

Agreements

They were born knowing everything, but everything was too complicated for them to live with.

So they taught themselves limits and lies. Every year, people accepted new agreements to wear as weights, chaining their lives to something they could understand — suffering. It was their rite of passage.

“When you grow up, you’ll understand,” they promised as their children agreed to weight after weight.

Some children gave up, their spirit crushed by the pressure of their world’s stories. Others went mad, rattling their chains and eventually hanging themselves to get free. A few survived to have their own children and pass on their religion of suffering.

Some escaped into the forest and were never heard from again.

On a Sunday morning, with gloom holding the sky hostage, the people left their homes and walked to their temple. They approached in threes and fours, towered over by spires of rotting wood held up by a mountain of rubbish. Their temple was carved from old machines and garbage — the bones of their ancestors.

It was Ariel’s eighth birthday and time for her first agreement.

The town flowed into the great hall of the temple and filed into shattered pews. As they sat on broken seats, wicked metal dug into their flesh and grated against their bones. Their priest stood chained at the altar, nodding in approval.

Life was not meant to feel good.

Ariel’s parents led her down the aisle, their chains rattling on the ancient floorboards and weights crippling their strides. Her father hunched forward, dragging an overflowing bathtub behind him, filled by bubbles and a fat man insulting him in between puffs of cigar smoke and sips of scotch.

“You’re not working hard enough.”

“Ha. You? You’ll never be good enough for that.”

Her mother, tall and bird-thin was bent to the left as she hobbled. An iron gargoyle clawed to her shoulder, whispering, “Why aren’t you prettier?”

“Why aren’t you better?”

Ariel’s sun-kissed skin radiated against the lines of her best black dress. A headband lined with golden aspen leaves wrapped around her dark hair. Her parents, out of breath, stopped at the steps to the pulpit while Ariel stepped forward to meet the priest.

Stretched skin from his bare back followed rusted chains to a jagged metal cross on the wall behind him. The light that wormed its way through the old plastic window above the cross was all that ever touched his long white neck and bald head. He reminded Ariel of the vultures she found last spring. She watched them peck apart a fawn she found dying in the metal jaws of a hunter’s trap. There had been too many of them and the trap had already drained most of the life out of the fawn.

Ariel’s skin crawled with the same helplessness she had felt as that fawn took its last breath.

She did not want this. But it was their way.

She couldn’t see them in the gloom, but she knew the people guarding the entrance would stop her if she ran. It happened all the time.

She had thought of escaping to the woods, but monsters lived there and the world past the forest was unknown. Her friend Sam had asked her to leave with him the year before. When she didn’t, he promised he would come back for her.

He never had.

Ariel missed the sunny days they laid in the meadow watching clouds dance across the sky. She felt the wind blow on her skin while Sam talked about the song of the trees. A voice knocked her back to the moment.

“We gather here today to give Ariel Thorn her first weight.”

The room replied in unison with grimaced breath, “So it has been, so it shall always be.”

The priest motioned his bony right hand and his two assistants came forward, holding a special weight of shame — a rusted iron tree.

“Ariel, we’ve watched you play with the trees and the flowers,” the priest bellowed, “You must learn that they are not your friends. You will remind us every day that the natural world is our enemy.”

One man grabbed her and wound a chain under her arms, around her neck and over her chest, pinching her skin as he put the padlock in place over her heart. Ariel screamed as the other man dropped the tree on the ground behind her and it jerked her to the boards below.

“Let Ariel be a reminder to us all that the earth slows us down and makes us savage. That the forest is our enemy and we must control it, kill it, burn it. We must bend it to our will or it will destroy us,” closed the priest.

With a numb shuffle, everyone turned and drug themselves from the great hall. No one spoke to Ariel as she wept on the earth. Her parents paused to look at her, she even thought she saw a flash of empathy in her father’s eyes.

“We’ll see you at home dear,” he said.

It was her weight to bear.

Aspen leaves from her headband lay scattered around her face, drops of blood burned against the gold in the gloom. She wiped her eyes clear and checked the back of her head. Her skin had split from the fall, but the flow of blood was slowed to ooze and it would heal without stitches... she hoped.

The priest and his assistants muttered among themselves, ignoring her as she got to her feet and dragged the iron tree across the floor.

She did as much damage to the floor as she could manage.

It took Ariel a few hours to drag herself across the harvest fields to the edge of the forest. Bright yellows and oranges sang against the fading twilight sky. She found her warm jacket, pants, and socks hidden in a pile of leaves under her favorite tree, right where she had left them that morning.

She bundled up, started a fire and cried herself to sleep as the wind danced through the crowns of the changing aspen trees, covering her in hidden gold and dropping flashes of light in the dancing flames.

Ariel's dreams brought her to summer days in the field with her friends. The morning she followed Sam to the smiling tree and they both listened as it sang them the song of the world. She saw the eyes and mouth move in the bark. Something was rushing toward them through the woods. Sam didn't seem to notice and the tree didn't stop singing.

She stood up to look and a crash threw her back to the ground. Shocking her awake and back into the night with her low fire crackling and a boy sprawled beside it, catching his breath.

"What were you running from?" Ariel asked.

The boy jumps from the ground and away from her voice. He sees her in the light, calms down, and sits with his back against an oak tree.

"What are you doing there?"

"My people gave me this weight and I will sit here and starve myself because this world is not for me." answered Ariel.

His eyes lit up.

"You're Ariel. Sam told me you were strong enough."

"You know where Sam is? Tell me!"

"He went through the flower gates into the lower worlds to find a song that could save all of us. One that could wake these people up. It's been a full turn of the seasons. We have to send someone after him," he said as he removed a vial from his pocket.

"Be still," he said.

He walked up to her and poured the vial into the keyhole of the lock on her heart. It sizzled and smoked and soon he pulled it apart. She untangled herself from the chains and smiled.

“What were you running from?”

“I was running from the shadows. Let’s not talk about them until the sun is back,” he said as he looked into the embers of the fire.

“We have to find Sam.”

“Yes. You’ll have to go into the lower worlds for that. And you might not come back.”

“Anywhere is better than here.”

“We’ll see. You haven’t even seen the Mouth yet.”

“What’s that?”

He smirked.

“You have to see it to believe it. Let’s get some sleep. We leave at dawn. There isn’t much time left for this world.”

They curled up beside each other and the song of the wind lulled them into the world of dreams.

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