. The word *guardian* is blazoned across my mind – a good word, a powerful word. All this time, I have been thinking of myself as a monster, a creature, a mutant, a freak. But if Honovi

is telling the truth – if I’m really a guardian – there are better words than “monster” and “freak” to describe who and what I am. Words like “hero,” and “protector.” Words my soul clings to, as if they form a rescue net to fish me out of the despair I’ve been so deeply mired in for the past weeks.

When Honovi stops, she halts so abruptly that I nearly collide with her. “This is it,” she says. She speaks in low whisper, her voice heavy with anticipation.

I glance around. I don’t know what I’m expecting. Perhaps some sort of bubbling spring of eternal youth, or at least a gnarled old tree like something out of *Fern Gully*. We’re not even in a proper clearing. We’re just stopped in the middle of the woods – ancient, hushed, magical woods, but still – just a random spot in the forest.

“Where is it?”

Honovi peers at me curiously from under her caterpillar eyebrows. “You know where, I think. I’ll give you a hint – it’s one of the trees.”

A surge of annoyance shoots through me. I’m facing the revelation of my destiny, and the old woman still just wants to play games. I look around. There are trees everywhere. We’re in the middle of the forest. “Sorry,” I say, “I forgot to bring my divining rod.”

“Focus.”

I let my eyes fall shut, breathing in the rich, old air. On instinct I stretch

out my hands. These, I realize, are my divining rods. I let the hum of the forest around me envelop my senses, until I finally feel it: it's like a hum, a low, steady pulse emanating from my fingers. My feet move forward, toward the pulse. As the palms of my hands connect with rough bark, my eyes shoot open.

There is no question. This is it. When my hands touch the jagged bark of the towering red alder, at once a sort of warmth seems to emanate from the tree. It pulses like an electrical current, shivering under my fingertips. Warmth flows through my veins, resonating throughout the very core of my body. It isn't until I pull my hand away that I become aware of my heaving chest, sucking the air into my lungs in huge gulps. The world spins before me and I nearly lose my lunch on the roots before Honovi grabs my arm and guides me to the ground. She eyes me shrewdly as I sit on my butt and try to catch my breath.

"Well," I gasp, "that was new."

Honovi clucks her tongue. "No, that is old. Very old." She reaches out her own branchlike fingers, the tips just grazing the bark as she casts her eyes upwards towards the canopy of green. She shivers, and a weird smile plays across her paper lips. "You must feel it strongly."

No shit. "Can't you?"

She shakes her head. "No. No, not me." Her hand falls away and she turns to me. "This is the job of the skookum. You must feel the tree because you must protect it. The rest of us - well, it's just as well that we are blind to it."

“So, when you say this is the source...”

“I mean that this is the center. Nature can balance the challenges it faces from within. You do not need to protect every tree. You only need to protect *this* tree, the source.” She gazes up at the boughs that tower above us. “All life flows from this one point. Without this, the forest will die. The animals will die. We will die. You understand?”

So this is it. This tree, this pile of twigs, is the source. There is a web that connects me to the owl and the salmon and the kids smoking a joint behind the old Boy Scout cabin, and this tree is the spider at the center. It’s the source of the magic that I control, and of the change that controls me.

We stand there for a while, me watching the tree, and Honovi’s eyes trained on me. My head whirls. I search for a question, a single, definable question I can ask Honovi from the maelstrom of uncertainty swirling around in my brain. The best I can manage is, “Why us?”

“Hmm?”

“Why us? Why my mother? If you knew him so well, you and your mother, why didn’t he choose one of you? Why bring an outsider into this?”

“My people have had one task, for many, many years. The skookum protects the source, and we protect the skookum.”

“Exactly. You were already involved.”

Honovi laughs dryly. “That is the point, child. If he passed the task to us,

we could guard the source. But who, then, would protect us? Hmm?"

* * *

It's late afternoon when we roll back down Honovi's winding driveway. Stillness has settled over me, perhaps from the memory of that hushed, insulated forest, or perhaps from the knowledge that my transformation, when it happens, will not be completely in vain. At least, I assure myself, I have a purpose. If I'm going to morph into a female wookiee, I might as well save the world while I'm doing it.

The lights are all off when we walk inside, and when Honovi flicks them on they illuminate the sleeping form of Luke. He's slouched over at the table, his right cheek resting upon his copy of *Frankenstein* and a little tendril of drool running down onto the open notebook beneath it.

"Some watchman you are," Honovi booms, causing Luke to nearly fall off his chair as he bolts to his feet and blinks the sleep from his startled eyes.

"Uh, just resting my eyes."

"I would ask if robbers carried away all my money, but it looks like you would not know one way or the other," she mumbles, half to Luke and half to herself.

"Where'd you guys go," he asks me.

"The source." I'm surprised by the trickle of pride that creeps into my voice when I say it. Already I feel like a guardian. The knowledge alone of this

secret life source – a life source that who-knows-how-much of the world is dependent upon, and which virtually nobody knows anything about – is empowering. This is something I can take charge of. This is something I can protect, I can control.

“Ahh,” Luke says, smirking, “the source! The mythical wellspring of life, the universe, and everything.”

I shoot him a scowl. “What’s your problem?”

“No problem,” he says, lightly. “Well, apart from the fact that I haven’t read beyond the first chapter of this book.” He gestures to the table. “Despite the fact that our projects are due in – what? – a week?”

“Good work.”

“And seriously, what is *up* with that Walton guy? I definitely don’t remember Frankenstein running around at the North Pole.”

“It’s called a frame narrative. Maybe you should read the book. Or at least SparkNotes it.”

“Hey, I’ve been busy.”

“Doing what, napping?”

“Oh sorry, I forgot, my leisure activities are so much less integral to my daily life than running around the forest at night like a feral dog. Oh, and getting hot and heavy with Logan Ford. Can’t forget that one.”

“I have not been getting *hot and heavy* with Logan Ford.”

“Oh sorry, was that Justin Bieber? Sometimes it’s difficult to keep them straight. You know – all that hair.”

“You’re just jealous because I’m saving the world while you’re busy drooling on your homework.”

“Saving the world?”

“Yeah... the source, remember?”

That strange smirk stretches across his lips again.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says. “Don’t worry about.”

“No, what?”

He hesitates. “Look, I don’t want to burst your bubble or anything, but the source... well, it doesn’t exactly need much protecting. Why do you think Big Daddy Foot lived all the way out here?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t Honovi tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“The source is on national park land. It’s protected by the government. Not intentionally or anything. It just happens to be on protected wilderness land. No one can cut it down or anything like that. It’s safe.”

“For now,” Honovi interjects. “In the future... who knows? Dori, you could live to be hundreds of years old. The source needs to be protected.”

Government is there now. It may not always be.”

My mouth is completely dry. Logan looks sheepish, as if he’s beginning to regret this revelation – or at least its blunt delivery.

“So you’re telling me,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper I’m so seething mad, “that not only is my only job as a skookum – the only reason for my existence – completely obsolete, but that I will also continue to live in my hideous and obsolete life for *centuries*?”

“Unless you are killed,” Honovi points out. “By humans. Or,” she fidgets uncomfortably, “by your own hand. These are the only ways I know of for skookum to die.”

My vision is laced with red. My head pounds. “That’s it,” I spit. “I’m done. Out of here. Totally done.”

“No, you’re not,” Luke says, his voice an iota gentler than normal. “Look, I’m sorry I was harsh. You just need to know the reality of the situation.”

“That my existence is utterly pointless?”

Luke shakes his head. “This is who you are. Honovi is right. You can’t just run away from it.”

But I can. I can, and I do.

The door slams shut behind me. I focus on my feet, placing one in front of the other, as I practically run down the side of the road into the valley. My head aches. There’s only so much one girl can handle. I’ve heard stories of girls

working themselves into panic attacks in the weeks preceding Prom, their nerves frazzled and eventually downright fried from the stress of juggling school along with the mounting pressures to find the perfect date, the perfect dress, and the perfect ride. None of those girls, I am confident, ever had to contend with the added anxiety of transforming into a giant, hairy beast. They'll find me wallowing in the children's play area in the park, I imagine, curled up in the fetal position under the slide and sucking my thumb. A neurotic monster – too tangled in a bundle of nerves to be a danger, and just prone enough to capture. They'll cart me around in a cage like King Kong, but I'll be too screwed up to stage a genuine escape. I'll just sit there, batty-eyed, behind the bars, drooling and babbling about Logan Ford's teeth.

A rock materializes out of nowhere, jarring me from my thoughts as it sends me toppling to the ground. I land with an *oomph*, and a sharp pain blazes up my arm. The arm feels hot and sticky within seconds, and I know the skin has been shredded away by the asphalt. I struggle to my feet, resolutely blinking back the tears that sting the corners of my eyes, and brush off the black crumbs of road top that cling to my torn up arm. I'm so absorbed in my own misery that I don't notice the truck pulling up behind me.

"You look like you could use a ride."

It's Luke. I groan. He must have seen me eat it on the road. The last thing I need is to be patronized by some asshole – especially this particular asshole.

"I'm fine," I spit. I rearrange my face into an impassive expression, which I figure is probably the quickest and most civil bet to convey my desire for him to leave me the hell alone. Unsurprisingly, though, Luke doesn't get the hint.

"Come on, jump in," he says. The window is rolled down, and his upper body leans half out of it. His brown arm rests on the side of the truck.

I shake my head. "No." Turning back to the road ahead, I continue to walk.

Luke lets off the break and coasts after me. For a minute I entertain the idea of running, but swiftly realize that would be stupid. Luke would just step on the gas and follow, no doubt. Even if I cut through the woods, the dinged up exterior of the pickup reveals a history of wear and tear that suggests that Luke would probably not be opposed to off-roading.

"Why not?" Luke asks. He seems unfazed by my irritability. I shoot a quick glance at him and spot a grin lurking somewhere in the left corner of his mouth. Smug bastard.

"I'd rather walk."

"Where's your bike?"

I had fled in such a rush that I actually forgot it. My newly strong and elongated feet carried me nearly a mile away before I even realized that I'd left it behind. "I wanted to walk."

"It's a long way back to your place."

His persistence grates on me.

“Good,” I say. “I need the air.”

I pick up my pace a little, but Luke matches it. I wish I had some tacks to throw in front of his truck, or maybe a box of Acme dynamite.

“What are you doing?” he asks. “I thought the whole point was that you weren’t ready to assume the life of a wandering nomad.”

I pause and face him, placing my hands on my hips. “I’m going home, all right? Home. I need a break from this crap.”

Luke doesn’t miss a beat. “But it’s getting dark.”

I throw up my hands. “Why should I care? I’m magic, remember?”

He grins. “Now that’s the spirit. Come on, get in.”

“I told you, I don’t need a ride.” I scowl at him to underscore my point. To be honest, though, my feet are sore. They’ve been killing me for days. Honovi says they’re growing, faster than it’s typically comfortable for any sort of human bones to grow, and that they will likely bother me for a while before they approach their full size.

“I’m not offering you a ride,” Luke says, a sly grin creeping across his face, “I’m offering you something better.”

“Luke Bane, if you’re coming on to me right now, I swear to God that the day my hand gets large enough to wrap around your neck, I’ll be happy as a clam to change into a monster fully capable of throttling your sorry ass.”

Luke laughs. It's an unexpected laugh, deep and resonant. "Don't worry, I don't do sympathy lays. I've got something better."

"What," I ask, rolling my eyes, "are you going to lure me with candy or something?"

"I'd go with the lost puppy, but I figure you'd be able to sleuth out that bogus story pretty quickly with your Spidey Sense. You know, being one with the animals and all."

"I think," I correct him, walking around and opening the passenger side door, "that what you mean is Squatchy Sense."

Don't get in cars with strangers. Every mother engrains the cardinal rule in her child's head, right along with stay in school and don't do drugs. But after a lifetime of admonishment, here I am, sitting in some random truck with some random guy, watching with half-interest as he taps some weed onto a little paper sheet and rolls it into a joint. I'm not sure why I agree to it. Probably the painful feet. Maybe the laugh. Either way, I'm here.

Luke is rolling up the windows. "You smoke?" he asks. He pulls a lighter from his pocket. There's a wolf on it, like one of those cheesy animal paintings that you see on the t-shirts you buy at the zoo.

"Not really," I say.

"Is that a 'not really,' like you do sometimes, or a 'not really' like you never have?"

“A ‘not really’ like I’ve done it, but only once.”

It was in eighth grade, right after Katie’s parents had gotten their divorce and her dad moved out. Her mom spent her days religiously practicing yoga and reading self-help books, and her nights nursing as much wine as she could guzzle down her throat.

“From Honovi?” he asks.

I nod.

“Let’s go,” Katie had said. It was after school and her mom was at meditation. We got a ride from Billy Cord, who had a crush on Katie and knew how to drive, and ended up in front of Honovi’s cabin. Katie knocked on the door, Katie did all the talking. Billy waited in the car. I glanced around at the strange room with its jars and vases and dusty bookshelves and spent much more of the time staring at my shoes. The fact that Honovi could get in very deep trouble for selling illegal drugs – especially to impressionable minors, like us – was eclipsed in my mind by that fact that that we were buying the weed. Drug dealer or not, Honovi was an adult; and adults, as my mother had thoroughly instructed me, were the law. I wasn’t too keen on her learning my face.

She must have known, I realize now. She knew exactly who I was. I remember how she laughed when she saw me. At the time, I thought she was scheming something. Honovi was a witch, and witches cackle because they’re up to no good. I was convinced she was some sort of plant, utilized by the

authorities to trap unsuspecting children stupid enough to walk through her door and make a request like the one Katie was making. I was convinced we had walked straight into her web. In retrospect, that smile carries such a different weight. It makes sense, though. She worshipped my father. It must have been like the President's kid traipsing in to score some drugs. I remember the way her beetle eyes crinkled and creased in amusement.

I consider making a crack about Luke's goofy wolf lighter, but elect against it. He's being nice to me, I realize. As nice, at least, as Luke can be. I'm not really sure why, but I decide that I might as well go with it. The flame dances against the tip of the joint. It flickers for a second and then leaks a little curl of smoke. He takes it in his lips and inhales deeply, his eyes falling shut. For a moment, he holds his breath. Then he lets it out, slow and easy, the smoke blowing out of his nostrils like he's some sort of dragon.

The windows are rolled up, and already the smoke is making the corners of my eyes water and the back of my throat start to sting. I resist the urge to cough through the tickle in my throat.

Luke offers me the joint. "Go on," he says.

"Nothing happened the last time."

"Meh. Nothing ever really does, the first time. Give it another try.

Besides," he adds, as I take the joint from him, "I can guarantee that the stuff Honovi sold you is not of this caliber." He leans over, lowering his voice

conspiratorially. “Let’s just say we don’t like to waste too much of the good stuff on the middle schoolers of West Pine.”

“So what, you’re a drug dealer now?”

He laughs again. “Nah, I wouldn’t go that far. I prefer ‘partner in the family business.’”

I seal my lips around the joint and take a cautious puff, making sure to pull the smoke all the way through to my lungs instead of just letting it fill my mouth. Just like Katie taught me. My airway constricts immediately, and I hack and cough, my face screwed up. Luke just laughs and urges me to try again.

For a while, that’s how it goes. We pass the joint back and forth, hot-boxing the car. It helps. My head doesn’t clear, but the all the noise that’s been banging around in it, all the volume that’s been ricocheting across it from one end to the other is weirdly drowned out. It’s like a television tuned out of focus – it’s not completely off, but a sort of static fuzz washes over the distinct noises. White noise, it’s called. I wonder what the opposite of white noise is. Dirty noise? I think about posing this question to Luke, but it seems so silly. I giggle, a little.

“Working this time?”

I smile. We swap turns dragging on the joint and sit in silence. I focus on the white noise in my head. It’s peaceful, and I’m grateful to Luke for giving it to me.

“It’s getting dark,” I observe, after some undeterminable amount of time.

And it is. The sun is low in the western sky, and the light has faded into dusk. We're still pulled over at the side of the road. It's a choir night for Mom. It'll be a few hours before she misses me.

The trees that loom over us appear darker, cast longer shadows. The glow of the blunt doesn't illuminate much, and soon Luke puts out the stub on the dashboard. We continue to sit. The light continues to die. The last hazy bands of pink fade to blue. The trees tower above us. It's beautiful. I say it out loud: "It's beautiful."

"Yeah," says Luke, "I know." And then, after a pause, "You know, it won't all be bad."

"What won't be?"

"Changing."

My stomach sinks weirdly. I haven't really forgotten, but still. The words register on a level of consciousness from which I'm actively trying to separate myself.

"I always wanted to live out here," he continues, "to just go out in the mountains and experience it all. You know? To live like my ancestors."

I chuckle dryly. "We should trade places, then. I'm pretty sure my ancestors were Canadian shoe salesmen."

He looks at me then, his face solemn and controlled. His eyes are bright and hard. "You're lucky," he says softly. "I know I gave you crap, but seriously."

Skookum blood – that’s not a curse. That’s an honor. Your father...”

“Was a monster,” I finish for him. I’m suddenly fed up with this talk of honor, like Bigfoot is some sort of God of the Wilderness. Like I’m supposed to become the incredible hairy woman with a smile of gratitude on my face.

“He was special,” Luke says. “And so are you. You come from somewhere, Dori. You know? You’re a part of something bigger. Do you have any idea how many people wish they had that?”

“Everyone comes from somewhere.” I remember my mother trying to convince me that I was immaculately conceived, just one of the many origin stories she fed me throughout my childhood. “Big feet or not, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t have a father.”

Luke is quiet. I hunker down in my seat and fold my arms across my chest. It’s dark, now, and the temperature is dropping. Condensation begins to gather in little droplets on the windshield. A thought pops into my mind: who knows how many more times I’ll be able to sit in a car like this? Who knows how long I have before I’m too big to fit beneath the roof of the car without folding in on myself? I willfully shove the thought away, trying to refocus on my white noise.

Eventually, Luke breaks the silence. “Here,” he says. “Lean the seat back.”

He reaches across my lap and grasps what I guess is a lever on my right side, and the seat tilts back away from my body until it’s almost horizontal. He

does the same to his, and then leans back, stretching his arms up and folding them behind his head. I stay upright for a moment. I still don't entirely trust his intentions. But in the end, I'm too high to really care. I fall back, too. My eyes gaze upward at the roof of the truck. I imagine that there's a convertible top, and I can see out and up at the stars as they start to peek out of the inky black sky.

I don't have it in mind to say anything, so I'm a little surprised when I do. "I'm scared, is all," is what comes out, which startles me even more. Then again, here I am - horizontal in a car, at night, next to a boy, half stoned out of my mind. If I haven't yet, it's probably about time to give up trying to understand anything that's going on in my life.

"That's stupid," Luke says.

I turn on my side to face him. "Are you kidding me?"

He shrugs. "You have a destiny. You may not be able to change it, but you can embrace it. It's right there, all laid out before you and ready for the taking."

"You've been spending too much time listening to Honovi."

"And you've been spending too much time reading Seventeen Magazine."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to mean that you should quit worrying about Logan Ford and the Prom and all that bullshit. Forget it. It's not important. Just think about it, Dori. If your biggest problem in the world is that you're being called to face your destiny, I'd say you're pretty lucky."

“My biggest problem is that I’m changing, beyond my control, into some sort of mythical creature.”

“You have a calling. You have a purpose.”

“I don’t have a purpose. You said so yourself. The source doesn’t need protecting. It’s a big joke.” I can’t help but laugh a little, at the sheer absurdity of it all. Maybe it’s the weed. “Anyway, I don’t want a calling. I just want to be normal, like everyone else.”

“Normal,” he repeats, “like everyone else. Like Logan Ford?”

“What do you have against Logan?”

“Besides his ridiculous, teeny-bopper hair? Nothing. Apart from, you know, the whole vapid and shallow and moronic thing.”

“He isn’t moronic. He’s nice. He’s nice, and he’s normal.”

“Do you want to hear a story?” Luke asks, suddenly.

“What kind of a story?”

“A true one.”

“Sure.”

He clears his throat, ceremoniously. “Ahem. Once upon time, there was this little boy. Let’s call him... I dunno... Duke.”

I laugh. “Okay. Duke.”

“So Duke was a happy little kid, for the most part. His daddy died long ago; but it was long before he was born, so Duke didn’t miss him, much. He had

his mother. He worshipped her. She was beautiful, caring, kind, and loved a mean rock song. Then do you know what happened?"

"What?"

"She shipped Duke off to live with his aunt. Or at least, some lady who was supposed to be his aunt. A lady he'd never seen so much as a photograph of before in his life, let alone met. 'It'll only be for a little while,' Mom said. 'Your aunt needs your help with a very special job.' But then she dropped him off, slammed the car door shut, and took off. Duke was twelve. He never saw her again."

Outside, the crickets are chirping. I glance quickly at Luke's face. It's impassive. "I'm sorry that happened," I say.

He shrugs. "It's life. Look. I've got nothing but Honovi, and school, and maybe a future acting like some kind of bodyguard for you... though I've got to say, you're a lot smarter than your father, so I doubt you'll end up needing it. But you... Dori, your life means something. You have a real purpose."

"You have a purpose too, though."

He laughs. "Yeah - you! And it looks like I'm going to be needed just as much to protect you as you're going to be needed to protect the source. You have time, though," he adds. "It may not be a purpose you can act on now. But someday, maybe. You have all the time in the world to figure it out. Certainly longer than I do, at least."

I let Luke drive me home. It must be later than I thought. The house is mostly dark, but I can see the faint glow of a single light through the window, and my mother's car is in the driveway. I say goodbye to Luke and creep in through the back door.

As I pass through the living room, I freeze. Mom is lying on the sofa, asleep. There's an empty glass in her hand - just a regular water glass - but a bottle of whiskey sits on the end table next to the couch. About a quarter of it is gone. I can smell the alcohol thick on the air. Memories stir within me, and fear. I shudder. For a minute, I consider touching her shoulder or shaking her arm, and waking her up so that she can go to bed. I stand there for a moment, arm half outstretched. But then I let it fall. I turn away, and climb the stairs.

I don't want to know. Not tonight.

The next morning, she bustles cheerfully around the kitchen, pouring my orange juice and serving me pancakes. I wonder if she remembers the previous night. I decide to forget it.

* * *

At first, I think that I must be dreaming. That's always how it begins. I'm dressed only in the faded Led Zeppelin t-shirt and the pair of boy shorts I wore to sleep. My feet are bare as they glide over the packed dirt of the trail, nimbly avoiding rocks along the path and falling as easily and as comfortably as if I were running on a treadmill. I have no recollection of getting out of bed.

Although the night air is chilly and damp, my body feels warm as I run. It's as if I'm radiating heat from within. Not sweaty, sticky heat, like when I panted through ballet class as a kid or was forced to fake my way through field hockey games in gym class, but a soft, comforting heat. It's my blankets, I think to myself. It must be. I'm still tucked warm in my bed, and my blankets are wrapped snugly around me as I dream.

It can't be, though. I've had some vivid dreams before, but this leaves them all in the dust. It's not just the way the cool air kisses my face, or the gentle scrape of twigs that I can't quite dodge around on the narrow trail, or the clear sound of an owl hooting somewhere in the trees above me. I can smell the mountains, the sweet, earthy scent of dirt and vegetation. Touch and sight and hearing are senses easily fooled by dreams. Even taste can be mimicked. But I can't recall ever smelling anything in a dream, and certainly not as evocatively as I can smell the forest tonight. Just to be sure, I pinch my arm hard. I'm still in the woods, and I'm glad.

Now I veer from the trail. I duck around branches and leap over a fallen tree trunk that rises up in front of me in the darkness. As I make my way deeper into the thicket, a soft rustling freezes me in my tracks. I pause, holding my body utterly motionless as I wait. All is silent for a moment, and then, sure enough, something stirs in the brush in front of me. A low, sleek figure emerges from the tangle of undergrowth, prowling cautiously toward me.

My heart skips a beat as the coyote raises its head. Every instinct screams at me to run away, but something holds me rooted to the spot. The coyote's gaze levels with my own. Its pale, almond eyes are luminous in the dark. Before I can stop them, my feet begin to creep closer. Now my heart hammers against my ribcage. Surely I'm about to be devoured – or at the very least seriously maimed. He continues to watch me, though, with those large eyes, as I move closer and closer.

Now we are just inches away. A strange calm falls over me as I crouch down in front of him. I can hear his panting, and feel the hot, wet steam of his breath. Slowly, I reach out my fingers toward him. Energy radiates from his warm, sinewy body. He's confused, I can feel it. He's encountered humans before; but he's not sure what to make of me, because somehow I'm different. He's confused, but he's not afraid. His pupils dilate as the very tips of my fingers brush against his coarse fur, and then, suddenly, he pulls away.

I jump, and the spell is broken. The coyote retreats, turning to look back at me with those bright eyes one more time before disappearing again into the night.

* * *

The next weekend, I finally go biking with Logan. He picks me up at my house, pulling into the driveway in his navy blue hybrid. Luke makes cracks about the "big date" all week, but not even his teasing can dispel the excitement

that bubbles in my chest.

He's exactly three minutes early. Mom insists on coming out and meeting him, making a big show of shaking his hand and showering him with pleasantries, as if I'm not already nervous enough. We load the bikes on the rack mounted on the back of Logan's car. As he backs out of the driveway, I am careful to train my eyes away from the front window of the house, where I am positive my mother is peeking out in suspicion from behind the curtain, paralyzed with fear for me at the memory of her own coed jaunts into the mountains as a young woman.

"Sorry about... all that," I say, as soon as we've pulled out of the driveway and are headed away from civilization.

"All what?" Logan is drumming his hands on the steering wheel in rhythm to the pumping bass on the stereo. I recognize the track as one of the Crazy Horses' songs. It's the lead single off their sophomore album, *Stallions of Darkness*.

"My mom. She's really overprotective sometimes."

He hums along to the lyrics in an impassioned falsetto, swinging his hair back and forth in front of his eyes as he drives. For a minute I wonder if he actually heard me, but eventually he shakes his floppy head and grins. "No way, man," he says. "Your mom is great."

"Oh yeah?"

“Oh yeah!” He winks at me. “Maybe I asked out the wrong Thornton.”

I laugh.

“Seriously, dude. She is one hot mama.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“It’s a compliment! You clearly inherited her beauty.”

I think of this morning, and how I pilfered one of Mom’s knitting hooks to dig up the matted tangle of hair that was clogging the shower drain. It came up in sticky-looking clumps, flecked with chalky bits of dried soap scum. “Thanks,” I say.

Logan Ford is a man of few words, and we drive mostly in silence. That’s all right though. It’s a hell of a lot better than Honovi’s proselytizing, or Mom’s worrying, or Luke’s snide remarks. My eyes fall shut as I lean back in the seat, letting Logan’s warble and the thrum of guitars wash over me from the speaker system as the air from the open windows blows my bangs back from my forehead. It’s definitely better than my own inner voice chattering nervously inside my head – the absence of which is now a welcomed deviation from the torture of the past few weeks.

“What’s that on your face?” Logan asks, his voice cutting through my peace. My fingers jump to my face instantaneously. I sigh with relief: no hair, no apelike bone structure. Just a little, raised ridge on my left cheek.

“Oh! Nothing. Just a cut.” I smile. The truth is that I’ve been going out

more and more often. Every morning I tell myself that that's it, that I've had it with my nocturnal wanderings and that I'm ready to settle down. Every night, though, it's the same thing. My feet pull me out of bed, and I'm halfway up the foothills before I realize what's going on.

"You're losing control," Honovi said, her voice stern and gravelly, when I told her.

I retorted that I wasn't. But it's hard to be so sure. I woke up yesterday with the cut on my cheek, the blood still fresh and congealing. A vague recollection of the whip of a thin branch razoring across my cheek lurked at the back of my mind, but it was so utterly dreamlike that it was difficult to tell if it was real or imagined. These are the times when my heart contracts and my stomach sinks, and I wonder how long I have left, and if Honovi's special tea is anything but a well-intentioned placebo.

The sound of Logan, though – his voice next to me and pumping through the stereo – the smell of him, and the nearness of him, makes it difficult to feel anything but giddily flustered. By the time we finally pull off on the side of the road and step out into the fresh air, I can't possibly feel more human. His fingers brush against mine as he hands me my helmet from the trunk, and a cascade of butterflies sends my stomach tingling into hyper drive.

He grins slyly. "I have a secret to tell you," he says.

"Oh yeah?"

“Yep.”

I wait, but he simply raises his eyebrows and laughs.

“Well, what? What is it?”

“It’s a secret. I’m not just going to tell you.”

“Yes you are!”

“I’ll make a deal with you.”

“What kind of a deal?”

“I’ll race you to the top.”

“The top? Of what?”

“The mountain.” He points, and I shield my eyes as I tilt my gaze up toward the cliff at whose foot we stand. The peak looks dizzyingly high and desperately far away.

I laugh. “No way. You have got to be kidding me. I can’t race you!”

“Why not?”

“Because one, I’m not that good at biking, and two, you have way more experience than I do. I’d be lucky to even keep up with you on that hill, let alone beat you.”

“So that’ll be the bet,” he says. “If you can keep up with me, if you can make it all the way to the top, I’ll tell you.”

I look from Logan to the mountain and back. “This had better be a pretty good secret.”

“Oh – the best!” I guess he can see the skepticism on my face, because he quickly adds, “It’ll definitely be worth your while. I promise.”

I mull it over in my mind. This could be it. Not only could this be Logan’s attempt to make a real, definable move on me – this could be my chance to come clean to him. This could be my opportunity to divulge my own secret, to one of the people it would mean most to me to know.

I take one last look at the mountain. “Okay,” I say. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

Despite my dread, it ends up being easier than anticipated. My feet pump steadily on the pedals, and my legs feel fantastic. It’s something in the air. With every breath I pull into my lungs, it’s as if I can feel my entire body inflate. I can literally feel the air nourishing me, oxygenating my blood and fueling my muscles like one efficient machine.

For the first time in weeks, I am happy – truly, genuinely happy. Despite the fact that I’m virtually drinking in the forest around me, I find that my whole struggle – the burden of guarding my secret, my despair at the danger of turning, my fear – is so simply pushed away. I know that it’s there, but it simmers just below the surface of my conscious mind, so that I can push it back down and subdue it at will.

Logan is quiet, but our silence feels like a companionable one. Besides, our surroundings are far from silent. Everywhere, the Willamette wilderness is filled with the singing of birds, and the soft rustling of the wind in the leaves. It all

sounds fresh and alert, just the way I feel. And then there's Logan's voice, playing over and over in my head. *It'll definitely be worth your while.*

When Logan skids to a halt, I'm almost surprised to realize that we've reached the top. I let my bike fall to the ground and walk out onto the precipice to join him. The sky is wide and the clearest shade of blue, and the valley is so far below us that the forest looks like nothing more than a bowl full of moss rather than an expanse of towering trees. I shake my hair out from under my helmet. My face is warm against the cool wind.

"Not bad, Thornton," Logan says. "You've got more metal than I thought."

Pride swells in my chest. "Yeah. Well, maybe you shouldn't underestimate me." I nudge a little round pebble with the toe of my shoe, sending it over the edge.

"I guess I have to tell you my secret now, huh?"

"I guess so."

He moves close to me, closer than he has before. I see the glisten of the light sheen of perspiration on his skin, and smell his sweat. It isn't a stink, per say. It's an earthy sort of smell, a mixture of Irish Spring soap and wet leaves.

"The truth is, I dig you, kid." My heart hammers against my ribcage. Suddenly, my consciousness jolts – a crack, a tremor, a flutter of wings – as the pebble I kicked connects with a branch and sends a startled bird flying. *Focus,*

Dori, I command myself, yanking my mind back into my own body. I focus on Logan's face. There's a freckle beneath his left eye. If anything will keep me anchored, it's that freckle. I hold onto it for dear life.

"You're..." he pauses, as if searching for words. His fingers find the little cut on my cheek, tracing it lightly and sending a shock of heat surging through my body. "... a really cool girl," he finishes. My logical mind, the cynical, rational (single) *Dori*, quietly points out that this is kind of a lame declaration of love, but I promptly swat her out of my head.

"I like you too," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Cool."

The sun is beating down on us, and I'm suddenly warm all over. I unzip my fleece, tugging it off my shoulders. It's unearthly beautiful up here. The trees cast long shadows, and the light plays off the angles of Logan's face like he's a work of art, like Michelangelo's *David* or something. My heart is still racing. I feel like I'm about to go into cardiac arrest, but I don't care. I want to tell him. I want to spill my guts to this boy, tell him my secret, share the most intimate part of myself - even if the most intimate part of myself is that I'm actually half ape-creature. The words fall out my mouth before I can even think of how to frame them:

“Logan, I have something to tell you to.”

“Wait,” he interrupts, “I’m not done mine yet.”

“Oh?”

“No. I also think it would be cool if we went to Prom together.”

I feel like I might faint. “All right,” I manage to gasp out.

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

“And I also want to kiss you now.”

This time, I can’t even manage an affirmative. My mouth has stopped working. Maybe it realizes that it now has a higher calling beyond forming words and sentences. Every task it’s ever completed seems obsolete beside this, its greatest and most important moment.

And then, he’s kissing me. I’ve never been struck by lightning, but I imagine that this is what it feels like. My body is being struck by lightning again and again, until I can no longer feel my knees or my feet or even, really, my lips. I hope I’m not shaking, because that would be horribly embarrassing. All I know is that my entire body is on fire, my heart is drumming so hard and fast that my ribs are in danger of breaking, and I feel a strange tingling sensation all over. I wonder if this is what kissing is like in general, or if this sensation is related in particular to kissing Logan Ford. I conclude that I neither know nor care, as long as this sensation doesn’t stop.

But, suddenly, it does.

Logan's face swims in and out of focus through the haze. He's saying something. At first, I can't comprehend it; but then he repeats himself: "Are you okay?"

For a split second I'm completely dumbfounded – and then it hits me. I'm gasping, gasping for breath that I cannot get into my lungs quickly enough. My heart is jack-hammering and my body is burning up. Something isn't right. The blood pulses beneath my skin in a dull throb, like the warm swelling of a bee sting. My skin begins to prickle. Something isn't right.

"Are you okay?"

Logan's voice barely registers, splashing like a feeble ripple against the mountain of noise that I have just crashed into. I can hear the crackling of a squirrel nibbling on an acorn in the trees above us, the thud of deer hooves pattering across the forest floor. Below my feet, worms and spiders and beetles and ants slither and scurry through the dark earth. My chest rises and falls uncontrollably. My shirt clings unbearably to my body, suffocating my crawling skin.

I can feel my toes begin to curl in the confines of my Nikes. I am reminded, vaguely, of the Easter I tried to squeeze into my favorite purple and white saddle shoes, which I had outgrown over the summer. All through church I could think of nothing but the way they pressed against my feet, and the

pictures I had seen in school of the Chinese women whose feet had been trained into gnarled little lumps by being forced into doll sized slippers. I'd wanted to scream all through the service, to tear the shoes from my poor crushed feet and fling them straight through the stained glass window. The ache had been unbearable. This is significantly worse.

Logan's hand is on my shoulder. "Dori, are you all right? Your face is really flushed."

"I'm fine," I lie, through gritted teeth. *I'm not fine.*

"Let's just sit down a minute." He tosses his backpack on the ground and tears through it. "I have my phone in here somewhere. Are you allergic to something? Did you get stung by a bee? My sister's allergic to bees. I know how to use an EpiPen. Oh no," his face falls, "I don't have an EpiPen. Where is my goddamn phone? I can call someone. Should I call someone? Dori?"

His voice becomes increasingly dim, like the soft buzz of mosquitoes. The air smells so good. I suck it in faster, my head reeling. No. No, no, no. "No," I say. I have to focus. This can't happen; not now, not like this. "No, I'm fine. I just feel a little sick is all." *I'm changing.* "I just - I just need to go." *I need to go now.*

Whatever Logan's response is, I do not hear it.

I am gone.

The heat of my body slices through the wind like a hot knife through cold butter. The faster I run, the better I begin to feel. The stinging burn that had

racked my body subsides into a warm tingle as I wrench the t-shirt over my head and fling it from me. My shoes are long gone. I can't even remember removing them from my feet. I imagine I must have just exploded out of them.

The earth rises and falls beneath my steady feet, breathing through the steady massage of *heel-ball-toe, heel-ball-toe* as I run. It is so old, the earth, so incredibly ancient. I feel crazy. I feel like tilting my head back and laughing as I run. Am I crazy?

"Dooorrrriiiii!"

I skid to a halt, reality tilting sickeningly back into focus. Logan. Of course he would go looking for me, I realize, shame seeping through me.

How long have I been waiting to go on a date with Logan? And now I've gone and ruined it. I tossed my bike aside and dashed into the forest like a crazy person. Either he will think I am seriously ill, or that I'm on some serious drugs. Then, of course, there is the issue that I am standing in the middle of the forest stark naked, probably covered in fur.

I look down, assessing the situation. Check and check.

Bike riding was a terrible choice. Why couldn't we have just gone to see a movie like a normal couple? Maybe grabbed some burgers at the diner? Honovi warned me about this. The corners of my eyes prickle as I slide down the trunk of a Douglass fir, hugging my legs to my chest. How could I be so incredibly stupid? Trying in vain to choke back tears, I cannot decide which is worse: the

fact that I ditched Logan in the middle of the trail, or the fact that I now have to go back and face him, to assure him that I am all right. Like this. Like a monster.

Despite myself, I let my eyes fall shut and try to find him. I feel a slight pang of guilt even just at using my abilities, but I can't bring myself not to. I suppose if I'm going to be stuck as a sasquatch, I may as well take advantage of what small benefits the change offers. I focus on the forest. It doesn't take long to find Logan. He is maybe a mile off. I must have run even faster than I'd realized. I can sense his anxiety, as well as his discomfort. He's stumbling through the woods, my discarded fleece cradled in his arms as he tramps over logs and around trees.

Oh no. My fleece. My heart sinks as I realize what I've done.

I shed my clothes without thinking as I ran. My fleece, my shoes... my bra. Not only am I standing immense and hairy in the middle of the wilderness, but my worried, confused, abandoned date is liable to find nothing of me but a trail of my cast-away clothing littered across the forest floor. Another thought, even more terrible, strikes me. If Logan is looking for me (which, my senses assure me, he is), if Logan finds my clothing strewn about, left behind in the wake of a trail of trampled earth and broken sticks, what is it going look like? An attack? Abduction? The actions of a psychotic teenaged girl?

A vision of police with flashlights and a pack of dogs combing the forest for signs of Dori Thornton swims before my eyes. Running off in the middle of

our date would be difficult enough to explain to Logan; but my behavior, my disappearance, the abandoned clothing – how could I justify that to the police?

An awful sound, something between a moose bleat and the death wail of cow, rings in my ears; and it takes a moment to recognize it as the moan that's just escaped my own mouth. The ugly sound just makes me cry harder. Dori, the beast of West Pine. Dori, the hairy howler.

Shake it off, Dori, I think, rising to my feet. There is a solution to this. I can move, and move quickly. The run from Logan to here was a pretty straight shot. All I have to do is retrace my steps. If I can collect my clothing before Logan spots it, I can at least avoid having to force him to face the mystery of why I stripped it off in the first place.

My feet carry me swiftly through the forest. Their dexterity, agility, and strength are astounding. I can't think about the implications of this just now, though. I'm too nervous, too keyed up about Logan, to really focus on anything other than the task at hand. I find my underwear, snatch it up. It's like there's a wall, a buttress between my conscious mind and the reality of what I now am. Lucky, in a sense. The panic associated with this realization lurks just below the surface, hiding beneath the full-scale panic at the thought of Logan discovering my discarded clothing. I block out all thoughts and fears about my metamorphosis. I shut down the part of my mind longing to wander across the multiple consciousnesses of the mountains.

Time is running short. I've collected everything but the t-shirt. I recognize a couple of spots on the trail – a low hanging branch here, a particular scattering of flowers there – and I know I must be close.

Finally I spot the top, tangled in a low bush to the side of the main trail. I stoop low to pick it up. I'm about to straighten, when a dull wail punctuates the quiet air. I slowly look up, my worst fear coming true.

"Oh my God." He stares dumbfounded at me – at my stature, my figure, the pile of clothing I grip in my hands. "Oh my God."

"Logan," I try to say, but he begins to scream, turns, and flees.

And, just like that, I'm alone again. I think about chasing him, but I'm too numb to move my body. For a long time, I just stand there. I hear him as he reaches the car, yanks the door open, and squeals away from the wilderness.

I stand at the precipice of the cliff, where Logan and I stood, it seems, just moments ago. Where he kissed me – my first kiss and, I realize with a wrench of despair like a knife being thrust into my gut, possibly my last. I try to remember it, but I can't. All I can see is the look on his face, a look of horror and disgust and malice. I tried to fight off the sounds flooding my senses all day, but now, all I can hear is his scream – the scream of someone fleeing from a monster. Which I am. I am, I am, I am.

Dori Thornton: The Mystery Beast of West Pine, Oregon.

* * *

Honovi is home when I show up at her front door late in the evening, after fleeing who knows how many miles through the mountains. I'm not even sure how I found it. The sixth skookum-sense, no doubt. I barely have any recollection of running. There is only Honovi's face, when she opens the door and sees me – a full-fledged beast, heaving and frothing at the mouth in panic and exertion. Even she looks impressed.

The shop is immediately closed. The sign on the door says that she is ill and will reopen as soon as she's feeling better. I feel like a fugitive being harbored by Honovi like this. She clears out the back corner of her hut, a little chamber beyond the first room behind the animal hide flap, and piles it with old blankets and rags for me to sleep on. I curl up in the fetal position, my massive body feeling gargantuan and clunky even as I compress myself as soon as I hit the pile of blankets. Once I am down, I barely move. I am afraid to see my body. I am scared of my size, my shape, my thick, red fur.

Time seems to blink by in a second.

I know it must be tomorrow when there's a quick knock at the door, and Luke rushes into the room before I can even open my mouth to answer him. I'm sitting on the floor in the corner, hunkered up with my back against the wall. It's a struggle to force my eyes to meet his; but I raise them defiantly, refusing to let him detect any hint of shame on my face.

He stands frozen in the doorway. For a minute he just stares, appraising.

It's the old Luke Bane all over again. Finally, he lets out a long, low whistle.

"That's more like it, s'quatch," he says. "I'm sorry I ever doubted you."

"Hairy enough for you now?" I manage, weakly.

He shakes his head. "Dori, I can't even get my beard to connect yet. You put me to shame."

I search his face for signs of repulsion and disgust. The only reflective surface in the back room is the windowpane, and even that is so clouded with dirt and grime that it would be impossible to get a good look at myself. I have yet to see the creature that I've become, but with Logan's terrified screams still echoing painfully in my memory, I can only suspect the worst. Luke betrays no hint of revulsion, though. To be fair, I'm admittedly not the first skookum he's encountered. It's still hard to imagine that my crouched, hairy figure makes for a pleasant sight.

"This can't be happening to me," I moan, unable to hold my guard up any longer. "What am I supposed to do?"

"We could smoke," he suggests.

"No! How is that helpful at all?"

"Sorry!" He moves beside me and sits on the floor, crossing his legs.

"Look," he says, "don't worry. It's going to be fine." He gives my shoulder an awkward pat. I'm now a full head taller than Luke is, and he has to reach up a little to do it.

“In what way is it going to be fine?”

“Have you ever thought about trying out for the basketball team?”

I punch him lightly in the arm. I’m as startled as Luke is when he goes reeling backwards from the impact of the blow with a yelp of pain.

“Oops!” I say, as he mopes and rubs his arm. I feel a little bad. Sort of.

“Boxing,” Luke says through gritted teeth. “I take back the basketball suggestion. Definitely boxing.”

* * *

I am the face on the back of the milk carton. Not literally. But I am an official missing person. In the first three days following my disappearance, a search party scours the wilderness in hopes of recovering my body.

The prospects for my recovery – alive, at least – seem grim. I scan the newspaper clipping Luke brings me. My whole body, eyes included, has become completely numb. Even as I read the words on the page, I feel like I’m looking at them through the reverse end of a telescope. The person the words are about, this Dori Thornton, seems a distant abstraction. A memory. Which is exactly what the good citizens of West Pine expect her to become.

According to Logan’s report, it seems most likely that Dori Thornton was attacked and, tragically, probably devoured, by an enormous grizzly bear. Logan bravely confronted the creature as he went in search of his girlfriend (this is the label I am given in the papers, and one which rings bittersweet as I read the

word – one of the only things that has been able to penetrate, however briefly, through the thick cloud of fog that surrounds my head), and witnessed the animal clutching some of the girl’s clothing.

I can only imagine what the people in school must be saying. I remember a boy in our fifth grade class who died in a freak fire, and how we all lit candles and sat outside the gymnasium after school the next day. A vigil, it was called. It’s Katie’s face, and not Logan’s, for some reason, that I picture again and again, the tears that streak down her cheeks illuminated in the glow of candlelight as she realizes how evil she was to me, how horrible she was for betraying her closest friend.

Luke probably knows the answers to these questions – How has the school reacted? Was there a vigil? Is Katie properly broken up? – but after he shows me the newspaper clippings, I simply turn from him and Honovi and barricade myself from the world. And the question that tugs at my mind the most, the question of Mom, alone in the house, left abruptly and without explanation or reason, I cannot even begin ask myself. Each time the image of the bottle on the table and the empty glass lolling in her hand starts to surface, I shove it down into the dark recesses of my mind.

There is a picture of me in one of the clippings from the *Daily Pine*. It’s my school photo from last year. I refuse to look at it at first, and later stare at it for hours as I lay in silence in the back of the hut. I feel as if I’ve never seen this

person before. Her face is small and round and pale, with a dusting of light freckles, and her hair – obviously red, even in the black and white newsprint – falls in bushy waves around her face. She smiles, happy, blissfully ignorant of what fate has in store for her. It's like looking at my own obituary. In a way, I am.

* * *

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I'm jolted awake to the sound of a fist pounding on Honovi's front door. Immediately, panic grips at my chest. It couldn't be Honovi, and now Luke – who lives, I've since discovered, in a tiny apartment in town – has his own key. Is anybody else home? There's a pause, and then the knocking begins again, this time harder and more persistent. Please go away.

The tightness in my chest loosens slightly when Honovi's voice suddenly calls out, "I'm closed! Can't you read the sign?" At least, I think, I'm not alone.

"I'm not looking for any chronic, lady, I need to ask you about my friend!"

I couldn't spring to my feet any faster if a hornet stung me on the butt. A large thump shudders through the house as I land on my feet, making the glass vials on the bookshelf clink and rattle. That voice – I'd know that voice anywhere.

"What are you doing?" hisses Honovi, her head appearing from around the partition just as I rush out of my little chamber.

“That’s Katie,” I reply breathlessly.

“Who?”

“Katie! My best friend, Katie. Well, at least, she was my best friend.” The words spill out of me like diarrhea of the mouth. For weeks she treated me like crap, and now here she is, on Honovi’s doorstep. And if she’s not looking for drugs...

“I’m here about Dori Thornton,” Katie is yelling through the thick wooden door.

“Let her in,” I urge.

“What, to see you?”

“No! I’ll stay back here.”

Honovi raises her eyebrows.

“I know she was with you,” Katie calls. “Seeing you. Let me in or I’ll – I’ll call the police!”

“Please,” I plead with Honovi. I can’t describe it, but I need to hear what Katie has to say. I need to know what she’s thinking.

Katie is still pounding, *bang bang bang bang*, continuously in even knocks. She shows no indication of stopping.

“You stay here,” Honovi warns sternly. “Do not move. Do not *breathe*.”

They think you were killed by a beast, and if they find a beast in my home, I will be the one to blame.”

“That doesn’t even make sense – and you know there’s no chance in hell I want to get caught. Just let her in.”

With a quick nod, Honovi disappears.

The hammering of my heart is so loud in my chest that I feel certain Katie will hear it as soon as she steps through the front door.

“Hurry up and come in,” I can hear Honovi say, her voice creaky and irritable. “You woke an old woman from a nap. This must be important.”

I suck the air into my lungs and hold it, barely daring to breathe. Katie’s presence suddenly fills the cabin. It’s the strangest thing. She’s worn the same perfume since eighth grade, and I suppose, if pressed, I could have recognized it from a lineup. But I never really noticed it before. Now, with my freshly minted skookum senses, the smell of her is immediately identifiable. It’s as if the air is saturated with *Katie*. A pang of loss shoots through me. Just feet away, I miss her more than ever.

“It is important,” Katie says. I hear the scrape of a chair, but only one. Honovi, I imagine. Katie isn’t one to conduct an argument sitting down. “I need to know if you know anything about Dori.”

“Who?” Honovi asks innocently.

“Dori. Dori Thornton? The girl who disappeared? The girl who everybody’s looking for? And stop. I know she was spending time with you. My friend saw her bike outside your cabin.”

Mystified, I wonder who this could be.

“Ah. Yes.” Honovi is quiet for a minute. “Yes, I do know Dori Thornton.”

“Do know her? As in, she’s still alive?”

I can’t help but be warmed by the swell of hopefulness in Katie’s voice.

“How should I know?” Honovi replies. “She is not dead, is she? Last I heard, still no body.”

“Yeah. Well, considering that the last person who saw her ran into a ferocious animal in possession of her shredded clothing, I don’t think the odds are looking so great.”

Shredded? I cast my mind back and try to remember. I can recall gathering up the clothes afterwards, but not that they were particularly tattered or anything. Maybe I hadn’t removed them, after all; maybe they had simply been torn from my body by the sheer force of my self-expansion. Maybe the story had been sensationalized. I remember the shrill squeal of Logan’s scream. Had he dramatized our final encounter? Tried to make himself look more heroic?

“If an animal killed her, why ask me?”

“I dunno,” Katie says. “It just doesn’t seem right. I mean, when she disappeared, they didn’t just poke around in the woods for a few hours, you know? They had the whole police force and half of West Pine out combing the woods. We even got to leave school early to help search. They had helicopters, dogs.”

My mind reels. I had no idea. I imagined that a few park rangers might have been dispatched, and (somewhat wistfully) that maybe Logan had joined them, searching in vain for his lost date while simultaneously composing a memorial ballad in my honor for the Crazy Horses' new demo. I don't know whether to be more humbled that the town showed such concern for my recovery or relieved that I chose to flee here rather than out into the woods.

She continues, "You'd think that if she were out there, they'd have found her. I heard that they even found a bear. Shot it."

Inexplicably, this news sends a jolt of sadness and rage through me.

"They opened it up, in case, well, you know. But there was no sign of her."

"Well that's good, hmm?" Honovi says.

"Yeah." Katie's voice is cautious. "I guess so. It just doesn't add up. And because I heard she'd been coming here, it got me thinking. Maybe Dori got mixed up in something. Drugs, whatever. Maybe she didn't get attacked at all. Maybe she just needed an excuse to get out of town."

The thought of me getting involved in drugs is ridiculous. I almost laugh. Dori Thornton: drug smuggler. In an odd way, that would almost be stranger than the actual truth.

Honovi must be thinking something along the same lines, because I can hear the suppressed mirth in her voice when she replies, "No. No, I do not think

so. Dori came to me for medicine only. No drugs. She had – what do you call it? Growing pains.”

I can only try to picture Katie’s expression at that one.

The two are silent a moment, and then Katie says, “All right. Well, thanks anyway.”

“I hope that they find her soon,” Honovi says, knowing full well that they will not.

“To be honest,” Katie replies, “I wasn’t really expecting much, anyway. I came as a favor to a friend.”

“Ah, a favor to Dori, you mean?”

I silently thank Honovi for knowing how badly I need to hear Katie say the words. What comes out of her mouth next, though, nearly winds me.

“No. My best friend’s boyfriend, actually.” I know almost before she says the words, and an awful, sick feeling seeps into my heart like black sludge. “He used to see Dori, I guess, before he dated her. He was the one with Dori the day she disappeared.”

* * *

The days all blur into one day. I sleep a lot and eat a little. Luke brings me photocopies of worksheets and notes from school, and leaves his own books lying around in the back of the shop.

“Why would I need that now?” I ask. I think about the little Stanford

banner pinned to the wall in my room at home and feel queasy.

“I thought you liked school,” he says. “Maybe it will help take your mind off things.”

The problem is that I don't need my mind “taken off” of anything, because my mind seems to be in a slow state of atrophy. I stare at the wood panels of the wall and let my eyes trace over the pattern of the grain, following it in loops and circles until it disappears into the corner of the wall or dies off at a dead end. I breathe in the scent of marijuana and homemade soup and crushed herbs. I watch a spider scurry across the floor.

For days, I do nothing but this; so it's not surprise that when, one night, I abruptly rise to my feet and creep out the back door, no one even notices.

At first, I just run. It's been so long since I smelled fresh air. One would think that, given my size, I'd crash through the woods like an elephant. I've always been a clumsy kid. But it's incredible how smoothly I glide through the forest. It's completely effortless, and almost completely soundless. I settle into the rhythm of running, listening to my own breath. It isn't until I'm almost at my destination that I realize where I'm running.

All in all, it takes me about ten minutes to reach to the high school. I avoid the roads, thinking of my father's untimely end, and cut through the woods. I can sense a group of kids nearby, huddled together under the trees. They pass a flask back and forth, but they are harmless. I veer further south to avoid them

and run instead beside a family of deer. Funny, that in the forest I feel somehow less isolated than I do in the real world. Then again, I guess that anything is better than high school.

I crouch low and move up against the large glass windows that line the far side of the gymnasium. Music pumps from under the double doors. I press my face against the glass, confident that the cover of darkness outside is enough to shield me from sight. Inside the gym, fake trees unfurl from the ground and twinkle lights hang like starbursts from the rafters. The girls are beautiful with their glamorous coifs and dresses in every color of the rainbow. I search the crowd for my own starlit gown, and take some pleasure, at least, from confirming that no one else has stolen my style. The light pours out from the window but I remain just to the left of its glow, concealed in shadow.

I spot Katie, in her marigold dress, gyrating with a bunch of the other dance team girls. And there, over by the punch bowl, is Logan. He looks just like I imagined he would, all those weeks ago at the mall in Eugene. And sure enough, there's Jenny Baker, blabbing away in Logan's ear. There were always rumors about Jenny and Logan. I wonder how long it took after his trauma in the Willamette wilderness for him to fall back into his old flame's arms. Truthfully, I'd rather not know.

For all Mrs. Baker's piety, I notice that she didn't stop Jenny from picking a dress with the most deeply plunging neckline conceivably possible. She flaunts

this rather conspicuously in front of Logan, but he seems distracted. He fishes his cell from his pocket, pulls it halfway out, and then releases it. I can't help but wonder if he's just caught himself checking for a text that he knows will never come. My heart jumps to my throat as his eyes glance over in my direction; but he cannot see me.

Rain begins to fall. The smell is intoxicating. It intensifies the scent of the fir trees, and the grass, and the moss that creeps across the forest floor. I turn my head toward the mountains and inhale. The deer are waiting for me. I can feel that they have missed running with my father, and I am suddenly eager to rejoin them.

I look back only once. Does Logan miss me? Does he wonder even now if I'll come striding through the door, decked out in my gown with my hair pinned up in curls? It's a nice picture, and I play it over in my head. He'll get over it, though. In time, he'll forget. And so will I.

I already feel better as I turn from window and sprint off into the night, like I am part of something older and wiser. Logan can wait. Maybe I will come back to him someday, and tell him my secret, tell him the truth. Maybe next week, or next year. There is no rush. The vanishing of Dori Thornton will become just another point of gossip – like the sophomore who got plastered and made out with Mrs. Lesnicki in the janitor's closet, or my mother's mysterious pregnancy eighteen years ago, or Honovi the medicine woman, or Lionel's

mystery beast. And, like the rest of those blips on the face of West Pine's history, it will fade in time.

* * *

May melts into June, the last lingering coolness of spring vanishing as the first hint of summer slides over West Pine like a dream. Early summer has always been my favorite time of year. The warmth and the green and the sunshine converge over the valley, and I can feel the knot in my chest loosen little by little.

During the days, Luke keeps me company. We play Scrabble and talk, and sometimes watch movies on the staticky little television set Honovi bought for twenty-five bucks at the flea market. When Luke is busy, I read.

After weathering the stupor of my first several weeks as a bona fide sasquatch, my brain has gradually returned to me. I've begun to realize that I have options – real options.

"Distance learning," I say, while Luke and I play rummy one afternoon. It strikes me all at once, and I'm so excited that I drop all my cards and we have to start over. I'm still getting used to the size of my hands.

"What were you saying?"

"Distance learning," I repeat. "Online college."

Luke raises an eyebrow. "Now there's an idea."

The possibility of still being able to get an education, completely

anonymously, in private and away from the prying eyes of judgmental students and research-hungry zoology professors, instills a blaze of hope in my chest more powerful than I can describe. I force Luke to get a library card so he can start checking out books for me. I read voraciously – fiction, poetry, even nonfiction.

“You will have to have a false name,” Honovi warns. “Dori Thornton is dead, remember.”

“She can have my name!” Luke laughs. “I’m not going to college anyway. I’ll just register for online courses and she can do the work. Ouch!” Honovi’s apple hits him over the head. “You’re going to give me a concussion one of these days, woman.”

“You will go to college,” Honovi orders, “whether or not Dori does.”

“All right, all right!”

We go on like this for a while, me sleeping in the back of Honovi’s place, eating Honovi’s food. It takes about a month to realize that my transformation is still in motion. As usual, Honovi is two steps ahead of me.

The fourth time I whack my head on the ceiling while standing up, Honovi decides that it’s time for a change.

“Sorry, sorry!” I say, quickly stooping to grab a broom. The impact of my head against the roof sent a shock wave through the whole house, knocking several vials from Honovi’s shelf and littering the floor with glass, foul-smelling

liquid, and the contents of the fetus jar. My head throbs. It's fine if I rise only partially and remember to keep my head bent slightly downwards. "I'm not used to being so tall. I'll get the hang of it eventually."

Honovi has not risen from her rocking chair, despite the commotion. She sits calmly with one leg crossed over the other – an uncommonly feminine stance for her – and with one snakeskin boot lightly tapping the air. I glance at her nervously. It isn't like Honovi not to yell. Her hooded eyes are fixed on me, studying me with an air of contemplation I don't quite like.

"Is there a mop or something I can use?" I ask, my voice booming a little too loudly in the confined space.

"Dori," Honovi says, "I think it's time for you to move out."

The broom slips from my fingers. It clips the edge of the bookshelf, causing a little shudder of clinking glass, before hitting the ground with a clack.

"Be careful, child! Do you want to knock my whole house down?" Honovi reproaches sharply.

"You want me to *leave*?" It's a suggestion I have been subconsciously dreading for weeks. I knew I was getting larger. Already my back is stiff from how tightly I must curl on the blankets in the storage room in order to contain my mass while I sleep. The possibility of outgrowing the back room has been prickling at the back of my mind ever since the first time I whacked my head against the roof beams. So far, though, I've managed to keep this fear repressed.

Honovi is right, as much as it frightens me to admit it. The shack isn't meant for two people, especially not when one of them is a giant. It's little more than two rooms, a toilet, and a closet. The front, where she keeps her shop, is the most spacious. It doubles as a sitting room, and sometimes as a dining room, when she's not entertaining customers. The main room behind the animal hide is slightly smaller, and contains both Honovi's mattress – which rests on the floor rather than on a raised bed frame – and a little kitchenette. Already narrow, the room is even more cramped now that Honovi has emptied the contents of the storage closet out into the middle of the floor to accommodate me in the miniature chamber off the back of the hut. The longer I stay, the more tight and confined my little cupboard seems. But where would I hide if not at Honovi's? The alternatives are too disturbing to contemplate.

"You are too big," Honovi says. She claps shut the book that rests on her lap and rises to her feet. "I'll get the mop."

"Wait, that's it?" Typical Honovi. The memory of that first day in the woods flashes into my mind – the casualness with which she brought the truth crashing down over my unsuspecting head, the sick off-handedness of her shorthand scratched onto a to-do list. "You're just going to kick me out?"

"I am not," Honovi says, a twinge of annoyance coloring her voice, "kicking you anywhere. It is time for you to go. It will be better that way, for all of us."

I can recall using a similar phrase when breaking up with Harrison Bellows in eighth grade. Harrison was knob-kneed and smelled like mothballs. His t-shirts were perpetually coated in a thick layer of cat hair. It was certainly better for me, but not particularly, I have to admit, for him.

“What am I supposed to do? Just head on home to my mom? Hey, Mom, sorry I’ve been MIA for the past four months, but as you can see I’ve transformed into a giant forest creature. What’s for dinner?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Honovi says. “You will go live in nature, as you are meant to live.”

“Like, in the woods?”

“You did not think you would live here with me forever, did you?”

“Well what am I supposed to do? Build a house?”

Honovi snorts. “What kind of animal have you ever seen building a house?”

“A beaver?”

She ignores me. “The woods offer natural shelter, natural protection. You will be safe there, just as your father always was.”

“Where did he live?”

“I’m not sure. I know for a time I would visit him in a cave. That was when I was very young. I do not know if he always lived there.”

“What about food? What am I supposed to eat?”

“You will live off the land.”

“I’m not an animal, Honovi!”

“Aren’t you?”

For this I have no response.

“We all lived off the land at one time. It is healthiest.”

“Honovi, I just watched you make SPAM for dinner last night, and you’re going to lecture me about being healthy and natural?”

She just tut-tuts, as always.

“Anyway, I’m huge. What, so I’m just supposed to live off of berries or something?” As if on cue, my stomach growls. It is a deep, gnawing sound that has grown worse over time. The more I expand, the emptier my stomach seems.

“You will hunt.”

“Hunt?”

“And forage. Simple.”

I open my mouth to protest, but no words come. Of course I will hunt. It should come as no surprise – I am the ultimate hunter. The very nature of my powers, or whatever they’re to be called, makes me perhaps the most apt predator in the entire food chain. All it takes is a deep breath and a clear mind to see the birds hopping on Honovi’s roof, the squirrel poised on the tree trunk to the left of the cottage, or the deer grazing a little ways up the mountain side. I will barely need a tracking lesson. You don’t need to search for your prey if

you're the master of a honing system so strong that you may as well be receiving satellite television. I remember the way the deer allowed me to run alongside them, as one of them, that night in the woods. They never even attempted to elude me. They had no fear of me. It will be as simple as walking up to an animal and asking it to please salt and pepper itself.

"Sleep here tonight," Honovi says. "Tomorrow I will get Luke to help you move."

* * *

When I awake the next morning, the first thing I notice is the smell. It's overwhelming. I sit straight up from my blankets, the ache of my compressed joints temporarily forgotten, and inhale. It's amazing, a smell like nothing I have ever encountered before – sweet and heady, like sunshine, rich dirt, and rivers pregnant with fresh rain. I shake my head. I must be crazy. None of those things have a scent, at least not that I have ever noticed, but the images are evoked so clearly and sumptuously in my mind that I cannot shake the notion. The window is cracked open and I rotate my head toward it. I close my eyes, tilt my nose toward the breeze, and inhale.

"First day of summer."

I start, turning toward the door. Honovi stands there. She's dressed in a ratty, green silk bathrobe, the color of which reminds me vaguely of dried boogers, and her snakeskin boots. The low light indicates that it's probably no

earlier than eight-thirty, but already an unlit cigarette hangs from between her thin lips. She grins at me with the corner of her mouth not gripping the cigarette.

“Is that why it smells so good?” I ask.

“Your father always went crazy the first day of summer. Ran about like a stampeding elephant. You would think spring would do it, but it was always summer.”

I inhale again. I can see why. The smell is nothing short of vibrant. If the smell of spring induced feelings of growth and change, summer brings with it vitality. It is the finale that spring has been leading up to all this time. I feel drunk on the sensation, and I have not yet even left the confines of Honovi’s stuffy house.

“A good time to move,” she says simply. She was so calm last night, so resigned about the whole issue of my leaving. Her restrained temper, her matter-of-factness – I wonder now if she has planned this all along, has been waiting for this moment to push me out of the house with the knowledge that I would be distracted by the overwhelming feeling that I will burst from my skin if I don’t make it outdoors in the next thirty seconds. Right now, I find it difficult to care one way or the other.

When Luke arrives, he’s carrying two fishing poles.

I raise an eyebrow. “Fishing?”

“Yep. Though admittedly,” he adds, “I doubt you’re going to need a rod.

Didn't want to make you feel left out, though."

It's an uphill hike to the river. The back of Honovi's house juts up against forestland, and the foliage is thick and dense. Between the shelter of the trees and my own ability to sense humans – sometimes from miles away, if I really concentrate – it's relatively safe for us to navigate the trail.

The leaves are lush and green, and the poplars sway gently in warm breeze. I try to walk slowly, since Luke cannot match my wide strides, but it's torturous to linger so much when every instinct urges me onward in the wilderness. The trail is narrow, and lined on each side by a tangle of woody shrubs. The soft twitter of birds comes now and again from the nests hidden inside these little shelters.

At first it's awkward, walking side by side with Luke. Most of our interactions since the change have been confined to the back room of Honovi's cabin, and most of them have involved me sitting down. Standing beside him, I tower at least two and half feet above the top of Luke's head. I've never been particularly tall. I spent half my childhood staring up at leggy Katie. It's strange looking down at him as we talk. Mostly, then, I just keep my eyes on the trail.

Often, my senses wander. It's easier to stay in control in this body than my old one when I jump between perspectives. I find myself less falling into animals' heads than existing in some sort of simultaneous consciousness, where I can feel them at the same time as I can see the trail ahead. When I suddenly find

myself inside the head of little salamander, body poised on a warm rock, I know we must be close.

I hear the river before I see it, and smell it before that. It's more of a creek than a river. Bank to bank, it's only about hundred feet wide. The water runs murky from the rain, but is beginning to warm. The side we stand on laps onto a little strip of pebbled shore, with one big boulder that juts out onto the river. It's the kind of boulder Katie and I might have sunbathed on, wearing our string bikinis and our fake, neon Wayfarers from the Bargain Bin in town. It's too sunny to cling to old memories, though, so I push these away and let my long toes dip into the cool water. I'm careful not to lean forward too far. I have yet to see my reflection, and I'm not keen on doing so any time soon. One step at a time.

"You'll have to keep an eye out - or, you know, whatever - for other people fishing," Luke warns, "with this weather."

"Don't worry," I say, forcing a smile. "I've got it. Anyway, it'll be easy to hide."

It's true. Both sides of the river are lined heavily with trees, their roots creeping over the edge and down into the riverbed, and their limbs bent over the river, dripping green vines low over the water.

I crouch down and cup my hands, gathering the water in my palms and splashing it across my face. The last time I bathed was probably the shower I

took before I left with Logan that afternoon. Rivulets of water drip from my face and down into my thick coat, and the dampness evaporating from my skin is cool and refreshing.

The fishing itself doesn't last too long. Luke spends about ten minutes boring me with the details of baiting the hook and casting the line. I effectively put an end to his lesson by shutting my eyes, zeroing in on a fish, and snatching it out of the water. I toss it at Luke, earning myself such a high-pitched yelp from him that I laugh for the first time in weeks. He reclaims his manliness by selecting a sharp rock and demonstrating the proper way to gut and clean a fish.

"I think," I say warily, "I might just stick to Honovi's SPAM."

We climb higher into the Cascades, north of the river. By the time late afternoon sends the shadows of the trees angling low over the ground, I've located what we deem a suitable cave.

"You know," I remark, when I've concentrated long and hard and assured myself of the fact that no ravenous predators are lurking anywhere within, "this skookum sense really comes in handy."

"See?" Luke says, laughing, "I told you it wasn't the end of the world."

A sudden surge of affection fills me as I watch him survey my cave, hoisting the fishing rods up on his shoulder. "Hey. Thanks," I say.

"For what?"

I shrug. "Helping me out. Being my friend. Keeping your smart-ass

comments to a minimum.”

He smiles at this last one – the rare Luke smile, teeth and all. “I’d better get back. Will you be all right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I think I will be.”

* * *

For the first time in my life, I am alone. I gaze around at the blank walls of the dim cave, wondering if this is how college freshmen must feel the first night they move into their new dorm room.

Initially, I worry that the craggy cave floor will be tortuous to sleep on; but I gather some moss and leaves from outside and arrange them as best as I’m able into a makeshift bed. It’s surprisingly comfortable. I make a mental note to bring up some of the blankets from Honovi’s when I get a chance; but really, those will just be a bonus.

My strength is an asset. I find a boulder nearby that I’m able to shove and roll to the front of my cave. Never having been to Girl Scouts, I have a little trouble with the nitty gritty of survival skills. For instance, I spend an embarrassingly long time trying to figure out how to close the boulder “door” of my cave from the inside, stretching my arms to their full span and gripping at the sides of the huge rock as I try to pull it in. After a lot of huffing and straining, I go around to the outside and push the boulder all the way in. The interior of the cave bells out as it opens into the mountain, and I discover that if I roll the

boulder all the way through the entrance, I can maneuver it around from the inside and push it out toward the opening to block the entrance at night.

The first night is the worst, but only because I'm alone. I'm not afraid. I don't need Honovi to tell me that no creature in the forest would outright attack me. The only real danger facing me is myself. More specifically, it's my mind.

Alone, there is no one to distract me from my thoughts. That first night, the figures float just beyond the darkness - Katie, and Logan, and my mother. I push them away, one by one, try to shut them out as I squeeze my eyes shut, but they're like ghosts that won't stop following me. The awful part is that I know they're not gone. I'm gone. They're still at home, and at school, and - if his encounter with the mystery beast didn't scare Logan away forever - maybe even riding the trails of the Willamette wilderness. They feel so distant, though. Unreachable. I bite back tears while I struggle to find sleep.

It gets easier, though. I develop tricks. If I keep my mind, my senses, occupied, I spend less time thinking about the past. As summer wears on, I spend my days exploring the hills and forests of the Cascades, sometimes running through the woods alone, other times wandering around with Luke. We go to the river a lot, though not always to fish. I visit Honovi almost every day, if I can, and she keeps me well stocked with human food. The river is more for recreation.

Luke should have been born a fish. He can barely go a day without

swimming. Most afternoons, he brings me books from the library, and I sit on the boulder overhanging the river while Luke swims.

The first time he strips down in front of me, I'm a little taken aback. He does it as if it's no big deal – unhooking his belt and peeling his gray t-shirt from his sticky skin. He runs in, splashing like a five year old in a rare (for Luke) display of exuberance, and spends every last second he can manage floating and splashing around in his boxers. I have never seen a boy in his underwear before, not in real life, anyway, but the strangest thing to me is how ambivalent I am.

If it were a few months ago and I were watching Logan strip – I can't even think about it. Luke, though, seems so – well – *small*. I'm struck by the humanness of him, and the fact that, even though I was a human for my entire life, even though I've never even properly seen myself as I am now, I'm somehow aware and attuned to the fact that he is not the same as me. His bare skin is no more shocking or provocative than the fact that I stand here and talk to him practically every day without (and this, the first time it dawns on me, does give me a bit of a shock) a stitch of clothing. I have begun to think of us as members of two distinct species. I'm not quite sure how to react to this feeling.

The days slip by, June bleeds into July, and I fall into a pattern of behavior. Read, study, talk to Honovi and Luke, eat, sleep. Luke brings me little things for my cave – knickknacks, toiletries, random small things that I request. It begins with basic essentials, toilet paper, toothbrush, that sort of thing. Once,

gripped by nostalgia, I even request a pot of nail polish. Other requests are more practical; he brings me a calendar, for instance, so I can tick off the days one by one. The most impressive is when, in a feat of tremendous daring, he breaks in through the window to my old room and pilfers my iPod, which he charges for me at Honovi's when I need it re-juiced. And then, of course, there are the books. These are probably the most important of all, and I hide in them whenever anxiety comes looking for me.

The structure around which I carefully construct this new life, and the presence of the items that anchor me to my old one – these things keep my sanity intact. Often, my humanity feels close at hand. Sometimes, I can almost forget where and what I am.

The one item I never request is a mirror.

* * *

As July wears on, my daily schedule begins to alter. For one thing, the hikers are out in full force. Not only locals but visitors, travelers drawn by the allure of the majestic Cascades, trek the paths that crisscross in a maze over the land. They come with tents, backpacks laden with pots, bug spray, duct tape, and astronaut food. Many arrive carrying a healthy knowledge of and curiosity about the Bigfoot legend, whether it be from supermarket tabloids or pseudoscientific television programs; and these people in particular are dangerous.

"You can travel at night," Honovi lectures, shaking the scoop she's using

to measure out weed into little Ziploc baggies. "It is not safe to be out in the day. Or on the river!" She tut-tuts fervently. "You want to get caught, hmm? You want to wind up in some traveling circus like the bearded lady?"

I'm struck by the irony of her particular choice of circus performer, but keep it to myself. Honovi has been more irritable than normal lately, and I'm in no mood to pick a fight. I stick to my cave during the days, shielded from the summer heat but bored out of my mind.

Several weeks of this self-imposed seclusion have passed when sit with my back against the cave wall one morning, giving myself a manicure. My entire attention is absorbed by the delicate procedure of brushing the stiff hairs of the applicator across the nails of my left hand. The polish container is miniscule. I am careful to focus on relaxing my muscles as I keep the pot suspended between my left thumb and index finger. It's like trying to use Barbie nail polish on a human hand. I bite my tongue in concentration as I stroke the hot pink lacquer across my nails. Their natural color is not the pearly pink of human nails, but a dusky shade of gray. I can avoid seeing my reflection, but it's hard to ignore the inhumanness of my hands. The polish is therefore not only a luxury but a comfort.

There is something distinctly human – distinctly female – about the smell of nail polish. I was never one to funnel all my hard-earned cash into the mani-pedi regime, but Katie had occasionally coerced me into going with her to Serena

Su's Nail Salon. The scent of this polish alone evokes a strong image of the place. It smells like cheap fluorescent lighting and that liquid the little Asian girls make you soak your fingers in. It smells like bad pop music piping through the radio and the reality shows that flash boobs and blondes across the television screen that's mounted on the wall. So clearly, I can picture standing with Katie, my arms crossed in half-feigned boredom as she spins the tower of nail polishes around and around, chattering endlessly as she points to this color and that, dissecting the rainbow of choices in search of the perfect shade. What color to choose? What a dilemma. Those, I think wistfully, examining my Malibu Pink nails, were the days.

"What," a voice interjects through my thoughts, "are you doing?"

I whip my head to the right at the same time as the vial of polish shatters in my grip, sending a gloopy, pink explosion all over my hands.

"Jesus, Luke! What is your problem?"

He leans against the cave wall, a bemused smile playing across his lips. I am possessed with a distinct urge to smack him. I recall Jenny Baker ripping the head off of my Ken doll. Of course, Luke isn't that small; but the image does give me a sick sort of thrill.

"What's my problem?" Luke echoes. "Says the eight foot tall beast painting her nails pink."

My cheeks burn. I'm glad, for once, that the fur covers them up.

“Shut the hell up. I’m bored. Maybe if you actually brought me something to do...”

In response, he shrugs the backpack off his shoulders and plops it on the ground in front of him. “You’re in luck,” he says.

“New reading selection?”

“Yes, indeed. Summer reading lists are out for English class.”

“And?”

Luke hesitates. It’s difficult to read his expression with half his face darkened by shadow. I can’t tell whether he’s trying to hide a laugh or a grimace. “Kafka,” he says at last.

Well, that explains it. I roll my eyes. “Let me guess.”

He straightens and holds the book open in front of him, clearing his throat as if in preparation for a dramatic monologue. “*As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect.*”

“Great. Perfect choice.”

“Hey, look at it this way: you could have had it a lot worse.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“At least you’re not a gigantic bug.”

“How lucky for me.”

He laughs.

“Yes, you’re so clever. Have you looked into standup? I hear there’s a real market for pretentious pricks with a sense of humor.”

“I would, but you know... stage fright. Absolutely cripples me.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, well you know how you’re supposed to picture your audience in their underwear? A lot less awkward and a lot more hilarious when you’re my audience.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better how?”

“I’m just saying that I’m comfortable around you.”

“You’re scared of random normal people, but you’re comfortable around an eight foot tall monster?”

He grins. “You’re no monster,” he says. “I’ve never seen a monster with pink nail polish.”

I clean up the mess from the polish the best I can. Luke is quiet for a minute, and then pulls something out of his pocket.

“Actually,” he says, “there’s something else I wanted to show you.”

There’s an edge on his voice that makes me turn. He extends his hand, holding out an article clipped from this morning’s *Daily Pine*.

“THE HUNT IS ON,” reads the headline. Beneath is a photograph of three middle-aged men, sporting an impressive array of mustaches, high-waisted pants, spectacles, and determined scowls. In the background are a large tent and

a table scattered with an array of scientific-looking gadgets. The man in the middle holds a large, white object in one of his hands that looks suspiciously like. . .

“Is that a foot?”

Luke nods. “Your foot. Or a plaster cast of it, anyway.”

I squint at the photograph in the poor light of the cave, holding the little sheet of paper closer to my eyes. The cast is lumpy, imperfect; and yet, there are the toes, the curve of my instep. The man holding the mold looks particularly smug. In addition to his Fu Manchu, he has enormous muttonchops. His hair is coarse and curly, which serves only to make these furry patches appear more beastlike.

“He looks like he could have some skookum blood in him,” I say.

“Did you read the article?” Luke is clearly not in the mood for jokes.

“No. Why bother?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why bother? Seriously?”

“Did you see all those gizmos they had piled up? These are clearly a bunch of nuts.”

“They saw the report from Logan’s interview about the day you went missing. They didn’t think that Dori Thornton’s attacker sounded much like a grizzly bear. They came here to look for you. They already have a cast of your footprint. Dori, these people are the real deal.”

I snort. "A bunch of Bigfoot hunters? Give me a break."

"Yes. A bunch of Bigfoot hunters. Exactly what part of this are you having difficulty understanding?"

"The part where I - a gigantic and powerful creature, fueled by the primal rage of self-loathing and PMS - am supposed to be afraid of a few wackos who want to wave their so-called scientific instruments around in the woods in hope of discovering a myth."

Luke looks incredulous. "A myth? Look, I don't know what kind of reality check you need, but they're not looking for a myth. They're looking for you. And if they find you, there are going to be some pretty real consequences."

"So what exactly are you suggesting?"

"Stay here. Hide. Be safe."

I kick at the wall, sending a little avalanche of rocks bouncing down the side.

"I know it sucks," Luke says. "Just hang in there. Yeah?"

The look on his face is one of such intensity, such concern, that it makes me pause before I even open my mouth to protest. His dark eyes regard me sharply in the dim light of the cave, but his face is soft.

Finally, I nod. "All right," I say. "You'd better get Honovi to hex them the hell out of town or something, though. I can't stay cooped up here much longer."

* * *

The longer I am alone, the less able I am to escape from my thoughts. I remember strange things, little things. I remember braiding my wet hair after stepping out of the shower, the purple and silver stripes on Mom's reading glasses, the feeling of the soft leather on my bare legs when I curled up on the big armchair in the living room to read a book, and the little silver buckles on the sides of my black boots. I remember crying at a mouse squashed in a trap in our kitchen. I remember going to my Gram's house on the weekends when I was very little, and the stories she told me before bedtime. I remember how the skin beneath her arm hung in loose, fatty folds, and how I would squeeze these flaps as she talked to me.

I can't even remember the last time I thought about Gram. She died when I was about five, maybe a little before. While the image of her arms is as clear as a photograph in my mind, I can barely recall what her face looked like. Gigantic, wire-rimmed glasses. White hair.

There are no pictures of Gram in our house. I guess that she and my mother didn't get along. Very rarely did I see the two of them together. They sometimes spoke over the phone, but almost never in the same room. Mom would walk me to the door whenever she dropped me off. We'd climb the porch steps together, and she would lift me up so I could ring the doorbell, and then set me back down on my feet. Whenever Gram opened the door, my mother would lean low and kiss me on the head. "Be good, sweetie," she would say, and then

she would squeeze my hand, sometimes so hard that it hurt. Then she would turn, her footsteps falling quickly as she retreated to the car, leaving me alone on the front porch.

I would cry for her, sometimes. Gram would rub my back, but that would only make me cry harder. The scent of cigarettes and face cream always lingered around her like a halo, and her eyebrows were bushy and low. I liked her flabby arms and her bedtime stories, but the same wild quality about her that thrilled me also scared me a little; and I was sometimes frightened that my mother would drive away and never come back, leaving me with strange woman.

“Where’s Mommy?” I would wail.

“She’s hard at work, honey,” Gram would always say. It didn’t strike me until much later that my Mom, a grade school teacher, was probably not working at West Pine Elementary on the weekends. Now, it seems more likely that what she was working was a twelve-step program. Back then, though, it was a mystery.

We didn’t go to Gram’s funeral, mostly because she didn’t have one. Mom had her cremated. I suppose her ashes must be in a cemetery somewhere, but I’ve never asked and I’ve never been told. I think of the two women, and the long silence between them. I think of my own mother, alone in the house, her baby swallowed up by Oregon wilderness.

Though it takes me almost a week to build up the nerve, I’ve already

made my decision. I tell neither Honovi nor Luke. They'll just advise against my plan. They'll tell me it's a bad one, that nothing good will come of it. I already know this. I figure I can spare myself the lecture.

* * *

Stars wheel above me in the inky sky as I move down the mountain. For once, I'm not running. As eager as I am to reach my destination, the eagerness is more out of curiosity than true anticipation. The truth is that I'm afraid.

Slowing my pace, I look up. Gram used to tell stories about the stars. I don't especially remember all the details, but mostly the dreamy contentment of laying on my back in the yard and trying to connect the glittering specks above me into the figures Gram had described: Orion, the hunter, Cassiopeia, the vain queen, Andromeda, chained to a rock and awaiting her death at the jaws of a terrifying monster. I can't remember the last time I searched them out in the dark sky, but tonight I tilt my head upwards and scan.

My feet halt in their stride almost of their own accord, and I realize how close I suddenly am. Several feet in front of me, the woods thin and give way to the black pavement of the road. Across it, through the tree line, a pinprick of light glows softly. It must be nearly two o'clock in the morning. The light means she's still awake. I guessed that she might be, but I'm not quite sure how to react to this confirmation. When I first "vanished," I occasionally allowed myself the passing daydream of my mother sitting in the rocking chair on the front porch,

dark circles rimming her sunken eyes and a pair of binoculars clutched in her white-knuckled hands as she gazed out into to the blackness, waiting for her baby to come home. If this were a Western, she'd be in contact with the sheriff.

"Bring her home, Sheriff," she'd plead, tears welling in the corners of her eyes though she kept a brave face and maintained the firm line of her mouth.

"Bring my daughter back to me. I'll do anything."

I diligently banished those fantasies from my mind. It didn't do much good to dramatize a situation that was already way beyond the boundaries of the surreal; and anyway, if I knew my mother, the truth of the matter was that she was probably spending less time pleading with the authorities and more time double fisting the Bible and a large gin and tonic. But it's well past midnight, and the lights are on in her house – in our house. Maybe she is waiting up for me after all.

I look both ways, like Mom taught me, and cross the street in two swift strides. In no time I am stooped low and moving across the yard where I learned to ride a bike, played hide-and-seek with Katie, and ate cake with my classmates on my tenth birthday. I crouch behind the tree where I stood just a few months ago when Logan texted me, all sweet and concerned. Had she really stood here, that girl with a ponytail and Converse, clutching the little blue cell phone in her hand? I shake my head firmly, trying to physically shake the memory from my head.

I walk around to the back door. Partially this is because I'm already jittery, and the thought of standing on the front porch, my back unguarded and exposed to the road, frays my nerves even more intensely. Also, though, I'm not sure the porch really has the capacity to support my massive frame.

The soft chirping of crickets fills my ears. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, focusing on the sound, letting it soothe me. Then I raise my fist to the door, pause for a moment, and knock. Despite my efforts to remain calm, every fiber of my body tingles with anticipation and fear. I plant my feet firmly on the ladybug doormat, but inside I am shaking. No answer, no answer. I stand there for almost a full minute before I hear the light shuffle of footsteps on the other side of the door. There is a soft click, and then the knob turns, the door swings slowly open, and there is Mom.

She's so small.

"Don't scream," I say quickly, "It's me, Mom. It's Dori."

She doesn't scream. In fact, she looks as if she never had any intention of it. Her face is flat and pale as she gazes up at me. Her jaw is very slightly slack, but she recovers quickly, fashioning her parted lips into a thin, hard line. "You," she says. Her voice is hard, too. "I was wondering when you'd be showing up."

I have no idea how to respond for this. I prepared myself for shrieking and striking and prayers begging God from protection against this monstrous creature. What I am not prepared for is this. I never envisioned a scenario in

which I, a hairy, eight-foot beast, could emerge on anyone's doorstep – related or otherwise – and provoke not so much as a single cry.

But then I see her eyes. They're glassy and unfocussed. I glance through the doorway behind her. Sure enough, a bottle of gin sits, half empty, on the kitchen table.

"Well," she says at last, "I guess you'd better come in. I can't stop you." She steps slowly to the side, her eyes never leaving mine.

"I – I'm too big," I say.

"Fine. Then let's talk here. Wait," she adds, and then retreats to the kitchen table, where she collects her glass. We face one another. The backs of my eyes are prickling, but I fight to keep my face straight and firm.

"I'm sorry," I say at last. "I should have told you."

She shrugs.

"That I'm alive, I mean."

She shrugs again. It's a listless gesture, loose and floppy, as if she's barely listening.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Shut up," she says softly. The acid in her voice is enough to make me feel as if she whipped me across the face. "I'm not your mother. And you are no daughter of mine."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know what you are!"

"I'm a skookum."

"You're a *demon*," she spits. "You're a demon, come to terrorize me for the sins of my past! I knew it, too, I knew it all along." Her voice is rising, becoming increasingly hysterical. "And then you were acting so strangely."

I remember her back facing me in the kitchen, the way she braced herself against the counter.

"I'm not a demon," I say, as softly as I can manage with my deep, rasping voice.

"You are! You are, you are!" Her cheeks are flushed and livid red now. My heart feels like it's shattering in my chest.

"You don't mean that. It's me. I just look different."

"Get away, demon!" she screams.

I shush her as quietly and gently as I can, glancing around to make sure no other nearby lights come on. "How can you call me that?"

"Because I know what I did! I know, and so does God. That wasn't Bob Johnson in the woods that night." She isn't crying, but she wipes her hand across her eyes. It's as if she's trying to erase the image that haunts her memories, trying to rub it out like it's a painful grain of sand lodged under her eyelid. "I looked at Bob the next day, and I could just see it in his eyes. Or not see it. He looked at me as if I was no one, as if nothing ever happened. And even then, I knew it was

because nothing ever had. Whatever that was – whatever *it* was, it wasn't human." She starts sobbing, now, horrible, choking, hiccupping sobs. "I am unclean. And you," she locks eyes with mine. "You are the offspring of that – that disgusting union."

"I'm *your* baby, though! I'm your baby as much as I am his!"

She spits on me. It lands at my feet. "You're the devil. And I will never protect a devil child."

"You're drunk."

"Drunk is the least of my worries, honey."

I open my mouth to protest, but she slams the door in my face. For a split second, I catch a shadowy glimpse of my reflection in the glass panes on the door. My brow is deep and furrowed, like a chimp's; and my coarse, auburn fur wreaths my face like a wheel of fire. My teeth, exposed beneath my opened lips, are jagged and fang-like.

I flee. I no longer care if I am seen, or struck. I run blindly. Behind me, I can hear the sound of glass smashing, shattering against the inside of the door, and my mother's voice wailing my name.

* * *

Everything is different. I don't tell Luke or Honovi about my visit to my mother's; but then again, I don't tell them much of anything. Honovi has a nasty cold she cannot shake, and the late weeks of August send Luke back to school for

his senior year. My visits with each are less frequent, punctuated by increasingly long periods of solitude.

All I can think about is my mother. Guilt wracks my body, gnawing at every fiber of every nerve. It's absurd. Why should I feel guilty? My choices were not what made me this way. How could I have helped it? How could I have known?

I can't help but think of Frankenstein's monster, reviled by his creator, rejected by all, beaten and driven away from the Delaceys – for what? For helping them? For loving them? For his ugliness. For a monstrosity that he was born with, a monstrosity that he could not control. But no one made him kill; no one made him seek revenge. Those monstrosities he cultivated all on his own.

No one made me go home. I knew that it was wrong. I knew how fragile my mother was, how upset. She drank when I was a child, probably out of fear, I now realize, of what I might become. She pushed me away whenever she could, and later pulled me close, hoping desperately that she was wrong. And now – what did I think would happen? True, she had already returned to the bottle, but she had also just lost her daughter. Maybe, if she could have just hoped that my disappearance was an accident – a horrible tragedy, but one that could at least give her some peace, knowing that her daughter lived and died as the good, Christian girl she always wanted – maybe she would have been okay.

But all possibility of that is now gone. I did that. I shattered any

possibility of hope, of sustaining the illusion that might have kept her going. For what? There was never any chance that it would turn out well. Why, why, why did I go?

But, of course, I am a monster. I am monstrous.

I become careless. I wander in the daytime, ignoring my senses, isolating myself from the forest at the same time as I roam it. Honestly, I just don't give a shit. The thoughts that once sustained me – the possibility of online college, the false aesthetic of a manicured sasquatch hand – all of it is bullshit. I was absurd to even try to cling to my old life. I should have known there was nothing for me there. Even before the change, what did I have? A mother who loved me in fear. A best friend who would rather be popular. A “boyfriend” who was nothing more than a silly infatuation.

“Do you think I'll ever need to... you know... breed or whatever, with a human?” I once asked Luke, during one of those sunny midsummer afternoons by the river. “To keep the bloodline alive?”

Even then, the shame at just the thought alone of being with a man in this hideous, inhuman form made me squirm with discomfort. It seemed like an important question to ask, though. The source, after all, needed to be protected.

Now it just seems like a bad joke. The source – if it even is what Honovi claims it is – is miles and miles away. For now, it's safe, a fact that further punctuates my extreme lack of utility as a living and breathing being; but even if

I died, what would be the big deal? I seriously doubt the government has plans anytime to just raze the national wilderness. And if, at some point, they ever do... well, with a government like that, the good citizens of America will probably have a lot more to be worried about than an ailing ecosystem. More to the point, if I'm not there to protect it, I won't be there to experience the fallout. And at the moment, I find it really difficult to feel too badly about that.

And so I wander, and I forage, and I tramp through the forest in broad daylight, distracted by my guilt and reckless with apathy. I'm looking for berries one afternoon a short distance from Honovi's cabin, much farther down in the valley than I usually stray during the daylight hours, when my carelessness catches up with me.

At first, I'm too startled to realize what's happening. A sharp crack reverberates through the air. The sound registers first; a resonant booming that seems to shake the trees around me, followed by the fluttering of wings as birds flee from the boughs above my head. I can see their retreating silhouettes, the blackness in stark relief against autumn foliage above. It's not until then that I realize why I'm looking up, why I do not need to crane my neck towards the sky, but simply see.

I am lying on the ground.

The voice of a man drifts into my head. He's excited, shouting something. Why am I on the ground? A spray of dirt jumps from the earth as a bullet

whizzes past my head and lodges into the ground beside me. My side aches; I'm gripping it. I pull my hand away and hold it before my eyes, a dull, throbbing panic growing inside my chest. The russet fur on my hands is stained a darker shade of deep burgundy, almost black. The hair is matted, sticky and warm with my blood.

"Harry! Harry, get over here!" The man's words barely filter through my consciousness. The forest blurs before my eyes, the limbs of the trees becoming hazy and soft, like an impressionist painting or a fading dream.

The whole thing is so surreal. I'm surprised that the pain in my side is not worse. I feel as though I should be howling or gasping or crying, but mostly I just feel a dull throb and a quiet nagging in the back of my head that I should get up and run away, that I should save myself while I still have a chance.

"Sweet Jesus, you have to see this! Get your fat ass up here."

"Is that him?"

"I dunno, maybe. Or maybe some kind of bear. I didn't get too good a look at it."

"Is it dead?"

"I think so."

But I'm not dead. I'm not dead, I say to myself. And then out loud, "I'm not dead." I can see the men now, running toward me like two shadowy ghosts. One is stocky and balding. The other has an abundance of facial hair – a huge Fu

Manchu.

It takes me a minute to place him, to remember where I've seen his face before. When the realization dawns on me, I feel my entire body go cold. They must be the Bigfoot hunters. And now they're here; they've caught up with me, after all. Both carry rifles.

"Stop. I'm not dead," I try to say again.

"Holy shit," the fat man says, "Did you hear that growl? It's still alive."

"Should I shoot it again?"

"After what it did to that local girl? Hell yes. Finish the sucker off. Put one right between the eyes, humane-like."

"No." I struggle to my feet. Both men stumble backwards, and one of them swears. They look so small, even as I hunch over in pain.

"Holy Jesus on a bicycle."

"That's a sasquatch, all right."

"Shit, Paul, kill it!"

Paul, the bald man, fumbles with his rifle, his fingers shaking as he frantically tries to unlock the safety. I am faster. The little man falls to his feet under the impact of my blow as I smack the gun from his trembling hands. He scuttles backwards, kicking up dirt with his boots and whimpering like a child.

"Son of a bitch!" Harry yells. He fires wildly, nearly missing. I stumble back, a roar escaping my throat as the bullet lodges into my left shoulder. I feel it

ricochet off the bone. My shoulder cracks, and I pitch forward in agony, swinging my right hand. It connects with Harry's chest with a sickening thump. The mustachioed man flies through the air, landing several yards away, on his back. He does not move.

Paul has already scrambled to his feet and begun to run away. The sound of Harry's body smacking against the ground makes him stop and turn. He screams Harry's name, but the man lies motionless in the dirt. I felt his chest collapse as I struck him. I felt the resistance of the small, brittle bones of his ribcage, and I felt them snap one by one, like candy cigarettes.

Paul hesitates, a steady litany of swear words spilling from his mouth with all the earnestness and pleading of a prayer, as if he were reciting the rosary. His bald head turns back and forth between me and his motionless friend: the monster, and its victim.

Then the world swims. My feet give out beneath me. I scream as my hands connect with the ground. The impact shoots a jolting thrust of pressure up my arm and through my shattered shoulder. Then a rock connects with my head. I fall to the ground.

"Fuck you, you fucking monster! Get the fuck out of here! Get out of here!" Paul has begun snatching every rock he can from the forest floor and is heaving them at me. They pound against my battered flesh one by one. I cry out again and again, stumbling to my feet. I can no longer see. The entire world is

nothing but a blur of brown and orange and green and white, a sick kaleidoscope that tilts and flips as I pitch unsteadily through it. I have no plan of action or sense of direction. I simply flee. I put one foot in front of the next, and an arm in front of that. All I can do is put as much distance as possible between the hunters and me.

I'm not sure how long I run. After a while, I'm not even sure if I am still running. Eventually, it is no longer day. I know because I can smell the cool wetness of night in the air, and because the haphazard colors that had flashed and swirled through my fevered mind are blessedly absent, replaced only by darkness. I wonder if this was what it's like to be dead. Perhaps I have already died.

In nature, there are animals that return to the place where they are born in order to die. Dori Thornton was not born in a cave, but I, whoever I am - this creature, this monster, this doomed being - was born there, at least in a sense. It is where I stopped being human. No human would ever be hunted like this, at random. No human would crush a man's body like this, destroy him in an instant, in nothing more than a reflex. But these things happened to me, to the creature that was born in that cave. And that, perhaps, is why I return there. Like a salmon swimming upstream I cut through the woods, blindly, mechanically, drawn by a force I can neither detect nor suppress, until at last I feel my burning body connect with cool rock.

Home, I think, the word coming to me like a prayer. I am home. This is the end, but at least I am home.

* * *

I dream.

In the first dream, I am tiny.

I'm in a room with many other girls, all of whom tower above me. I recognize where I am at once. Framed black and white photographs of ballet slippers, roses, and the graceful arching of dancers' arms at the barre line the walls, which are painted a soft shade of pink. There is a long bench with the seat covered in burgundy velour, and a round glass end table topped by a vase of glittery fake roses. Little lamps line the walls. Their shades are covered in dusty mauve gauze that softens the light and casts the room in an aura of sensual tranquility. How many years has it been since I last recalled Mademoiselle Marie's ballet studio? And yet, here it is, preserved in all its faux romance – the site of my childhood torture.

I suppose it's one of those childhood memories too horrific to allow out into the open spaces of the mind. Even as a child, I could come to terms with the strange leaks that would sometimes spring in my mother's self-control. I could cope with the memory of the front door slamming at three in the morning, and hearing the crack and thud of her tripping and falling against the kitchen table. I always remembered the image of her sitting on the floor like a rag doll with her

hand clutched to her bleeding head, looking up at me in fear and confusion as I stood frozen in the doorway in my Barbie pajamas. It haunted me, but I could accept it. My afternoons as a five year old at Mademoiselle Marie's I could not - I cannot - accept. They were a different sort of torment, one that needed to be borne not by virtue of birth but by force of society. It was unbearable, and thus it was repressed.

"I wanna do karate with Katie," I had protested, when my mother raised the suggestion of dance lessons. Katie's parents had recently signed her up for Tae Kwon Do, and she assured me that she would soon be granted the secret of smashing through cinderblocks with nothing but her forehead.

"I think you would really love ballet, sweetie," my mother said. "And you'll have friends in that class as well." By "friends," she meant Jenny Baker, the daughter of her then prayer group leader. Jenny was sharp - narrow bodied and snub nosed, with a smile so sickeningly sweet that you just knew there had to be fangs hidden behind it - and I was terrified of her even at that young age.

I went to Mademoiselle Marie's for four months. The woman was also sharp and narrow, a middle-aged version of Jenny. She stuck me in the back during the recital, a move that Jenny later described to me as being predicated on my "stockiness." It was a word I came to despise. "It isn't that you're fat or anything," I remember her saying to me, as if I had asked (I hadn't). "You just don't have the body of a dancer. You're a little... stocky."

But that is in the past. This time, it's different. A long mirror lines one wall of the room, and I regard myself in it. I am petite, dainty... and I'm me as I was before the change, no longer the stocky, awkward child of my memories, or the monster of my present. I wear a simple black leotard that hugs the contours of my body like a second skin, a soft black skirt, and nude tights. The brushed black leather of my ballet shoes cushions my miniscule feet. My red hair falls in waves around my face, but I pull it back and secure it into a neat bun – the perfect ballerina.

The other girls tower above me, but I am not afraid. Somehow I know that it is not that they are large, but that I am small, a Lilliputian displaced in the world of humans. Their legs are thick like tree trunks, and their hands hang like huge rubbery masses at their sides. Jenny Baker is there, and I can see clear up her nostrils. She has a mole on the bottom of her chin half the size of my hand.

“Come,” Mademoiselle says in her fake French accent. She stands at the door that leads from the changing room into the studio. She pulls it open and gestures with one hand, her arm outstretched and her palm flat and turned upwards. “Dance for us, Doreen.”

I gladly accept. My heart flutters in my chest. I can hear the girls whispering to one another. They are giant, and so even their whispers carry like big gusts of wind.

“She's so tiny.”

“Have you ever seen such delicate feet?”

“She belongs spinning in a music box.”

It takes me a moment or two to reach the door with my miniature feet. I glide toward it in tiny steps like a geisha. At last I reach the doorway, expecting to pass through onto the hardwood floor of Mademoiselle Marie’s studio. But when I cross the threshold, my feet hit not wooden planks but cushiony green moss. I am back in the forest.

The girls gather around me. Some of them, I now see, are not girls at all, but trees. Their legs have been trunks all along. Their hair is made of the vines that hang down from the canopy above. There is a mirror stretched across the plane in front of me, but it’s not really a mirror. It’s water, flowing sideways through the air in one continuous stream, a river through space. I see my reflection in it, but also rocks and fish glimmering just below the surface.

I look back at Mademoiselle. “Go on,” she says, “dance.” She smiles encouragingly, and I see that her teeth are large and yellow. She makes a soft tutting noise, sucking her tongue against the backs of the square teeth.

I dance. I spin around, slowly at first, but then faster and faster. I leap back and forth across the forest floor, arch my back, and sway my arms to and fro. I sway and rock and twirl until the world is a blur of green.

Eventually I become aware of my reflection in the water. I watch myself turn and spin, so graceful and delicate. But there is something beneath the

surface, a shadow. It isn't the fish. It's too big. It grows darker and larger as I dance, and though I try to ignore it, I find that I cannot. I struggle to pry my eyes away, but it mimics my every movement. I flail my limbs with increasing wildness. Perhaps I can throw it off track, prove to myself that it's unable to follow. Every jerk, though, every arch, it mirrors exactly, until at last the image rises to the surface, and eclipses my own.

It is not something swimming below the surface of the mirror water, but something cast upon it. It is my own reflection, hulking and horrible and dark. It is a monster.

"It's okay," Jenny Baker says, behind me. Her shrill voice cuts through my hide. "You're just a little stocky."

In the second dream, I am lying in my bed at home. It's summer, and the window is open. A strange noise, a soft grunting, floats in through the window on the warm breeze. I sit up in bed, and look out into the night, my blankets pulled up to my chin. A pair of yellow eyes peers through the window at me, like twin lamplights in the dark. A shiver runs up my spine, but I stare back, quiet and still. I know that whatever he is, he's just looking. He won't come in.

When the eyes disappear I crawl out of bed and pad to Mommy's room. "What's the matter, baby?" she asks me, her eyes still heavy with sleep and her face slack and relaxed and peaceful.

“I had a bad dream,” I say, even though it wasn’t really a nightmare. I’m not sure how else to describe it. I relay the dream to her. She knows it. I’ve had this dream before.

Mom says the same thing each time. “No more fantasies! If you spent less time reading those fables and more time reading the Bible, maybe you’d get some comfort out of your reading and not just scary dreams.”

This time, though, she doesn’t lecture me. “Come up into bed, baby,” she murmurs, and I clamber up beside her. She tucks me under her arm. She’s nothing but a skeleton, though, old dusty bones. I’m so much older than she will ever be. Why do I still feel so young? I nestle up against her bones as she hums me a lullaby. Tears fall silently from my eyes as I cling to her. She’s already gone.

In the third dream, I am down by the river where Luke and I fished that June afternoon. The sun is blazing in the clear blue sky, and I can feel its warmth radiating across my body. The heady scent of summer drips from the leaves that overhang the riverbank in a rich green canopy, and the hum of cicadas fills the air.

My body is stretched across a warm boulder that rests to one side of the river. I’m wearing the bikini Katie bought me for my sixteenth birthday, the magenta one with the little black polka dots. A big hairy monster in a bikini. It’s so absurd, but I can only laugh. It feels too good to care – the sun shining, and

the summer air so sweet and warm on my skin. My skin. I look down again, and sigh with contentment, for there it is. My skin is milky white in the bright afternoon sun. No auburn fur, just pale, smooth skin, almost translucent, the color of skim milk, after being hidden so long from the sunlight.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

I turn, and there is Luke. I’m startled by how large he appears, standing there on the shore of the river, his back straight, his lithe arms folded across his chest. There’s no fishing pole in sight. He wears a plain gray t-shirt, and I can see the muscles shift in his brown arms as he uncrosses them and beckons to me. He looks substantive. Has he always been this sturdy? It occurs to me that perhaps it is not that he has grown, but that I have shrunk. I am normal-size again; I am not some hairy creature or towering beast. I’m just Dori Thornton, sunning beside a river in the heat of summer. My biggest concern is that I don’t have a tube of Coppertone handy to shield my fair skin.

Luke strips off his t-shirt and tosses it aside, then unhooks the buckle of his jeans. I avert my eyes as he steps out of his pants. I have seen him undress before to go swimming, but somehow this is different. I am suddenly aware of the bareness of my own skin, exposed to the world. I feel naked, vulnerable. I feel as though if I look at Luke, I will not simply be looking at him; I will be watching him.

There’s a splash as he enters the river. He yelps a little. When I turn, I see

that he's already up to his shoulders. He grins at me, and then plunges beneath the surface. In several seconds he emerges, shaking the water from his hair like a shaggy dog.

"Come in," he calls. "It feels fantastic!"

I slip carefully down from the rock. The riverbank feels firm and rough as my feet touch down. They are my feet, long but narrow and soft. My nude white toes curl around the pebbles. Luke floats on his back about midway across the width of the river, his arms stretched out beside him like wings.

As I step into the shallows, the cold water stings my skin. I inhale sharply. Inch by inch I wade out into the river, letting the water rise slowly over my body. I have forgotten what it's like to be touched, to feel something other than the armor of my own fur brush against my bare skin. Goose pimples rise on my arms as the tiny hair follicles react to the cool water's caress. It rises over my thighs, my bellybutton, my breasts.

Luke turns, and smiles at me in that crooked way of his – a real smile, though. When I was little, whenever I was sad, my mother used to do anything to get me to smile. When I did, she would beam back and thank me, telling me that the smile was like sunshine breaking through the clouds. That's what Luke's grins are like, sunshine breaking through the clouds that usually mask his impassive face, the serious line of his mouth. "Get over here, slowpoke," he says. He holds out a hand to me. The water is up to my neck now – I feel so small –

and I sink my toes against the smooth rocks that line the river floor and push off into the deep.

But something is not right.

Immediately, I begin to flail my arms. The water will not hold me, will not keep me afloat. I know that I know how to swim. But try as I might, I cannot keep my head above the water that now seems intent on swallowing me up.

“Luke!” I try to cry, but just then the river grips me and pulls me under. Water fills my mouth and I choke and sputter. The top of my face breaks the surface just long enough for me to gasp down a gulp of air before I sink back down into the void. I hold my breath desperately, kicking my tiny legs and thrashing my arms, attempting in vain to connect them against some surface I can use either to propel myself out from the river or pull myself up against. There is nothing, though, only darkness.

I open my eyes into slits, and can see nothing but murky brown, a watery gloom that shifts and churns but surrenders no hint as to where is up or down or left or right. My puny lungs burn. I struggle to hold in the air, but it’s already turning into poison in my chest. My head is muddled and weightless. I let a slow stream of bubbles hiss from my mouth, my heart pounding with terror as each dissipates before me. I am going to die. I am going to drown here. The water will fill my lungs, rushing into them in one final sluice, as if I were just one more cavity to be filled along the riverbed.

Distantly, I can hear a voice. Luke, perhaps. Yes, he's there, I recall. I think of his brown body, his dark, serious eyes. Maybe he will save me. Or maybe he will pull me from the river, just in time to watch me die in his arms. That's how all the old tragedies go. And it isn't such a tragedy, now that I think about it. There is something poetic in it, the silent slipping from life, from sadness, into nothing. *To die*, Hamlet mused, *To sleep*. Hamlet is paralyzed into inaction in part by fear of death, Ms. Calder said, but only in death does he ultimately achieve peace, redemption, and vindication. It is as easy as letting go, letting go of life, of suffering. I cannot quite remember what I have suffered, and only know that it will be good to escape from it. It will be so easy. I'm so very small.

"Dori. Dori, can you hear me?"

I smile as the water fills my lungs. Luke is there. He'll miss me. I hope he won't be too traumatized. I've hurt too many people already. My air passages are completely blocked. My body begins to ache. Is this the way it's supposed to feel?

"Dori!"

Suddenly, Luke is there, his face a foot away from mine, but clouded by the shifting surface of the river. There's a rushing in my ears as I feel myself rising closer and closer to the surface. He is going to save me after all. My whole body throbs, and my head burns from lack of air.

As I break the surface at last, I cry out. My voice is a hoarse rasp. Luke's

face still floats in front of me, his eyebrows contracted. I can feel his breath against my feverish face. I want to say something. I want to thank him, or maybe ask him why it hurts so badly, why my body feels as though it's burning up from some internal fire. Nothing comes out though. The words have long since coagulated in my mouth and all I can do is groan.

"Dori, can you hear me?"

The pain is unbearable. The world shakes. I blink, and the sun blinks back. And then the sun flickers out completely, and all that's left is Luke's face, flushed and drawn.

I am lying on my back in the dim light of the cave. "Am I dead?" I croak.

"No," Luke says. "No, you were shot."

The hunter's body, crumpled on the ground, flashes across my mind. "Oh God. Luke... the hunter..."

"I heard. Don't worry. Just an animal attack, right? You said it yourself - they're a bunch of crackpots. No one will believe that guy. You'll be safe here."

His face swims sickeningly before me. "I'm dead. Please tell me I'm dead."

"You're hurt, but you're alive," he says.

Lines of worry are etched across his brow and his mouth is tight, but relief shows in his eyes. I think of the crooked smile, on the river, and the line of his broad shoulders. Unbidden, my hand stretches out to touch the side of his face.

Luke flinches. I pause for a split second, my hand half an inch from his cheek. A jolt wrenches through my chest as I register the sight before my eyes – my hand, my real hand, massive and coated in fur, the hair still caked with dried blood. The expression barely flits across his face before it is gone, but it brands itself on my eyes – a subtle shift from concern to fear, and a hint of disgust, as if I were about to yank his head off. I could if I wanted to, I realize. It's so incredibly little next to the largeness of my hand.

Luke does not pull away, but I let my hand drop. I watch as he tries to mask the embarrassment that spills across every inch of his face. I am monstrous, and he's disgusted by the monstrosity, whether he likes it or not. He knows it, and he knows that I know he knows it. My head aches.

"You're alive," he repeats at last.

I shut my eyes, and turn away.

* * *

April is not, in fact, the cruelest month.

In "The Wasteland," T.S. Eliot says that it is. He is wrong. Or just plain stupid. Maybe he's joking, being facetious. I don't really know, because I wasn't in class the day we covered "The Wasteland" (though, to be fair, Ms. Calder probably would not have been very much help), and I will perhaps never know, because I suspect that Stanford's diversity policy doesn't extend to eight-foot-tall, hairy beast-girls.

April is not always kind, of course. April was when I began to change. If you had asked me then, maybe I would have agreed with T.S. Eliot. Now, though, the memory of April is like a dying sun in my mind – a soft, hazy pinprick of light that is gradually dimming, as the world grows increasingly cold and dark.

Winter settles heavily across the Cascades. When I was little, winter was a season of fires in the hearth and hot chocolate in big, deep mugs. Winter was about cozy knit hats, and the scarves Mom would wrap around me so many times that I felt like a mummy. At the beginning of December, Mom would drive to Costco and stock up on cans of food, in bulk. Peas and carrots, beans, soup, tomato paste, anything she could cram into the back of the car, really. She stored them all on the big set of shelves in the basement, next to the backup generator and the bundle of firewood she bought from McKay's General, in town. "Better safe than sorry," she would repeat. It was always better to over-prepare – and early – than to be caught by surprise by winter's assault.

I am not prepared though. Winter sneaks up on me. It shouldn't. I should notice the change in Luke's clothes as he shows up every day or two at the mouth of the cave, should notice how his flannel shirts begin to be layered under hoodies, and then jackets, should notice when his dark hair is covered by a thick wool hat. The fog has settled heavily in my head, though.

"How are the books going?" Luke asks one afternoon. It must be mid-

November. He peels back the bandage from my side. My broken arm was splinted as soon as they got to me, and healed unnervingly quickly – probably, Honovi hypothesized, because my skookum bones were still growing. The gunshot wound is also largely healed, but Luke takes great care to continue redressing it, fearing that it might become infected.

After the accident, Honovi made the trek up the mountain to take care of me. It's a long hike for her, though, and she complains of the effect of the colder weather on her joints. Since I passed from the limbo state of immediate danger, Luke has taken over her medical administrations. He does well as Honovi's proxy. His hands are gentler and he refrains from mixing his own saliva with the salves he applies to the wound. I look at his face and feel a dull pang when I register the anxiety etched across it.

He's noticed the stack of reading material, I gather, based on his comment. It sits in a back corner, undisturbed. Luke is accustomed enough to my messiness by now to recognize the implications of their organization.

"I've been tired," I explain. He nods.

The truth is that I don't want to read. I can't bear the simplicity, the organization, the sense of those stories. The neatness that once comforted me now makes me jealous. The escape I once desired now seems selfish to offer to myself. What have I done to deserve it? Why shouldn't I suffer?

"Listen, Dori." Luke has a look on his face like I won't appreciate what

he's about to say. I brace myself for a lecture on the futility of self-pity; but instead, he says, "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to keep coming."

My head jerks up. "What? Why?"

"The weather's getting a lot worse."

I suppose it is. My trips to the outside world have been limited to bathroom runs (it strikes me, now, that even this is a euphemism, a construction of language I've clung to despite how long it's been since I've seen or used an actual bathroom), events that take me no further than the bushy undergrowth of the woods a few yards outside my cave. Sometimes there's snow, sometimes it's clear. The changes register, but only on the most minimal level. Now I attempt to tally the snow times against the clear times, but it's too much of a blur to count.

"I'll try to keep you stocked as much as I can, food-wise," he says. "Let me know if there's anything else you need, all right?"

"All right," I say, but I can't think of anything to ask for.

* * *

Honovi does make one final visit to my cave before winter settles in too deeply for her to make the journey.

I spot her picking her way slowly up the mountainside, roughly hewn walking stick in hand, as I'm out gathering berries. There isn't much to be found now that the cold is beginning to bite at the plants, but the last of the sweet

Oregon grapes are still relatively ripe. I pluck the small, blue berries in bunches, tossing them into a burlap bag.

The little sack is halfway full by the time that Honovi reaches me. Her breath is labored, and she smells strongly of sweat and marijuana. Before I can so much as say hello, she gestures at the bag with the end of her walking stick.

“That,” she huffs, “is not going to be nearly enough.”

I help her climb the rest of the way up to the cave and lead her inside. Though I offer her my soft bed to lie on, she declines, grumpily muttering, “It smells like wet dog. I’ll take the rock, instead.” I decline to comment on the irony of her complaining about *my* body odor, and instead drag over the large, flat-topped rock that Honovi and Luke like to use as a sort of chair.

As Honovi sits and catches her breath, I deposit the (literal) fruits of my labor with the rest of my food store. She eyes it quizzically. In the old days, I might have reminded her that she promised to bring me beef stew the next time she came to visit. Today, though, I lack the energy to really care.

“You should be careful. You will not last the winter if you run out.”

I nod. “I know, I know.”

“Collect the leaves, too.”

“That sounds appetizing.”

“Salad.”

“Good point.”

“Dori,” she says, after a moment, “you will be all right.”

I glance over at her. Her eyes are softer than usual, the wrinkles at the corners drooping wearily downward. She searches my face. For the first time, she seems truly old.

“How do you know?”

She shrugs, wrapping her woven shawl more tightly around her shoulders. “Your father,” she says.

I feel like putting my fist through the wall. I’m tired of hearing what a saint my predecessor was, tired of the worshipful way that Honovi speaks about him, and, most of all, tired of her expectation that just because he was content with living a life of solitude in the wilderness, I will be too.

“Yeah?” I say. “Well I’ll bet he didn’t murder anyone.” My chest tightens at the words. Guilt churns sickeningly in my stomach.

“He was alive for many years – hundreds, maybe. I do not know what he did and did not do for all of them. But what you did was an accident.”

“It doesn’t matter. I was so stupid. I knew how strong I was.” I think back, for the millionth time, to that afternoon at Honovi’s, and the way that Luke flew backwards at my joking jab to his arm. How could I not have remembered?

“You were attacked. An animal will defend itself. All animals do it.”

“Yeah, well that’s exactly the problem, isn’t it? I’m not supposed to be just some primal, thoughtless, cruel animal. That isn’t who I am.”

“It’s a part of who you are.” She continues, cutting me off before I can protest, “It is part of all of us. You made a mistake. And it is likely he died very quickly.”

“Great, because that really helps.”

We sit in silence for a long time. Honovi shuts her eyes. I ignore her, instead sifting through the berries I picked earlier. I pop a few in my mouth and chew slowly, but they sit sourly in my stomach. It would have been great if Honovi had remembered that stew.

“Did he ever visit me?” I ask suddenly. “*Him*, I mean.” I’m thinking of those twin lights in the darkness, all those years ago.

Honovi regards me with surprise. “I don’t know.”

I tell her about my recurring dream. “Only I don’t know if it was actually a dream,” I say. “I used to call them nightmares, though I’m not sure how scary it really was.”

Honovi looks thoughtful. She says, “The first time I met him, my mother told me not to be scared. I was, at first. He was so big. Bigger than you,” she adds. She pulls a cigarette and a match from her pocket. She strikes the match against the rock until it lights. For all her nature-hugging ways, she still can’t quit the habit. I don’t have the heart to tell her that the cave is non-smoking.

“How tall was he?”

“Ten feet, perhaps.”

I nod in appreciation.

“I knew about him already. The skookum were part of our history, you see. The story was told to me from the day I was born, just as I told it to Luke, and later, in a way, to you.”

“Luke? When did you tell him? I thought Luke wasn’t from here,” I interject, remembering his story that night in the truck.

Honovi shakes her head. “He was from here.” She hesitates a moment, taking a drag on the cigarette. “He is my husband’s son.”

I look up with a start. “Your husband?” All this time, all of these months, and still I feel like I barely know this woman. I can’t picture Honovi, strong, hard Honovi, with her temper and her bossiness, ever willingly cohabitating with a man.

“Yes,” she says. She exhales the smoke through her nose, like Luke does. “I married very young. It was foolish. Stay away from the boys, I told you. That was good advice, and not only because of the change!”

“You said that he’s your – husband’s son?” I press. “Not your son?”

Honovi laughs wryly. “You have noticed Luke’s handsome looks? You must know those are not from me! His father was a handsome man, and his mother was very beautiful, very young. She could have been my husband’s daughter.”

“Did you know?”

“Of course,” she says with a sneer. “I was a fool, but not that big a fool. I knew the whole time. He knew about the duty of my family, my bloodline. It bored him. He wanted to move to California, and become a big movie star. Indians were going to be big in the pictures, he said.”

“So he left you.”

“I kicked him out!”

I can’t help but crack a smile.

“I told him to go live with her, if he liked her so much.” She inhales the smoke deeply, shaking her head. “He didn’t like her so much when she had Luke growing in her belly, though. She was not five months along when she woke up to an empty bed. Good riddance, too,” she says, spitting on the ground. “That man was only trouble. She had nothing, though, so I helped her.”

My eyes boggle. “You helped her? Why? How could you do that?”

Honovi considers. Finally, she says, “Because Luke is family. He is my husband’s baby, and so he is my baby. I delivered him with these hands,” she says, holding them out with their lined and leathery palms facing up. “They left when Luke was an infant. Maybe to chase my husband. I don’t know. And then one day, poof! There they are, at the door again. I don’t know what the matter was, but she did not want that child anymore.”

I frown. “I thought you sent for him. I thought he was supposed to be here, to watch and see if I would change.”

She shakes her head. "That is what Luke believes. It was convenient, though, to have him here."

I can't help but ask the awful question that has been creeping up on mind, though I feel like I probably already know the answer. "Honovi, how much of this story does Luke know?"

"Almost none. His mother is my sister. His father died when he was young. That is the story Luke knows."

I rise to my feet, ire rising like bile in my throat. "That isn't right! You can't lie to him. He's practically eighteen, practically an adult." I think of all the times my own mother fabricated stories about my dad, lying straight through her teeth through years of my life. I think of the pain of never knowing the truth.

Honovi's eyes flash. "You must not tell him!" she cries. "This is the life he knows."

"But it's a lie," I protest.

"It has purpose. Luke has purpose."

A growl rumbles softly, threateningly in the crawl of my throat. "It's a *story*."

"Exactly." She rises slowly to her own feet, leaning heavily on the walking stick. She tosses the cigarette aside. "What about your books, hmm? You are the one always talking about finding comfort in stories."

I shake my head. "It isn't the same."

“Why not?”

“That’s fiction. I know it isn’t true.”

“There’s truth in stories, though,” she hisses, moving her face so close to mine that I can feel her smoky breath. “Even if the facts are not true, the spirit still can be.”

“And that makes it fine to lie? That’s not the same thing at all.”

“It’s just to protect him. To show him he is loved. To show him he has purpose. And now he has it, yes? It’s a comfort, like your books. Like your mama’s religion. And like you,” she adds, “hiding *this* truth from your mother.” She gestures to my enormous figure.

This last part is like a sharp blow to the face. I struggle not to allow myself to agree – not to allow my face to reveal the truth of my encounter with Mom.

“It isn’t real, though,” I say, gritting my teeth. “And it isn’t fair.”

“Real? Fair?” She laughs a dry, flat laugh. “You know what was ‘real’ for me? I lost my father when I was seven. I lost my mother when I was twelve. I lost three babies, never born, by the time I was twenty-two. I lost my husband when I was thirty-five. I lost my breasts when I was forty-six. I lost your father when – well, you know when.” She pauses to consider a moment, as if self-conscious about revealing her age. “Who gives a shit? When I was seventy-three,” she says at last.

I don't know whether or not to be surprised. Honovi has always seemed as ancient as the mountains to me, but hearing a specific number truly drives home the weight of her age. It's no wonder she has such trouble climbing up and down the mountain.

"I'm sorry," I say softly. I can't think of anything else to say.

"That is what reality means to me. And I have heard many stories – many wild stories – about crazy old Honovi over the years of my life. Between you and me, I would rather choose those stories. They are far less painful to live by, and far more simple to understand."

I watch her weathered old face, the brown folds and creases that I have come to know so well, but which hide more history, more secrets, than I suppose I will ever know.

"Promise," she says, "that you will not tell."

I hesitate. Her eyes pierce mine. At last, I nod. "I won't tell. I promise. But," I add, "just for the record – when someone tells me my own story, and if I ever tell it to another person, I want it to be the truth. It doesn't have to be painless. It just has to make sense."

Honovi simply shrugs. "You are a teenage girl, Dori Thornton. You love nothing more than to suffer." Suddenly she smiles that wide, yellow, toothy smile, grasping my hand tightly in hers. "Your story is only beginning, though," she says. "And it is part of a larger tale."

Gloomily, I cast my gaze around the cave. "Well, the story's not getting too much action around here, these days." Though I guess no one said the skookum life was particularly glamorous.

She gives my hand one last squeeze in that vice like grip of hers – so strong, for such an old woman – and bids me farewell. "Take care, child," she says. "You are alive. Enjoy it."

* * *

Snow comes soon, and often. Sometimes I go for days without seeing Luke. He leaves a first aid kit with me so I can redress the wound if I need to, but by now it's mostly healed. Honovi makes extra food whenever there are reports of a particularly nasty squall, and Luke packs it in a cooler to bring to me in case the weather is too bad to hunt. I relish these treats. Sometimes I hoard them. I go for days eating scant amounts of leaves and nuts from the store I have compiled throughout the months, and save the chili, the soup, the chicken, whatever Honovi has sent, for as long as I can possibly stand to go without eating it; and then I devour it all at once, savoring the substance and nostalgia of human food.

Human food. That's how I've begun to think of it.

I dig through my pile of things and find the calendar Luke brought me the first week I moved into the cave. The last day I have crossed off is back in early September. I stare at it for a long time. It seems foreign to me, somehow. It's like discovering little ticks scratched into the wall on the side of a prison cell, as if the

person who marked these blue lines across the blocks were a blank-faced stranger from a distant time. September second. That's the last day I crossed off. I try to remember doing it, try to recall when I held the pen in my hand, what I did that morning, what happened that day. I can't. Was that the night before I went out to gather berries? Did I count off another day of my life? Did I awake that morning and mark the passage of time, the last recorded day of the life of the creature formerly known as Dori Thornton?

I'm still staring at the calendar when Luke arrives. It's been a few days since I last saw him.

"Hey," I say, without turning toward him, as he enters. I saw him coming, felt his boots crunching through the thick crust of old snow as he picked his way up the trail. I knew when he crouched low to the ground to re-tie his loosened shoelace. I smelled his sweat and the scent of detergent on his clothes as he stood outside the entrance of the cave. I heard his breath as he exhaled, coming out of the wind and into the stillness of shelter. This is no longer an effort. It takes no concentration to switch this extra sense on and off. It doesn't overwhelm me either, though. It's just another channel, one that I can tune in and out of as easily as pressing a button on a remote. I can keep it on mute, but it's always there, playing in the background.

I put the calendar aside and move to face Luke. He doesn't want to be here. I can tell by the hunch of his shoulders, the way his neck is hunkered down

into his upturned collar like a turtle shrinking back into its shell. He smiles anyway, though, and I'm grateful.

"How's it going?" he asks. He nods to my side, which is no longer bandaged. "Are you healed up?"

"Yeah. It's more or less better. It aches a little to touch it, but the wound is closed. It doesn't seem in danger of getting infected or anything."

"Are you still cleaning it?"

"Yeah. What have you got there?"

Luke places the cooler he's carrying onto the ground. It's large, much bigger than the one he usually brings, and looks heavy. "There's a big storm coming," he says. "Tonight, or maybe tomorrow."

"How big?"

"*Big big*. Like, I probably won't be seeing you for a while *big*."

"Looks like it," I say, eyeing the cooler.

"Honovi was worried about you being able to get out and get food."

"I was planning on trying the snow cone diet. All the celebrities are doing it. Any fruity syrup in that thing?"

Luke remains stern. "I told you, you haven't been storing up enough. Unless your plan is to go into hibernation, you're going to have to eat something to survive."

Hibernation. It hadn't occurred to me. I wonder if that is possible, if I can

simply sleep through the long stretch of snow and ice that lies before me.

“Honovi says she’s pretty sure skookum don’t hibernate,” Luke adds, reading my thoughts. His eyes move to the ground behind me, where I’ve tossed the calendar. “Is that what you were looking at when I came in?”

I nod. For a moment I hesitate, wondering how to frame the thoughts that have been nagging at my mind. He won’t understand, I realize already; but it doesn’t seem to matter.

“I’ve been thinking about calendars,” I say, at last. “About marking time.”

“Yeah?” The flicker of his eyes to his watch and then back to me is rapid enough to pretend that I don’t notice.

“Everybody does it,” I continue, slowly. “Everybody always has.”

“I know.” His brow furrows. He doesn’t know where I’m going with this. Of course not. I notice his fingertips graze the front right pocket of his jeans. That’s where people keep their cell phones. I wonder if he’s waiting for a call, or maybe a text. I wonder from whom.

“People are obsessed with time,” I say. “They always have been. The Mayans, the Romans, everyone. They’ve built whole structures around it, not just calendars but actual buildings, actual monuments.” I think about Chichen Itza, in Mexico. We learned about it in Spanish class. During the Equinox, the shadow of the sun slides down the stacked steps in a zigzag, from the apex of the pyramid to the serpentine heads at its base, like an actual snake slithering down the side.

“And when we don’t have a physical measure of time, we make our own.

Inmates in cells scratch tally marks on the walls. Marooned sailors and lost hikers carve notches into tree bark.”

“And Lady Bigfoot gets calendars from her friend – despite the fact that she could just, you know, ask him what day it is.” His joke falls flat on my ears.

“It doesn’t matter, though,” I say quietly.

“What doesn’t matter?”

“What day it is.”

Luke frowns. “Come on, Dori. Now you just sound nihilistic.”

I shake my head. “Time – days, weeks, months – that’s a human construct. It matters for birthdays, and holidays, and appointments, and” – Stanford flashes, fleetingly, across my mind – “for deadlines.”

“And those things don’t matter to you anymore.”

I correct him: “Those things don’t apply to me anymore.”

Luke sits and crosses his legs. He’s even smaller in this posture, his figure both compact and vulnerable. The memory of how easily the hunter’s chest collapsed under my hands surfaces again, like a floating corpse that won’t stay sunk. I push it back down. If there were a way to tie rocks to the feet of my memories, I would.

Finally, Luke speaks. “What about seasons? Lunar cycles?”

“What about them?”

“I mean, it isn’t like time is completely independent from nature – where do you think the structures for those time scales came from?”

“What’s your point?”

He shrugs. “Just because you’re living in nature instead of living in civilization doesn’t mean that time no longer has an effect on your life. You need to know what times are best to hunt, what times certain foods are growing, what times people are hiking or camping or Bigfoot hunting.” He cocks an eyebrow. “And you need to know when winter is coming, so you can actually store up some food to eat instead of making me lug this gigantic cooler up Mt. Everest, here.”

“I don’t need a calendar to figure that out.”

“All right, maybe an almanac.”

“I’ll just know. I do know.”

“Says the one with the empty refrigerator.”

“There’s a difference,” I point out, “between ignorance and apathy.”

“Well, at least you’re willing to own up to it.”

“Marking the passage of time...measuring it out, structuring it around life...” I struggle to finish the sentence. “I don’t know. It’s the way humans construct the... the... the *plot* of life. It’s a way of dividing it into segments, into chapters. And for me...” I trail off.

“And for you, there is no plot?”

"If I were to write down the story of my life, what would it say?"

"Well, it would certainly have a catchy title, at least. *Bigfoot: The Unabridged Autobiography*. Instant bestseller, guaranteed."

I laugh hollowly. "*Day one: Ate some berries, walked around in the woods. Day two: Slept in a cave. Almost out of toilet paper, but on the bright side I didn't accidentally murder anyone today.*"

"Hey, I'd buy it."

I open my mouth to say something else, but am interrupted by the ringer on Luke's cell phone chirping to life. "Who is that?" I demand.

He plucks the phone from his pocket, glances at the screen, and hits ignore. "It's not important, never mind."

"Luke. Do you have a girlfriend?" I try to weave a teasing note into my voice, and am perturbed when it comes out instead in a gruff grunt. My face feels hot. Immediately, I regret asking.

"No," he says, too shortly to not be lying.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you, it's no one." He rises to his feet. "I should go. I have a lot of work to do tonight."

"All right." I know I shouldn't have asked.

"Save the food," he admonishes, turning back over his shoulder as he leaves. "This is going to be a bad one. I don't know how the trails will hold up."

I feel my stomach whine the second that Luke leaves, bidding me goodbye and promising to be back when the storm dies down. Snow is already falling rapidly outside. I watch his retreating back, and my heart sinks as his small figure is quickly swallowed up in the blur of white. First he is a hazy outline, then a ghost in the snow, and then he isn't there at all.

* * *

I tell myself that everything will be fine. I will ration the food he has left for me, like a soldier, like a traveler.

Willpower, of course, is not my greatest strength.

The storm worsens at an alarming rate. I peek outside and can see only a swirl of white, can hear only the howl of the wind whipping down through the peaks and crevasses of the Cascades. Fear grips me. Fear of isolation, fear of starvation, fear – despite the thick coat that insulates my body – of freezing to death alone in a cave. What if the paths up the mountain are blocked – for weeks, or even months? I can picture it now, Luke climbing up the mountain and making his way back into the recesses of my cave, only to be assaulted by the stench of my dead and frozen body rotting in the dark, damp, late March thaw. I curse myself for forgetting to ask Luke to recharge my iPod. Now would be the moment to blast something emo and rock out my sorrow. All I have is my pile of rags, a couple books, and the cooler of food.

I lay down on the blankets, but my eyes won't stay shut. I stare at the

cooler. This must last for days, I remind myself, possibly weeks. I will not touch it. I will wait until I'm truly hungry. I will ration.

The food does not last through the first night.

I couldn't tell you what was in it. I gorge myself, choking the food down as I cry like an infant. Like that, it's gone. Afterwards, I sleep like the dead. No tears after that, only emptiness.

At first, I'm surprised by how panicked I'm not. When it's over, I stretch out on my back and lie, motionless, on my bed of dry grass and blankets. I am sated and drowsy, my stomach rising and falling with my breath like a red hill. There's a certain grim satisfaction in knowing that the food is gone. I'm free from the pressure to ration. The weight of counting food and the strain of disciplining myself is gone. My sole responsibility is to have patience - to sit in the cave and wait, and to hope that the snow will stop and Luke will come back.

Hunger comes swiftly, though. In two days, I'm dearly missing food. By the fifth day that Luke doesn't show up, my insides ache and burn. I feel as though someone has carved an enormous scoop out of the middle of me. The juices slosh around in the hollow core of my belly, a constant reminder of my emptiness.

People think they know what hunger feels like. I can remember squirming in Statistics class, trying to glue my eyes to the front of the room so I wouldn't keep checking the clock every three seconds in anticipation of lunchtime. "I'm

starving," I would groan to Katie under my breath, as my stomach churned in demand of sustenance. This is a completely different kind of longing.

Distraction is the only remedy. I sleep a lot, but rarely deeply. The fevered dreams that accompanied my illness do not continue to haunt me, at least not in my sleep. I hardly dream at all. Mostly, I doze. I think of bears, their enormous figures stretched out in caves – many around here, I can feel – their chests rising and falling deeply in the long calm of hibernation. I snuggle up on the pile of blankets in the back corner of my room, tucking my knees to my chest. The howling wind filters through the tunnel of the cave. It's reduced to a shrill, muffled whistle that seems to me like breathing.

I focus on this sound. I try to match my own breath to it, inhaling and exhaling along with "Nature" – Honovi would be so proud – in order to keep my mind of my aching gut.

Often, I think of time, and what I said to Luke about it. Sleep becomes the regulator of my days, the structure by which I function. There are the times that I doze, drifting in and out of consciousness in the cold, dark recesses of the cave. There are also the times when I'm awake; and these times become increasingly confusing, disorienting. I slip. I feel myself slipping, and I embrace it. I lose track of how many days or weeks it's been. The snow barricades shut the entrance to the cave. At first, it feels like a door, keeping out the cold and keeping my security, my coziness within. Soon, it traps me.

Any last vestiges of humanity fall away when the toilet paper runs out. When debating about the components that make up humanity, scholars will talk about a higher intellect, the power of compassion, of foresight, of memory, of deception. All of this is bullshit. Try living in a cave for three months, beyond the reach of human interaction or social pleasantries. Try living in cramped quarters, soiled by your own excrement, without so much as the means to wipe your own ass. Screw empathy. Toilet paper makes us human.

* * *

The first time I venture out of the cave after the storm, it's like being born. I poke my head out into the light, blinking and squinting against the dazzling brightness of the blazing white snow. I'm ravenous.

I lope - down on all fours - all the way to the frozen river, splash out to the middle, and grab a fish. Before I even know what I'm doing, my teeth tear into its flesh, ripping the cold, wet meat from bone. Not long ago, I would have vomited at very thought of doing something like this. Now, it's just an instinct. I suck the flesh from the bones, smacking my lips. When I'm done, I toss aside the carcass, and grab for another, and another. It's a while before I notice the bear that fishes a little ways downstream from me. He regards me coolly. Probably pissed that I'm hogging up the buffet.

I continue like this for a while, hunting during the day and sleeping deeply at night, satiated for the first time in almost as long as I can remember.

Luke doesn't show up, but somehow I'm neither surprised nor concerned.

Sometimes I stumble upon remnants of civilization, like abandoned campsites or discarded gear. Like an archaeologist, I comb these discoveries carefully. My collection includes a compass, a sinewy, gnarled walking stick, and even an unopened can of beer. Once, I find a whole fire ring, constructed from smooth, round stones. The charred wood inside lies black against the snow. It looks like someone was here recently.

Again, strangely, I am reminded of Gram.

Fire, Gram used to say, makes us human. "It all boils down to fire," she would say, the creases at the corners of her droopy brown eyes deepening, as they would whenever she was grasped by the aim to seem particularly wise. "Fire's what helped us claw to the top of the food chain. You can't protect a warm body from the cold or scare away a jackal in the night without fire. You can't cook a warm meal to sustain you without fire." Here she would pause – always, and the rhythm of her speech, and the words, were always the same each time, so that I remember them still, more than a decade after she spoke them – and here she would lean over my small face and raise her white caterpillar eyebrows and say, "But you know that's not all I mean, Dori. It's not all survival. It's thriving. Evolving. Fire gave us industry. Fire gave us identity. Without a good fire, what would you expect people to gather 'round? To dance around? Tell stories around? Share history around?"

Indeed, every time these words were spoken to me, they were spoken against the backdrop of a fire crackling in the hearth. Even in the summer when the air warmed, Gram would always have a little fire burning low in that big stone fireplace at night. Mom said it probably didn't bother her. "When you're as icy cold as that woman," she muttered to me once, "nothing short of the eternal flame will warm your bones." As a little girl, I connected this sentiment to Gram's cremation, and it troubled me deeply. As I remember her fire story, though, I can't help but wonder if that's how Gram would have wanted to go, reclaiming, in a sense, her own inner fire.

"That's why fire is such a part of us, Dori," Gram would finish, that extra twinkle coming into her eyes at this point in the lesson. "We don't just master that fire on the outside of us. We carry it on the inside. We're creatures of fire. It drives us."

I feel it that night, beside the old fire ring. It possesses me. I stamp my feet upon the ground, relishing the tremors that spread like arteries in the dirt beneath my enormous heels. My energy pumps through the ground, one shock wave after another ricocheting in the cool, damp earth, stirring the hidden organisms I can feel teeming inside it. I want to make the trees quake from their roots up to the very tips of their sinewy limbs. I want something rapturous. I want the earth to open up and swallow me whole, the barren trees to blossom, the lake to swell and rise. I want to tilt back my head and roar at the moon,

unleash the guttural shriek that has been building and festering inside me for week upon torturous week. I feel drunk.

If Luke were here, he'd think I was an idiot. I look like an idiot, I'm sure, clomping my hairy feet and flailing my arms like some sort of aboriginal, those women on the Discovery Channel whose dark breasts dangle, bare and somehow sad, on their narrow chests, flapping shamelessly as they bounce and spin around a crackling fire.

I finally tip back my head and howl to the moon. Not at it, but to it. Like it can hear me, the ancestral beast, keening to it from my place on this tiny speck of dust in the vast solar system. The sound that assaults my ears is one of a rooster being strangled. Vaguely, I'm aware that it must be coming from me. It must be my voice. I roar and roar and stamp and claw at the dirt until my cry diminishes into a painful rasp. I think of the other skookum, the ones that came before me. I imagine that their shadows dance beside me. I remember the yellow eyes from my childhood dreams. Could that have been him? The old man of the mountains, the fire beast, the creature of West Pine, Oregon. My father. My father.

* * *

Winter lingers extra long this year, and by the time the mountains begin to thaw, it's been months since I've seen another person. Very occasionally, when I return from hunting but am too restless to sleep, I will pick over my books. They, too, seem like distant memories; but perhaps less so than the humans I once lived

amongst. In a way, they feel like old friends, somewhat foreign but still with a lingering sense of familiarity. More often, though, I read the mountains. I trek through the snow-blanketed woods and let my mind wander from creature to creature, tree to tree, feeling the steady pulse of the Cascades. This is the greatest comfort of all.

But I do miss them, at times. For all the raw fish I consume, the disintegration of my former hygienic ways, and my general isolation from the humanity, I must finally admit that the girl who was Dori Thornton is still down there somewhere, no matter how deep. As much as sometimes I'd like to pretend to be, I am not just another animal (a grizzly bear, for instance, would not cry in the night for dashing her mother's hopes, or bury itself in sleep to try to forget killing another creature in cold blood). I am not even full skookum. I begin to understand, slowly, the loneliness my father must have felt, the isolation of being alone in the world, the only one of his kind.

Luke, especially, shows up in my thoughts. I wonder about his life, about whether or not he has a girlfriend, about whether he'll go to college. I wonder if he will ever see his mother again, and if, someday, she will tell him the truth. I wonder whether or not she should. My mind often wanders back to that summer, and the hours playing rummy and Scrabble, fighting over spellings and trying to outdo each other with increasingly crude or ridiculous words.

On multiple occasions, I consider heading down into the valley toward

Honovi's, but something always makes me pause. I'm afraid that how different, how feral, I've become will dismay them – or, maybe worse, have the exact opposite effect. The thought of that worshipful look that overcomes Honovi's face whenever she speaks of my father is often enough to keep me away.

That being said, I'm shocked when I wake up one morning to find Luke standing over me.

"Hey," he says. He looks different, his dark hair cropped close to his head.

"Luke!" It's been so long since I've spoken that my vocal cords feel thick and dried up. To hear my voice, now simply a low growl, no one would ever guess that I was a regular girl not so very long ago. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, you know," he says. "I figured it's been a while. Plus, you still have my cooler." He nods to a corner, where the empty cooler rests against the wall. I had totally forgotten. It seems so long ago since the he dropped it off here that afternoon. It has been a long time. "How are you?"

"Good," I say. "You?" I'm still having trouble processing the fact that he's here. It's been so long since I had an interaction with another person. The words, the familiar pattern of pleasantries, flow from my mouth automatically, like the human Dori being resuscitated from the dead.

"Surviving," Luke says.

"How is Honovi?"

He shifts his weight. The look on his face tells me the answer before he

does. "Actually, that's what I came to talk to you about. Honovi is gone."

"Gone?" I already know what he means, but the reality of it is too strange to comprehend. For almost a full year, there have been two people in my life: Honovi and Luke. My entire social network has just been halved.

"She's dead," he says quietly. A sadness lingers around his eyes. I realize for the first time how attached to the old woman he was. I remember his story, that night in the truck – and Honovi's, I realize, the last time we spoke. She was the only family who ever took care of him. Something deep within me stirs.

"How?" I ask.

"Cancer." Of course. "She was feeling bad all winter, but you know her. No trust for Western medicine." He grins a little at the corner of his mouth.

"Anyway, by the time she went in to get checked out..."

"I'm so sorry." And it's true. My heart, at the very center of me, the same heart that took all winter to harden and cool against the world, has thawed in an instant. I want to cry. I want to hug Luke and rub his back and tell him it'll be all right.

He says, "I scattered her ashes, just like she wanted. She always used to joke that I should cut them into the weed so that her spirit would be infused in the next generation."

A barking laugh escapes me. "That sounds like Honovi, all right."

"Yeah. I figured that might be bad for business if word got around,

though.”

We’re quiet a moment, neither one of us meeting the other’s eyes. I think of Honovi’s ashes, floating over the peaks and valleys of the cascades. She reminds me, I realize suddenly, of Gram. She always did.

“Since Honovi’s gone,” Luke continues, “I’m the next in line to, you know, look out for you.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I think I’ll be all right though.”

“You’re tougher than I thought. I remember walking in on you crying in the bathroom, that day at school.”

It seems so long ago, a different lifetime. Two lifetimes ago, even. I say, “Yeah, well. The winter is a pretty steep learning curve.”

“I’ll bet.”

For all that I’ve missed him, having Luke here is awkward. I wonder if my cave smells bad, if he can see the wildness in my eyes. I consider asking about the girlfriend, but think better of it.

“There is one thing you can do for me,” I say, at last.

* * *

I place a bouquet of wildflowers at the foot of a tree near where it happened. I don’t know the hunter’s name. A story ran in the *Daily Pine*, a long time back. Vaguely, I recall Luke telling me in one of those dark and hazy days of early winter, when my consciousness was mostly adrift. The writer, I remember,

argued for more diligence and respect for the wildlife on the part of tourists and locals alike in their travels, effectively warning off the last of the Bigfoot hunters – for the time being, at least. These were the broad strokes Luke had painted for me. The details, he had skipped. Maybe he thought I didn't want to know.

Spring is written all over the mountains. Graduation will come in a few weeks, and my old class will leave for college. Luke is going, too. Honovi, he says, would have expected him to.

“Will you be going far?” I ask.

“Washington.”

“Congratulations.” It's strange, to think of all of them leaving while I remain. Their stories will continue, their plots will grow and change as they pursue their degrees, as they find jobs and contribute to the economy, as they get married and start families.

Luke hands over the big cardboard box he's lugged up the mountain for me. “This was a bitch to get,” he tells me. “I needed to go to like three different flea markets.”

“Thank you.”

He smiles, a real one. “You're welcome,” he says.

This is the last time I see Luke. When he leaves, picking his way down the mountain after giving me an awkward wave goodbye, I carry the box to the back corner of the cave. I place it on the ground beside the various odds and ends I've

collected throughout the winter, and the small stack of books.

As time passes, I think about my own plot, my own contribution to the world. One day, I run all the way to “the source” for the first time since Honovi took me there while I was still red-headed, jeans-wearing Dori Thornton. I sit beneath the tree, between its big, twisting roots, for a long time, soaking in the pulse of energy that radiates from it. I decide that I’m glad it’s safe, for now, even if I’m not really the one protecting it. If and when the time comes, I’ll be waiting.

I do not open the box. I’m not ready yet.

* * *

Years later, I crouch behind a tree, deep in the forest that blankets the foothills of the Cascades.

The glow of the fire has drawn me down into the valley, following the hum of voices rising and falling. I don’t know why I crept down through the trees. In the old days I ghosted around campsites in hopes of snagging scraps of food. But it has been a long time since those days. Now when I see fire, I turn away. It’s safer, more practical, not to interfere. Something pulled at me this time, though. Boredom, perhaps. A random impulse.

It’s a family. Two parents, maybe in their late forties. Two boys, and a girl. The boys are squabbling over who should get the last marshmallow, the younger boy coming dangerously close to stabbing his brother’s eye out. The girl gazes into the fire. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, her chunky pink boots

perched on the edge of her camp chair. I miss boots.

I watch them for an hour. They play Twenty Questions and make popcorn in a tin attached to a wooden handle, and then the mother suggests that they each tell a ghost story. I don't listen to the stories. There are enough ghosts in my own life without having to hear about more. As I watch the family, though, gathered together around the fire, I strange sort of ache seeps into my bones.

In the flicker of the firelight I can see the world of humanity, conjured up and whole, a single light that burns brightly inside them all, a tradition this family shares with millions of other families, with those who came before, and with those who will come after. I watch the boys laugh and the little girl squeal at all the appropriate parts of the story. The father has a camera. The pictures he snaps will be slipped into some photo album; and years later, the grown children will look over it. They'll tell their children the story about that weekend they went camping with their family in the foothills of the Cascades. They'll take them camping, too, and play the same strategies in Twenty Questions, and tell the same ghost stories, creating new memories that are born from the old, again and again, like Honovi's mother reciting to skookum legend to her, and Honovi reciting it to me.

Back in my cave, I remember Jenny Baker, that bitch. It's almost laughable the way I used to be tormented by her, a single character who barely made up a single, infinitesimal blip on the timeline of my own life. I think of Jenny's

gossiping, and the way they all fed off of it, the way they couldn't get enough of those lurid stories, whether or not they were one hundred percent true. I think Logan, crooning the ballad of a red-headed girl who went missing the wilderness. I think of Honovi, and of Gram, who are one and the same, whose faces blend together so that I cannot remember which was which in the story of my life. I think of my mother and her creation stories, and of the contradicting stories of Luke's creation. I even think of Katie, who has long since passed out of my knowledge, but whose story I sometimes imagine when I lie on my back at night, casting my mind to that other world, that other life. I think of my father, whose story is not only his story, but my story, the skookum story – the stuff of history and legend.

I think of books, really think of them, for the first time in years. I try to remember that feeling that made me want to study literature at Stanford. I run my palms over the covers of the books I've saved, their characters and plots contained, intact, within, the very same as the when I read them years ago. I remember the neatness of it all, the purposeful organization of meaning.

Because that what stories are. Whether it's a legend, or a fictional novel, or an account in a history book, a story is framework that supports random events, a structure that orders the chaos of life so that, maybe, we can find meaning in it. Stories, true or imagined, are an account of human life. They're how we make a record of things other animals would just let slip by unnoticed, unmarked, or

unremembered. Humans can't do that. I can't do that.

That's the thing about people. Even if the plots of our lives aren't dramatic or life-altering, even if we don't get a chance to save the world or make life meaningful for another human being, we still exist. I still exist.

I pick up *Frankenstein*. This, I have read the most. It was the last book I read as a human, and the first book I read as a skookum, a s'quatch. I think about the monster. He's vengeful, murderous, hideous; he doesn't even have a name. But he has a story, just like Gregor Samsa does, and just like I do. My mind drifts back to *Macbeth* at the playhouse, with Katie, so long ago. Macbeth says that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But he's only partially right. Life itself may signify nothing, but the tale does just the opposite. No matter how brilliantly or poorly, authentically or inauthentically, wittily or idiotically that it's told, the point is to tell it, to record it, to leave some proof of your existence and, maybe, to affect someone else's. Shelley's monster gets to tell his story, and that makes all the difference.

At last I open the box. The items are there, just as requested – an old typewriter, and a large stack of fresh, white paper.

My fingers are too big for the keys, but it doesn't matter. I punch them slowly, one by one. I have all the time in the world.

I'm almost finished now. I'm leaving soon. This part of my life, this story, is over. When I'm done, I'll leave the manuscript here, in this cave. If you find it,

and you read it, I hope you will remember me. I hope you will realize that I exist, and I hope that, even if we can't share anything else, I can at least share this story, my story, with you. I don't mean to impart any sort of lesson or ask for any sort of sympathy. If there's meaning buried somewhere here in these pages to be gleaned for your own benefit, that's for you to find. For me, though, I just want to leave a record that I was here, that I am here. That these things happened, and that they happened to me, the skookum formerly known as Dori Thornton. That's all the meaning I need.

You'll probably never meet me, but I hope that you'll remember me. I hope that you'll carry my story with you. And maybe our paths will cross. I'm not sure where I'll go next. If you're ever out camping, maybe you'll hear me as I run through the night forest. Maybe you'll hear me roaring to the moon, or hear the rustle of fur as I shake rainwater from my mane. Maybe you'll feel my eyes peering at you from where I crouch, listening, in the dense cover of pines. You will remember me. You will turn, looking, perhaps, for yellow lamplights in the dark; but I will be gone. Just another mystery, disappearing into the mists of the Cascades. But that, at last, is enough.

ACADEMIC VITA of Emily C. Toombs

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