

FEATHERS OF A FALLING STAR





*To my family,
and to everyone who
has supported me.*

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Chapter 2

THE SHEPHERD.

A stillness clung around the trees, which sat blue and sullen in the dawn. Deep silence had sunk heavily in the spaces between them, waiting for first light.

Kami strode between the boughs and frost, a clash of crimson cloth amongst the blue.

Today was the winter solstice; a dark, drab day of the year, full of awry spells and muttered curses.

The thin, crisp edge of the moon still hung high in the brightening sky as they looked around themselves, squinting at the few remaining stars above.

Their breath came out in bursts of mist, pricking their damp nose. They send up a quick, silent prayer for their thick cloak, natty and thread-bare as it may be.

Their mind skipped around the different directions and place names they'd come to seek, paths wound through field, forest and fire, seeking scraps and clues. This nomadic life suited them, but it wasn't easy. A lean, tough edge had come into their body, showing the wiry figure of one who lived off little.

With a sigh they finally paused, leaning heavily on a neighbouring fir tree. They shook the damp, clinging dew from their hood and came to perch on a moss-strewn tree nearby.

From their weathered goatskin pack they pulled a small, weighty dagger and an angular, palm-sized piece of wood. Soon the only sound echoed back was the scrape of the blade as echoed and danced in and out between the trees. A pair of crudely sculpted eyes peered balefully out at Kami as they slowly worked, whispering long strings of spells and chants to bind the talisman together. A thoughtful, trancelike air fell over them as they worked.

At last this was shattered by a weight of warmth clinging to their back. The sun had finally pulled its way through the trees, turning the blue forest to gold.

A trail of sunlight ran zigzag through the wood as Kami rubbed their tired eyes, pulling themselves from spell-weaving, and rolling their hunched, cramped shoulders.



Shaking their fur of the clinging dawn, they carefully placed the talisman in their pack and stood, stretching their bad leg, the scars and damaged muscles trembling.

They were heading through this great forest to reach the lonely town of Rusk on the other side, sheltered in the rises and folds of the fields as they curled their way towards the sea.



It took another two nights amongst those towering trees before Kami saw the low, blue roofs of Rusk through the thinning wood. The houses sat squat to the ground, huddling against the hills from the sea wind that blew up the valley.

From up high they could spy the fields surrounding the village stretching up to the lonely mountains, all studded with white and grey sheep. The shadows of clouds pooled and spilled over the fields below, before finally being caught in the higher peaks, hiding them within the mist.

After the days of travel their old leg injury was acting up, shooting daggers of pain with the pressure of walking. All they could do was mutter a soothing chant, droned out through dry lips as they staggered to the village.

An old, dilapidated inn came into view as they entered the town.

Their hackles raised, it had been a while since they had come among people.

Limping up they leaned against the crumbling clay-clod wall cautiously and peered through the mirky glass. The whole place seemed to be standing more due to the sheer enthusiasm of the townsfolk inside rather than anything else, Kami thought to themselves.

Before they could be seen they leaned away from the window, lip curling. People and conversations were the last thing they wanted right now.

They made their way round the back, spotting low lean-tos and fences, with a few sheep looking on with their gnarled horns.

Just as they were about to walk past Kami looked back. The sheep were listless, lamed.

Their own leg stabbed in sympathy.

Mind made up, they slipped through the gate and crouched to the ground, digging various pouches from their pack. With a thumb and forefinger they took a pinch of clay from each pouch into their clawed hands and rose stiffly, coming to the lean-to, and drew the wide, arching symbol of Aenkin, good health, onto the slatted wooden walls. They bound the spell good and true, sealing it with a wave of their clawed paw. No foul weather would ever make the sigil fade. They turned around, voice taunt.

“You won’t die, and you won’t get any sicker.”

A few sheep raised their curling horns, unperturbed. Kami stared at them a heartbeat longer, ear flicking, before grabbing their pack and huddling against the wooden wall, cloak pulled over their ears; a sheepdog among the flock.

Their paws dug into their muzzle as a shudder ran through their body, trying to suppress their low growls of pain. The days of travel were catching up to them now they had stopped. Blooms of light danced behind their eyes. The muscles in their leg spasmed in retribution, the old scars twitching.

Their teeth dug into their lip. Despite this it was a known pain, a long-kept pain, and it wasn't enough to stop them eventually sinking down into the great shadows of sleep.





*The spray of the waves stung their eyes, the sun catching off the
sea like liquid gold, blinding them temporarily.*

*For miles the water stretches, moving in restless turmoil.
Behind them, without needing to turn and see, a monastery
looms.*

*Shouts and laughter echo impossibly from the high walls,
coming from a thousand different places.
The bird flew like a bolt of lightning from its perch, skimming
the waves, a spark of life above the restless sea.*

*A bloom of crimson appeared, swirling thick in the water,
falling from its' wings as the sky darkens, and darkens, and
darkens.*

Kami jolted awake, teeth bared wide in the gloom. Their dream ran ahead of them, slipping away like water from a spring, but a snow white bird held firm in their minds eye; motionless and silent.

ADD MORE

Laboriously peeling off their crimson cloak they paused, inspecting the jagged scar that ran down amidst the fur on their left leg, creating a channel, a border all of its own. The skin was taunt, bare, shining slightly in the morning light. It felt silken smooth, vulnerable and naked compared to the rest of their furred body, it looked out of place.

They stared at it for a while, silent in the chilling morning air, small puffs of air rising from their muzzle as their chest rose and fell, rose and fell.

They set to work gently washing their sore muscles, feeling the knots and tensions in every single one.

CHANGE THIS, DIDNT SLEEP IN INN:

Before calling out Kami stopped to watch, leaning on one of the crude fence-posts. The farmers gruffly worked in silence, their calloused hands worked in an age old practiced way, doing what they had done for most of their lives; methodical, and precise.

One of them suddenly caught Kami's eye and called out.

“You here to help, boy?”

Nodding silently Kami clambered over the fence and joined them; sticking out like a beanpole amongst the sheep and the bowed backs of the farmers. One of them looked Kami up and down sceptically.

“You that new visitor people've seen walking round? You need work?”

Kami smiled placidly.

“I was a shepherd in my old monastery before I began to travel, I know the ways of healing and the ways of magic. If you would let me work a few days before travelling on; I would be grateful.”

The two old farmers exchanged glances, furrowing their thick brows. It was rare to see a magic user asking to be a shepherd, but it would be a fool who turned them down.

Finally one of them said,

“Aye. You'll find a flock East of here, up the mountain trail, take over from the lad with them, he's been up there for weeks.”

Without a word more, they turned back to shearing.

Picking through the quietly bleating sheep, Kami crossed over the village heading Eastward, a gnarled marker of wood stuck at an angle off the path. Beyond it the tough grass stubbornly clung as the way steeped and grew rockier, small

twists of thyme that had lasted the winter curled themselves into the gaps between the rocks.

Before Kami could continue further they started, and their long ears pricked up as a thin shout came from behind them.

They turned and spied a small group of children, sitting on a fence line a little way off. They called and gestured enthusiastically at Kami, who padded back to them, fiddling with the strap of their backpack, eyes not meeting theirs.

“We know who you are!”

“You can do magic, show us some!”

“Something big!”

Kami paused, unable to tell if their cries were genuine or jeering. They glumly scratched the back of their head and stooped, plucking a long blade of grass. The children’s eyes widened and they loudly shushed each other. One small, freckled girl whispered,

“Maybe they’ll turn it into a sword!”

Kami brought the grass up to their muzzle and blew, loud and clear. The mewling call of a cliff falcon erupted from the grass whistle, making the children jump and squeal in surprised delight. Kami glanced sharply up and held their arm aloft, the children in awe.



Like an arrow loosed came the mighty bird, clapping its wings like thunder.

Kami stood stock-still, staring at the bird. One baleful yellow eye met theirs, and as it did the bird recoiled upwards in a single powerful beat of its wings, claws scoring out towards Kami's face. Kami raised their arms over their head protectively as the bird screamed around them, recoiling, before casting off as suddenly as it had come.

The children were silent.

A tremor ran through Kami, their eyes brimming. Without looking back they started forward, it was stupid to think that spell would have ever worked, not now.

They carried on silently, shoulders hunching in on themselves, and began up the mountain path.







Here and there wild gorse was flowering at the promise of spring, winking vibrant suns above the grey slate of the rocks.

Kami started off up the mountain path, pausing briefly to pluck some sprigs of wild thyme and sage, bringing each up to their nose, eyes closed as they breathed.

They paused again to gather some last clinging rowan berries, careful to not let their claws break the skin, and stashed these away in their pack.

The sun bled through the clouds making them feel hot and uncomfortable under their thick fur. Sighing, they stopped to strip their crimson cloak off over their head, draping it over an arm.

As they went higher, the sound of a distant brook or stream pricked their long ears and they came upon it as it babbled to itself in feigned laughter, jumping over rock and pebble on its journey down to the sea.

They spied quick little fish flashing in the brisk, clear current.

Padding over softly they placed their cloak and bag on the rocks and went to stand in the current, wincing at the cold mountain water on their paw pads.

The fish scattered restlessly in a show of scales before settling once more, as languid as the water they swam in.

Kami stood like stone, the shadow of the clouds sliding noiselessly over the brook and their hunched form.

Eyes keen, unblinking, Kami flashed out a claw, lighting quick, hooking one of the little sliver fish and quickly killing it between knife-sharp jaws.

They ate this raw and fresh as they carried on their way, cold paw pads heating up as the sun warmed the rocks underfoot, leaving a trail of dark, wet footprints in their wake.





Chapter 2

THE MOUNTAIN.

After another half day of walking they finally heard the telltale bleating calls of the flock carried over on the mountain air. Their leg dragged awkwardly across the ground.

Kami rounded an outcrop of rocks and spied a sullen looking boy, surrounded by a flock of speckled grey sheep with curling horns.

The boy looked up as Kami's crimson cloak waved in the breeze, catching his eye.

"I'm here to watch the sheep."

Kami called briskly as the boy continued to stare, cagily, in their direction. He trudged over.

“Suit yourself, wolf.”

Without a word more, he slunk past, thrusting the worn crook into their paws, kicking stones as he headed down the trail.

“I’m not a wolf.”

Kami muttered to themselves, spitting on the ground. They turned their attention instead to the crook, turning it this way and that, inspecting the length of it intently.

“No magician to charm these things...”

They said absentmindedly, reaching into their pack for the whittling tools. The sheep wandered, unperturbed, as Kami perched on the dry, stony ground to carve, muttering out a binding spell as sparks, warm to the touch, leapt out with each glance of the whittling tool.

Occasionally a sheep would lift its carven horns and stare at Kami out of its slotted, silent eyes before returning to grazing.

As the shadows of the day lengthened, they held the crook aloft to admire their handiwork. The symbols for protection, good fortune and storm-calming stared back at them.

Now on the mountain, their real task began.

They swiftly took note of where the flock stood in the approaching twilight, watching the sun slip fast behind the tallest peaks, reddening the sky as it went. A wild energy seemed to fill the coming twilight, crackling as a coming storm. The air was cold and catching in their throat as they

spoke aloud a summoning spell, one memorised many months prior.

Their voice rang like a bell struck, heading out over the clear sky as the first stars appeared silently, as if called by their spell. Kami called upon the points of the mountain, the brooks, the rocks themselves, and as they did this a light seemed to shimmer out of the very ground, winding far across the glade and out of sight around the mountain path.

Their eyes brimmed with the magical light they had called as they watched it etch down over the rocks, trembling and falling like water. A dozen sheep eyes glinted like jewels as they caught in the glow, restless but quiet. With a wordless bark, they gathered up the grooved and charmed crook, heralding the sheep along with them into the night.

They hurried, barely taking in the land outside the small sphere the trail cast in the darkness, stuttering and falling over the land, the stars above blazed as they watched. Spell-drunk and wild Kami and their flock went on, eyes never leaving the trail, searching for the end in the barren landscape.

Their bad leg collapsed under them, claws scoring the ground as they fell, the earth lurching beneath them. A pit formed in their stomach as they were thrust to the floor, wrenching a cry from between their teeth.

They tried and failed to catch themselves, hand gashed along the ground, the wind knocked from their lungs, cheek against the freezing stone.

A few sheep paused and looked on, indifferent in the gloom.

Before they could sit up a screeching pain swam through their leg, pushed beyond its feeble limits as the blood throbbed under the skin, scars pulled taunt.

Their palm bled in response, trickling down their fur.

A wave of anger rose in their chest, taking their breath away once more, the world seemed to tip.

Weakness, such weakness, their mind screamed, a snarl coming from their clenched teeth as their shoulders shook.

Spit dribbled down their chin, chest heaving. Black danced at the corner of their vision, a buzzing filled their skull to the brim.

Why was this the way it was?

Their youth. Their body. Held back by this laming.

“Nothing more than a fucking cripple.”

They growled, eyes squeezed shut, curling into themselves.

A spasm ran through their leg in white-hot protest and they howled back, throat raw in the night air.

The light blurred and splintered before them, tears cut down through the fur of their muzzle.

They hid their face in their hands, trembling, cursing.

The light held true and waited. Offering little comfort but instead a promise, a key.

They wiped their eyes on their thick-furred arm. Their body shook silently as their rage dissolved into a cold stone in their stomach, their anger leaving them.

Gingerly they stretched their right leg in front of them. It ached back.

They bit their tongue, bit it hard, and pushed further. Copper danced in their mouth. Leaning heavily on their crook they forced themselves back upwards.

The way was slow going after this and lanced with pain.

They glanced again and again towards the invisible horizon, hoping dawn wasn't close just yet.

As they limped over a rise they finally spotted it, the end of the spell.

The line of light cut abruptly before a small shrine, folded against the neighbouring boulders.

It looked neglected, forgotten to those around it, although a symbol in blue on one of the slatted roof tiles still remained, badly worn by weather. The sheep milled about as Kami came close, putting a clawed hand on the shrine that barely reached shoulder height, hunched and haggard on its support beams.

They pulled their bag from their shoulder, taking out a rich, green-hued pigment from a little pouch. With this they traced the symbol on the roof tile, picking out the almost forgotten sigil with their trembling fingers.

With a grunt they lowered themselves down onto the rocky ground before the shrine, pulling two more packets from their bag. From the wax paper of one they removed smoked rabbit meat, and from the other was rowan berries

and blueberries. They lay these on the slab of rock just inside the shrine, catching a few berries as they rolled and placing them back inside one by one.

Their eyes in an instant glinted amber in the surrounding darkness, lit from within as they raised a clawed finger, holding it to their lips.

A small flame leapt to life, swallowing the offerings.

With a swiftness that caught them off guard a small, clawed creature scabbled across the roof, fur bushed and beady eyes glinting in the firelight.

It watched Kami with a knife-like stare as they tried to form their words. They swallowed.

“Mountain spirit I...I come bearing offerings. Please speak with me.”

The whiskers on the little creatures face bristled furiously, revealing sharp, dagger teeth as its lip curled.

Finally, it spoke with a voice that seemed to hang in the mountain air like a freezing fog.

“I will not accept your tainted offerings. I know why you are here.”

Kami stiffened, a fight with a spirit would be short-lived and deadly.

“I don’t want to fight, I just want to make things right.”

Kami replied, voice rasping on the cold air as their hands shook.



Heartbeats of silence hung between them both, the only sound being the grate of hooves over rock in the darkness.

“You know it is too late for that, your sins cannot be forgiven. Why you follow this quest fruitlessly is beyond me.”

The spirit spat these words, seeming to be speaking from all directions across the lonely mountaintop, bombarding them.

“Your atonement should be death. But I am not the one to give it to you.”

At this, Kami dared to look up into those black eyes, a tiny pearl of hope unfurling at their breast.

“So you’ll tell me where to go for...atonement?”

The little creature flicked a paw in disgust.

“It is a long road. Long and lonely. It is no meaning to me if you pursue this or not.”

Their long mottled tail swished the roof tiles, stilling ever so slightly over the symbol, fresh and new.

“...To the West is a bay. There lives a spirit who knows the waters unlike I do. Whether you go to her or not has no consequence here.”

The hope in Kami’s chest bloomed ever so slightly, their leg throbbing in apprehension.

“I cannot repay my debt to you, thank you.”

Kami bent their head forward and held their paws to their chest in the



symbol of reverence.

“Ha! Do not thank me, you are lucky I spoke a single word to you.”

With a last spit of fury from the creature the fire suddenly died, the smoke curling up past the empty shrine roof.

Kami sat back, quietly.

Despite the spirits anger, it had given them exactly what they needed.

A soft grey light crept across the sky, blurring in the first shadows of dawn as Kami laid back across the chilling rock, muscles cramped in the cold. Tears sprung anew from their eyes as their heart lifted ever so slightly with the rising sun.







Chapter 3

THE BAY.

Another sunrise arrived silently over the mountain peaks. Kami sat slumped across the outcrop, stinging eyes watching the flock here and there between the rocks. A mist hung around them, the sunlight burning through it in jagged lines. Far in the distance a hawk called out across the freezing air.

Their mind drifted, thinking of the far off bay waiting for them, glittering in their minds eye. The call of gulls rang in their ears.

Something had to be the key to this, to make their relentless travelling worthwhile.

They were brought back to the mountainside by the coldness pricking their nose.

A spiderweb of frost crossed over the stones. Snow would soon come, and the flock would need bringing down to the lower meadows when it did. Their leg ached from the cold and the



lack of movement, forcing them to stand. Their shoulders hunched inwards, folding in on themselves from the dull thud after thud in their leg.

“If the snows come today, I might even get to set off tonight...”

They muttered to the air around them, leaning heavily on the crook to keep weight off their bad leg, stretching the muscles in it tentatively.

A heaviness seemed to creep into their mind, bowing their shoulders further, a dull thudding conscience.

The Mountain Spirit was right to treat them with such vitriol, but, why had it also decided to help? It felt like much more than they deserved.

They pushed the heel of their hands to their eyes, thoughts in a confusing spiral.

They allowed themselves to think, for a moment, of the high, sunlit walls of home. Painted in red and gold, honey-sweet in the light. They thought of the warm, dry air that tasted of thyme and orange blossom...they thought about the night they left, a shadow flashing over their heart.

A bleating cry lurched them out of their daydream. Ears pricked, Kami traced the noise over to a huddled outcrop. Peering behind they saw one of the ewes lying on its side, cold air coming in short bursts from its muzzle.

“No,...it’s much too soon for lambing.”

They mumbled in concern, bending over the ewe, hands gentle and ready.

She was panting hard, eye rolling in its socket.

They held the crook and traced the symbols with a claw anxiously.

A slick, pathetic bundle was pushed, pulled, fell onto the ground, picked up quickly to avoid the freezing stone and held to the ewes head.

Before she had even lifted her muzzle to it Kami could see what was wrong.

It lay cold and unmoving, head slumped and malformed. In the centre of its crown was a singular, grotesque eye, open and staring out at nothing, splitting the head like a gaping wound, reflecting Kami's face back to them.

A pit opened in their stomach. The lamb felt like an omen towering over them, a dark curse laid upon their back.

Not a single breath had come from it, slipping into the dark before it had even seen the world.

They knew they had to leave. Their presence brought nothing but death, they couldn't allow themselves to stay longer.

With shaking hands they picked up the lamb, wool still slick to the touch.

They walked a ways from the flock and knelt to the peat in between the rocks, the ground was hard as iron but they felt

resolute. Claws scoring the earth, they hunched over the small forming grave like a rat over a tomb.

Their fingers burned from the cold, claws throbbing with the effort. A shallow grave was all they could offer. They swung down their pack and took out a scrap of cloth, wrapping the pitifully small form and lowering it into the earth. They hesitated, lump in throat, before enclosing the grave once and for all.

They stood in silence, plumes of air around their muzzle.

“I’m sorry there wasn’t more I could do for you. I never should have come here.”

The singular, glazed eye burned in their mind, giving no reply. They raised the crook with a shout, gathering the flock for their trek down the mountain, a careful eye on the last ewe, blood still staining her off-white fleece. Anxiety riddled at their heart, the frost of the morning stinging their eyes as they gazed at the mist below.



Kami reached the lower fields at the foot of the mountain just before sunset, the stones casting solemn shadows around them. Their body ached and trembled, they hadn't stopped to eat or rest, the pain feeling like a cathartic gesture, one step closer to some sort of atonement.

One of the shepherd boys stood near the fenceposts, staring curiously at the approaching flock.

“Take this, I have charmed it best I can, but there is nothing else I can do here.”

Kami's eyes bored into his for a single moment, filled with a grim determination, something wild held just under the surface.

They didn't wait for an answer, turning away as the boy started falteringly to speak. It was dangerous, stupid to have come to this town in the first place, it was dangerous for them to be amongst others at all.

They travelled on until nightfall, sleeping rough, wrapped up tight in their cloak beneath the towering cedar trees around them as the world froze once more, barely a breeze creeping through the glittering grass.

The moon shone its cold light through the branches, sending shadows to sway across their tired eyes. With a coldness settling into their breast, Kami eventually slipped into sleep.





*Kami's soft paws slipped soundlessly across the cold tiled floors.
They knew this place, they knew every crack and blemish of the
tiles, every delicately painted flower.*

*The candles lining the high walls caused their shadow to heave
across the red plaster, dragging over the threadbare tapestries
that had lost their colour over the years.*

*A cry came from up ahead, as the hall twisted into darkness, a
chasm between the candle light. Kami ran towards the sound,
heart squeezing in their chest as their shadow fled alongside
them.*

It came again, a low guttural moan.

*A woman, in the candle light, her form seeming to shimmer in
the darkness, a figure behind dirtied glass.*

*She lay on the floor, writhing in agony as a spasm ran through
her swollen belly.*

*Kami gasped, falling to the floor, reaching for her trembling
hands.*

"I'm here! I can help, it's going to be okay, I-"

*Kami shook, words dying on their tongue as her head turned
towards them, morphing, a sheep's slotted eye stared back at
them, rolling in terror.*

*Suddenly a piercing cry joined hers as she arched back. Kami
rushed to the baby, bloodied on the floor but breathing, crying,
screaming.*

*They picked it up, and as they did its body began to change.
Its fingers contorted and lengthened, bone thin and brittle.*

*Its arms deformed, bending back slowly, almost gracefully,
arching up and over its head as feathers wormed their way
through the skin of the face, its little mouth a black gash in the
darkness.*

*The baby's cries grew shrill, relentless, beating its still bloodied
wings against Kami's hands, writhing and bucking in their grip.
The birds white feathers glinted in the low light, blood matting
to its breast as it struggled and struggled to breathe-*



Kami startled awake, a jolt of white hot adrenaline ran through them, a snarl dying in their throat. Their chest heaved, sucking in air as if through mud.

It was barely dawn, and frost shone silently over their cloak in the gloom. They screwed up their eyes, raking their fingers over their muzzle, the small pricks of pain from their claws grounding them back into the world around them.

Every night seemed to be haunted by these dreams, always panic filled, always the bird, hung in their minds eye. The glittering frost warped around them, heaving and pushing with the light of the coming dawn. Fog sighed over the dew heavy grass around them, melting and dissipating as the daylight crept on.

The bay. That was the only thing worth thinking about. The cold had done no good for their leg, all the sleeping rough gradually catching up with them.

They could feel it throbbing with their heartbeat, always held in the back of their mind, in the dark, painful recesses. With each thud of pain their chest heaved, but in their minds eye the bay sat waiting, shimmering under a warm sun.



Two days and two nights Kami wound their way down the mountains, drawing ever closer to the sea.

The temperature rose as they came amongst the larch trees and birches. Silence was punctuated by the lilting call of the

cliff falcon, far off in the distant corners of the sky. Thistles nodded proud heads as Kami went past, dragging their tired feet over the dry ground.

Sleeping rough for so long was catching up to them, each night a little harder to recover from.

Their anger moved under the surface like a wounded animal, refusing to let their body rest more than it had to. Suddenly a flash shone through the trees, reflecting into Kami's eyes from far away.

They came out between the trees and paused.

The bay stared back, light reflecting off the distant surface, mirroring and fracturing the clouds above it.

A small collection of houses huddled on the western shore, folded into the great curve of the water, smoke rising from chimneys in a haze.

Kami breathed heavily, eyes not leaving the water as they made their way downwards.

Each night passed they had dreamed, more frequently than ever before on their journey.

There was a ferocity to the dreams, each one lashing them awake, heart pounding. But there was nothing else to do but limp forwards, on some unseen shadowed path, with only hope that it would lead eventually out into the light.





Chapter 4

THE FULL MOON.

Kami came amongst the town at midnight, faint glimmers of lanterns at some of the windows shining out into the darkness. Some of the winter constellations they recognised glimmered silently above them, hung in the still night air. The bay lapped hungrily at the docks, dark as oil in the night. Kami faltered. They knew no one here, and who would welcome a stranger through their door after dark?

With the call of the bay beckoning them, they ducked between the houses on the narrow cobbled street, ducking low to avoid the lights from the passing windows.

Down near the water ahead, they spotted an old boathouse; windowless with a low, crooked doorframe.

They felt quickly down the grain of the wooden door until their fingers ran up against the lock bolt. In the still air above it they sketched a rune with two fingers, little trails of light

following the movement of their claws; the lock sprung open.

Inside it was silent. Darkness pressed over their eyes like wet cloth, but in the light of the doorframe they could just make out a little rowboat pulled up alongside a bundle of stiff-cloth sails and fishing traps.

They pushed the door closed behind them and stood, waiting for their eyes to settle.

Dropping their pack they curled down into the sail-bundle, the muscles in their leg throbbing again and again in the darkness. They turned their attention to the sliver of light from the bottom of the door in the dark, a silver thread unspooled along the floor.

Their muscles shook and tensed, but despite this their tiredness weighing heavily over their mind won out, and they soon fell into a leaden sleep.

Mind filled with silver trails disappearing into the darkness, water shrouded in shadows, a flash of something sinking down, down into the waves...



*A sound settled on the very edge of their hearing.
They strained to listen, twisting their head from side to side.*

*Someone was crying.
Out there in the impossible, inky blackness, someone was
crying.*

*Kami's breathing quickened.
"Where are you? I can't see you!"*

*They cut out across the dark, feet slipping on the uneven
surface, listening hard for the small, broken-voiced sound.*

*Their feet stumbled, ran, stumbled again, until they noticed
a scattered trail across the floor, leading off into the darkness.
Feathers, winding away into the throat of the dark passage
ahead.*

*The darkness pressed an invisible hand over Kami's eyes the
further they strained to look. Instead they looked down to their
feet, following the trail.*

*A sickly, wet feeling stuck to the fur of their arms and hands.
They kept their eyes resolutely locked to the floor.
Something slick ran down their muzzle, down their arm,
dripping to the ground.*

*The crying continued, always up ahead, sounding more
desperate as they tried to make their way towards it.*

*A light, so faint it was lost again when focused on.
A candle.*

*A candle growing larger, a warm light, a room.
Golden silk and satin, pools of incense upturned and
smouldering.*

*The room opened out before them, unfolding slowly in a bloom
of reds and oranges, shimmering in the light like a mirage.
They could almost taste the orange blossom on the warm dry
air, choked out quickly by the sickening smell of smoke and
incense.*

*Great scores of claws marked the floor, the walls, glass was
shattered and strewn in the candle light, fractal and
disorientating.*

*Tables upturned, jewels scattered, great clay pots dashed
against the floor, all moving, swaying back and forth in the light
of fire. Clumps of feathers lay everywhere.*

*On the silken cushions, the patterned tiles, the broken glass, in
the oily spills of incense, sucked down into the liquid.*

*Dry, heaving sobs echoed around the room, and in the very
centre, sparking in all its glory,
lay the golden cage.*

*Kami gripped their head, teeth grinding together.
The crying wouldn't stop. Someones mouth opened in a howl,
maybe it was theirs.*

*The room howled back twice as loud, shimmering and shaking
and red.*

*Something dripped down their arm to the floor, ran between the
grout of the tiles and was gone.*

*Something was in Kami's mouth, they were choking, their jaws
locked around it, gagging and retching as they fell to the floor,
the weight on their lungs bursting, reaching a breaking point as
they shot up-*



Eyes wide, Kami stared around them, their panic preventing them from seeing, mind and heart racing.

Slowly, they began to make out shapes. A bundle of cloth, a prow of a small rowboat, a line of light from under a door...

“Ah-” Their voice broke, becoming thick with tears that ran down through their fur. They let them fall.

The dawn light was blue, cold. Chasing away the red room, the fire, the golden cage.

They clung to themselves, squeezing around their ribs, trying to hold their body together.

Before they could move, the door lock slid across, blinding them temporarily with the light of day.

A tiny gasp came from the open door. A small figure stood, half-hidden behind the doorframe, staring intently.

It took Kami a beat to register what they were seeing; A child of no more than seven or eight. More unusually, she was a Lycan, as they were. The hair on her tail bristled slightly.

“No ones meant to be in here.”

She said this bluntly, holding her small, clawed paws together.

Kami snapped out of their surprise.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean you any harm...I had nowhere to sleep last night.”

Kami stood up slowly, conscious not to scare her, and moved closer to the door.

“What’s your name little one? I didn’t expect to see a Lycan out here.”

There was a pause, she fiddled with the hem of her dress.

“...Lucie. There aren’t Lycans here, why are you here?”

She stepped back, still facing them but allowing Kami to stoop out through the low doorframe.

“I travelled here from far away. I’m...looking for something important.”

Kami said this gently, crouching to be closer to her eye level.

“If you want to find something, you should talk to my mama, she has finding spells.”

Kami smiled, “That is very kind of you”

She kicked at the ground with a little paw, not meeting their gaze.

“My rowboats in there, I’m coming to look at it.”

Kami glanced behind them into the dark little hut.

“Would you like me to help you lift it out into the light?”

She gave a stiff little nod of her head.



After some fumbling and dragging, Kami came back out with a small dinghy. The wooden hull was damaged with cracks and gauges, and the seat across the thwart was broken.

“I don’t think this is going anywhere in a hurry little one.” Lucie peered at the thing.

“It’s got holes in it...”

Suddenly, Kami had an idea.

“How about this? If I help you fix your rowboat, then I can borrow it for one night.”

There was a long pause, as if she stood weighing up the offer, staring at Kami out of her dark tawny eyes.

“Will you paint it too?”

“Any colour you want!”

“Well, I want it to be green.”

Looking incredibly pleased with herself, she ran off without another word up towards the houses.

Kami smiled to themselves, setting the boat down gently and examining it.

It was true that they needed a boat to be able to talk to the bay spirit, but this particular one would need a lot of work. There were gashes between the wood of the hull where it had been damaged, and the wood itself needed coating. The centre thwart had been snapped, but they could see both its oars still propped inside the storehouse.

Magic and charms can only get one so far, so this would be a job for their hands.

“At least it has rowlocks I suppose, how would a child row without them really...” They mumbled to no one In particular, scanning the boathouse again for any materials.

They soon found themselves looking down at small cluster of supplies, a bag of old filling powder, some sandpaper, and a tub of varnish.

“No green paint though.”

They tipped the boat over, inspecting the hull. Luckily none of the damages went right through the wood.

They sat on the step outside the shed, turning to look at the water for a moment.

It was a still, damp day, and barely a ripple stirred the surface of the bay. It reflected the bright, uniform cloud coverage above. A little fish leapt out of the grey water, twisting and arching in the air before falling, causing the water to move in restless circles for a while.

They turned back to the hull and reached for the sandpaper; settling back with their bad leg stretched out in front of them, the boat laid down between their knees and began sanding the hull down in long rhythmic strokes.

As they worked their mind wandered between this and that. Their dream last night in particular worried them, the terror and pain of it still locked in the back of their skull. Even sleep was not an escape from any waking pain, and their dreams only seemed to get worse as time went on.

“All I can do is keep going.”

Their voice was deadpan, tired, offering themselves little reassurance. They instead turned their thoughts to the bay spirit. They had read as much as they could about the spirits they sought out, in the dusty tomes they fled with all those years ago. The bay spirit in particular should have an offering, traditionally fish, seasoned with water mint and thyme.

They sat and thought about herb-gathering before the small pitter patter of footsteps made them look round.

Lucie was running down towards the shed carrying a tin in her paws, arms taunt with effort.

She stopped just short of Kami, staring quizzically at the upturned rowboat.

“This is the green I want.”

She placed it carefully next to them.

“Ah, perfect! The last ingredient. I’m just sanding down the hull, then I’ll start filling in the damaged bits.”

“Why don’t you use magic?”

Kami looked at her sidelong.

“Well, if we want it to have true, real strength to it, it needs to be done by hand. I will charm it for you though.”

“Mama doesn’t fix things that break with magic either, well, not real things.”

Kami hummed in response as they worked. Lucie crouched on the ground opposite the step, eyes following the movements of their hands closely.

“Magic is more...for the minds eye. It’s not always the most tangible thing.”

Lucie didn’t respond for a while, her intense little gaze on her upturned boat.

“Why do you need my boat?”

Kami paused, wondering how truthfully to answer.

“I have to...meet someone. Who can help me.”

“D’you promise to bring it back?”

Kami laid the boat down with care and reached a hand across to her.

“I promise. Look, I’ll even make an oath with you, then you’ll know I have to keep it.”

Lucie tentatively took Kami’s outstretched hand and waited. With their free hand, Kami sketched a rune into the air between them, and in the brief moment following their finger a silver line hung upon the space, shimmering delicately before disappearing like a fine mist in the grey light.

Lucie gasped and looked around for it, retracting her hand quickly.

“That means I must return it, so don’t worry.”



The rest of the afternoon Kami continued to sand and then set to work mixing up the filling powder with a little seawater. All the while they were followed by their little shadow who watched their every move intently. After the spell, Lucie looked closely at Kami as they worked, at their claws and hands, but no more runes appeared in the air around them.

The sun was sinking low behind the houses when Kami lent back with a sigh.

“That’s it for today! We’ll let that set until tomorrow. You should run home soon little one.”

Lucie started to turn but paused, looking back at them.

“Will it be done tomorrow?”

Kami grinned, “Be patient little one. But shouldn’t be much longer, especially as the full moon is only a couple days away. That’s when I must borrow your boat for one night, you see?”

Her ears pricked up at this, and she nodded to herself, before turning and running back along the little street up towards the houses.



Kami woke just after dawn, stretching their cramped muscles across the sailcloth bundle on the floor of the boathouse. Their hands shook. Another dream last night, full of not just panic but heartache, guilt.

They sighed and locked their eyes on the bottom of the door across the small room, where a goose-grey light glowed through the gap into the soft velvety darkness. The air felt crisp and quiet, the hush before the sun rises.

They let the stillness envelop them, imagining sinking down into the sweet smell of dawn and the sea, which they could hear whispering and sighing outside the door.

They slipped into a half-dream, imagining the cold around them like a blanket of snow on some far off peak, becoming rosy with a slow sunrise that filled up their body. They opened their eyes.

Their leg was preventing them from falling back into sleep, sending them little claws of pain through their muscles, making their heartbeat throb subtly in their vision, Lub Lub Lub.

It was the day before the full moon. The boat needed painting and varnishing, and the herbs and fish needed collecting before tomorrow night.

They rose, sighing, staggering slightly. The muscles in their leg like stone as they limped to the door.

The world outside was blanketed in a soft fog, pale purple and chilling. The smell of the cold itself hit their nose, a crispness enveloping their mind. They walked to the edge of the small jetty aside the boathouse.

Around them the air was still, holding its breath for the coming sunrise. A cluster of gulls called and squabbled across the bay to one another.

As they sat a closer sound caught their ears, the low garbled call of the cormorant undercut the shrill gulls. They watched as a sleek black head bobbed nearby, suddenly cutting through the smooth rippling water and disappearing down into the darkness like a spear thrown. A few heartbeats passed, and it slipped silently up to the surface closer to Kami, eyeing them sidelong for a moment before another elegant dive.

The wind started to turn, coming in over the bay westward. With it brought the ghostly, lilting call of the curlew. Echoing around the glass circle of the bay as Kami listened in silence, hands still.

Across the horizon line spilled a pool of gold. The disk of the sun rose over the water, tracing its way to Kami across the still surface of the bay.

The fog glowed in an ethereal light, holding the sun and becoming smoke-like. A last clinging star shone above their head, fading as the sky slipped from deep purple to delicate pink.

Kami, faint and dream-like, felt as if they could fall up into the sky at any second; but their heart squeezed in their chest, tethering them.

Their eyes pricked and stung. They hid their face in their arm, turning down and away from the sunrise. A few tears shone gold as they fell to their cloak.

In the gradual waking of the world they sat, listening to the seabirds calling.



CHARCOAL IMAGE HERE OF BAY/SEABIRDS.....

The sun was now well into the sky, beating down on Kami's shoulders as they sat bent over the rowboat. They tapped a knuckle against each filled gap in turn and, satisfied, reached for the tin of paint. They had found a big, soft brush in the far corner of the boathouse, and they dipped this into the tin, setting to work once again.

Soon after, they again heard the approach of little feet, and smiled as they turned.

Lucie's eyes lit up as she saw the beginnings of her green rowboat.

"Can I have a turn?"

She asked, standing at Kami's shoulder.

"Of course you may. Try to do smooth, long strokes."

She took the brush in both paws, kneeling next to them on the boathouse steps. Kami suppressed a smile at her incredibly slow and careful brush stroke, tail stuck straight out behind her in concentration.

As she leaned down to the sides of the boat Kami tipped it slightly, giving her easier access.

It didn't take them combined much longer to have a complete first coat finished, shining in the sun as it dried.

"Now we must leave it to dry. And in the meantime, I have a fish to catch."

Lucie looked round at them.

"Can I come too?"

Kami hesitated, but simply answered, "Of course little one."

Kami took a route around the backs of the houses, avoiding the singular cobbled street. Lucie followed, running back and forth between them and the water, intent on their quest. A pebbly tidal beach sat down below a short slope of marram grass, with large black stones penning in various sized rock pools. Lucie ran straight to one of them, little paws clambering across the stones, encrusted with limpets and strong-smelling seaweed drying in the sun.

Kami crossed the pebbles further down to the shore, where the gentle tide lapped at their feet. They waded a little further, wincing at the cold water leeching through their fur. The next step would take considerable concentration.

Looking round for Lucie, they spied her as she turned over various stones, hunting for crabs.

Kami shut their eyes.

They reached out to their other senses, letting the mild breeze around envelop them, smelling the sharp scent of the sea and the pungency of seaweed, the distant gulls, the tiny scrabble of claws as Lucie moved from rock pool to rock pool.

They felt the sun on their neck like a weight, the water biting at their ankles, moving back and forth around them as their feet became numb with the cold.

They pushed their mind out further, ahead of them into the bay. They could feel the restless movement of the water, but within that something flashed quicker. A muscular tail, a fin, a round eye. They pooled their mind in, the image of the

fish coming with clarity into their mind's eye, every scale and cascade of light as it swam. The rest of their surroundings and senses fell away, their mind on the beach entangled, threads linking like a fine spool of silk outwards. They flicked their tail, a suggestion of a thought, a changing of direction.

With a snap their eyes opened, crashing back into their body. Shooting past them, a small silver fish leapt upon the pebbles with one quick flick of its' tail.

Lucie, who had turned to watch, ran down over the pebbles to their side, fur on end in excitement.

“Why did it do that? It's stuck now.”

She stared at the fish, gasping again and again on the black stones.

Kami reached down, and with a deft claw slit its throat, stilling it.

“I...persuaded it. Although it felt a bit unfair. Without your boat being finished I was running out of options.”

She looked up at them, at the fish in their clawed hand, blood welling around the gills.

“Did you use magic?”

“Yes, I reached my mind out to find it. Remember I said it's all in the mind's eye? I simply gave it the suggestion of an idea, a change in direction...A mind must become one, or one another, for a brief second. It wasn't my thought anymore, it became the fish”

She stared at them, looked back out across the bay, shifting her paws on the pebbles.

“...I caught a crab. Would you like to see?”



The two spent the next hour crouched at various rock pools, Kami telling her all they remembered of the creatures they came across, dredging up what they learned at days spent on the beaches of home surrounding the monastery. Eventually their leg started to throb, and they rose, wincing.

“I must go lie down for a bit little one, this fish needs properly preparing too. Come find me this afternoon and we’ll do the second coat.”

Lucie stood up, clambering down from the rock pool she was perched over. With a small paw she momentarily took a bunch of Kami’s cloak, looking down at their feet.

“...Okay”

With that she let go, heading up across the stones again, searching for something.

Kami gazed at her a moment longer, lump in their throat, before turning back towards the boathouse.

By the time the sun was casting lengthening shadows across the ground, Kami and Lucie sat together before the little rowboat, smartly dressed in its' new green coat of paint.

"Did you give her a name?"

"Seashell! I thought of it all by myself."

"It's the perfect name, and i've got just the thing to finish your boat."

They reached into their pack and produced a little oilskin pouch full of tar. They dipped a claw in, and with precise movements wrote in bold letters along the side of the hull.

Lucie jumped up, wagging her tail as she read the letters aloud to herself.

SEASHELL ♦

Kami turned to her, smiling. "What do you think?"

Lucie's eyes gleamed,

"It looks like I thought it would again, when I came to look at it the other morning!"

She ran a little paw across the side, gazing at it.

"Is it the full moon tonight?" She asked, staring at Kami across the boat.

"Yes, which means I must go collect the herbs I need before it gets dark-" They paused, a sparkling laughter in their eyes, and before Lucie could speak continued, "-and yes you may come along."

Again Kami chose a longer path outside the small village, away from the houses up to the scrubby grasslands and fields that ran down to the sea.

Lucie followed close to them, tail still wagging.

Despite the chill, down and away from the mountain was milder, and various plants and herbs had begun to push their heads up into the world above.

The tough old sprigs of thyme were easy enough to spot, gnarled after a cold winter but still covered in delicate little leaves. Kami collected these in a tidy bundle as Lucie waded through the tall grass surrounding them.

"What are these ones called?"

Kami looked up. Lucie was pointing a small claw at a clump of flowers, their white heads bowed downwards as if huddled in private conversation.

"Snowdrops"

"What about this one?"

She called, jumping over to a not yet fully open group of petals.

"Crocuses"

"Do you know the names of all of them?"

Kami laughed, standing.



"Not at all! Just...a lot of them I suppose."

They zigzagged upwards over the tussocks towards a cluster of field maples and silver birches, who's leaves were just starting to peek out of their buds. A blackbird sung sweetly above their heads into the clear air, paying them no mind.

Between the roots sat a marshier patch of ground, pooling into a spongy surface underfoot. Lucie stamped about in the bog, squealing in surprise as a russet-coloured newt sprung away from her, disappearing into the mud.

It did not take Kami long to spot the flat green leaves and light purple heads of water mint, growing around the brackish water.

They collected a small bundle and added these to the thyme, satisfied, tying them together with a bit of twine from their pack.

"Look at this!"

Kami's ears swivelled round. Lucie was on her tiptoes gazing into the low boughs of a silver birch, ears pricked intently.

Just as she reached a paw forwards Kami spotted what she was looking at; a small birds nest with three delicate, speckled eggs.

Their muscles tensed, a white bird flashed in their mind, and they leapt forwards grabbing Lucie's arm, pulling her roughly backwards.

She stumbled in their grip. Kami turned on her, snarling, "Be careful!"

Their claws dug into her forearm. Her fur bushed as she pulled and struggled against them.

Kami jolted, letting go and retracting their hand as if burned.

"Lucie I-I didn't hurt you did I?"

Their voice came through strangled. Lucie shook, staring at them, brow furrowed. She touched her arm, tears welling.

Kami's heart sunk down into their stomach.

"I was just looking. I wasn't going to touch them."

Her voice wobbled as she said this, eyes on Kami's hands.

"I know- I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt or...or scare you..."

Their voice was quiet as they stood still before her.

"Would you let me look at your arm?"

After a long pause and with great reluctance, she quietly held her arm out towards them.

Kami approached slowly, ghosting their fingers over the scratch that parted her fur. Their hands shook a little, stomach knotting.

"I've got a little bit of salve for this, then it will be as right as rain."

They forced a smile as they reached into their pack.

She said nothing to this, nor when they applied the soothing balm.

On the way back down to the village, Lucie asked for no more flower names.



Kami sat on the end of the small jetty, fingers and claws covered in fish scales that glittered faintly in the quick falling sun.

With listless movements they started to stuff the fish with herbs, staring out over the water as they worked. Their eyes were as dark and set as the water below them, a shadow pressed over their heart.

Their ears swivelled backwards, hoping to hear the patter of small footsteps, but were met with only the shrill cries of distant gulls.

The disk of the sun disappeared behind the water in a blaze of orange, streaking the sky over their head. The moon was already on the rise, coming up behind their right shoulder in a cold light. They looked upwards, just beginning to make out faint stars of constellations appearing overhead. They looped the names they remembered over and over in their mind; Myrica, Thuja, Zerkova, Iberis.

The sky began to change to a darkening purple, a single smudged line of pink chasing the now invisible sun.

Kami turned to look at the moon, somber as it climbed further into the sky. The image of it seemed to shake and sway in their vision, wraithlike.

The bay murmured quietly to itself in the coming night, lapping at the jetty below them.

They sighed, pulling themselves to their feet, scooping the fish as they went. They tied the last of the twine around it, holding the bundle of fish and herbs together in one hand.

Returning to the boathouse door they paused, looking down at the freshly painted rowboat. Their jaw clenched.

They stood there quietly in the dying light, face set, before beginning to drag the boat prow down over to the jetty, manoeuvring it bit by bit over the edge into the water and checking the oars were securely locked.

Before going further they turned, looking up towards the houses. Warm yellow lights flickered in the windows. Their shoulders hunched in on themselves, they turned away from the light.

Stiffly they swung down into the boat, setting the fish bundle in the stern in front of them.

They wobbled momentarily before sitting on the central thwart, legs stretched out ahead of them and set their back to rowing.

On the still night the little rowboat glided out as if on ice. The moon gazed after them, clear above the houses now.

The air seemed to hum, charged and restless on the full moon night. Their fur stood on end as they sunk into the

push and pull rhythm of rowing. Around them the night pulled close to watch, following the quiet creak and rustle of the rowboat.

They rowed straight out across the inlet amongst the hushed night, their boat a small wooden chip on the quiet water. The bay moved in silent arching waves with the stroke of the oars, making the stars on the surface tremble behind them, fracturing as they went.

As they reached the centre of the inlet they paused, staring up into the moon that seemed to be brought closer by their gaze, looming directly above; a disk of pure ivory.

The moon cast its' eye directly towards them.

They could make out every divot and blemish on the surface, intricate patterns of an unknown language.

Their blood thrummed under the skin, throbbing and pulsating down their leg.

A great weight crushed into their chest, the moon was all encompassing. Their head swam, their eyes ached, unblinking. A terror slowly crept into them, like the tide, filling them to the brim with blinding light.

Trembling and hypnotic the moon seemed to call out to them, wavering in the sky above, they could almost make out the words-

"I wouldn't stare at her too long if I were you."

The voice ran over them like cold water, gasping, tearing them back into the boat, pulling their eyes downwards and away. The manic energy ebbed from their chest.

In the darkness of the stern sat the spirit, languid and relaxed. It stretched its' spine into an arch.

"You'll lose yourself like that."

It stroked a paw through its' whiskers, shimmering in the moonlight. Kami's head buzzed, they held a palm up against their skull.

The spirit pawed at the fish offering on the thwart before it, eyes sparkling with humour.

"I guess you have read about me then."

Kami shook their head, still dazed, before replying.

"Spirit, I thank you for appearing before me."

It rubbed a paw across its' face, pausing to wash its ears.

"There's no need to be so formal, I know who you are. We've all been keeping our eyes on you."

Kami winced.



"Could you, I mean...would you be willing to help me?"

The spirit narrowed its eyes.

It bent forwards, sniffing the fish before revealing pointed little teeth, crunching directly through the skull.

After a time it raised its' head, squinting across at Kami, its' eyes reflecting the moonlight.

"I find what you are doing amusing. I want to see where this goes."

It raised a paw to its' mouth, whiskers twitching as if stifling laughter.

"I know every creature, stone and wave of this bay, there is something most miss. Round the headland is a cave, no light must be cast there, but on the full moon of tonight you might just find something you're looking for."

Kami straightened.

"Although you better hurry, the moon won't be up forever."

Looking pleased with itself, it bent back down to the fish.

"Thank you, It means so much that you would help me. My offering is not enough."

The spirit looked up sharply.

"Unlike the Mountain Spirit I have no feelings if one of us lives or dies."

It leant forwards, pupils turning to daggers as its' eyes stretched. Its claws dug





into the fish beneath it.

"A thirst for blood like that is nothing. If a bird is killed here or there, so what."

It wrinkled up its' nose, fangs flashing in the moonlight, watching Kami like a cornered

piece of prey.

"I guess hunting birds is something we can agree upon."

Kami trembled, unable to meet the spirits' gaze. Voice weak in the night air, they looked down at their hands.

"No...it was a mistake. An irredeemable mistake."

"Suit yourself, but I'm sure a small part of you enjoyed it, relished in it."

The spirit licked its' lips, fish now turned mostly to skin and bones.

"That anger...it didn't help at all. All I have left is this guilt." Kami replied, voice thick and rasping as they looked back up into the spirits eyes.

The spirit yawned, face splitting as its' sharp teeth caught the moonlight.

"No wonder you have all those nightmares."

Kami jolted, leaning forwards across the boat.

"You know about those? Is there-"

"A way to get rid of them? I guess you'll just have to keep going, and see for yourself."

With one last narrow-eyed grin, the spirit vanished, leaving behind a small pile of needle-bones in the moonlight.

Kami sat back in the boat, eyes swimming as they stared at where the spirit had been. All around them was quiet except the gentle lap of the bay against the hull. Frowning out across the water, they looked off to the rocky headland, and out beyond it to the open sea. A pulling started in their chest, a wordless call through the moonlight, from the depths of some far off cave.

The conversation with the bay spirit needled at their mind, making their guilt well up into their throat. No matter what the spirit said, they would never relish in what they had done.

There was no point thinking about it, what could they do but keep going.

Reaching for the oars again they swung the boat around, back facing the spit of rock that loomed out of the water in the distance, black and foreboding. Under the light of the moon the way seemed a clear shot, the moonlight dancing and jumping over the water around the prow of the boat, leading all the way out to the headland.

A single, topaz star shone just above the horizon line before them, writhing in light as it pushed higher. Using it as a pinpoint, they pushed on towards the promised cave.



Shoulders cramped and stiff, Kami dropped the oars as Seashell, the little row boat, drifted to shore amongst the flat rocks huddled in darkness; great lumbering beasts of stone and shadows.

Locking the oars Kami clambered out, slipping into the chilled water as they dragged the boat forwards by the prow.

Before them lay a great slab of granite, sheer and resolute in the stark moonlight. It cast Kami in shadow, shrinking them before it.

They left Seashell nestled between two great boulders, a safe line up and away from the sea as it heaved itself upon the stones, restless and hissing upon retreat.

The flat surface of the rock before them seemed to extend in either direction, with no openings in sight.

Reaching a hand forward they pressed it flush against the stone, which leeched heat away from them into itself. They shut their eyes, mind fanning out over the ground, shooting along the rocks like a star, searching. In their minds eye they looked along the uniform expanse until, there, a line of darkness within the rock face, opening out towards them as their mind rushed to meet it.

They opened their eyes.

Before them lay an entrance, barely as wide as themselves. The blackest of night lay in wait within it, refusing to be pierced by the light of the moon.

They started forwards, one hand trailing the rock for guidance. The fur on their neck raised as the dark consumed them, chilling their blood.

The stone underfoot was so cold it burned as they edged on further, the sound of their breathing amplified in the confined space. Now they could scarcely see their own hands in the darkness, but a gulf of air in front of them told them the passage had opened up, the roof above lifted away unseen.

They stood, silent in the dark.

The barest hint of a structure loomed up like some strange animal, and Kami realised they were looking at a tower, rough-cut and risen out of the stone.

They came forwards, foot bumping up against a step, then another, as the stairs slowly wound in a spiral, up inside the desolate tower of stone.

Edging onwards they ran a hand along the curved wall, smooth and age-worn.

A faint hissing seemed to fill the space behind them, sinking into their mind as it gradually grew louder.

A tiny flick of water caught the back of their arm.

Closer the sea crept its way across the rock of the chamber, writhing towards the first steps of the tower behind them.

Their heart jolted in their chest as they stumbled forwards, skin pricking in panic.

Again, there came a horrible gasping, sucking noise behind them. They turned momentarily, the staircase winding away behind them was almost lost in the gloom, but white spray of a wave leapt up at their face, crashing down only a few steps behind before being pulled backwards into darkness. Their chest tightened, the salt aftertaste in the air choking their throat as they struggled up the worn steps, uneven from countless years of footfall and smoothed by the ceaseless waves.

There were no windows in the grey walls, no telling how many more spiralling steps were left as they struggled on. Gasping, heaving, their foot slipped, mashing their knee down onto the stone. They let out a cry but scrambled up as the spray hit them again, snapping at their heels, edging higher and higher behind them.

The almost pitch black gloom pressed in on them, they felt they could not even recall the light of day, all that was left was the spiralling staircase and the sea. In the depths of night.

They clung to the wall as a wave splattered against their back, the cold making them tremble against the stone.

They climbed, unable to run faster on the uneven steps, desperately pulling themselves along the outer wall. Their leg spasmed, making them fall to their knees once more with a cry. A wave broke fully over the top of them, threatening to drag them down into the shadowy depths below. Their claws raked into the stone to keep themselves from moving, cloak

clinging to their sodden fur as they let out a strangled sound, coughing as the salt stung their eyes.

Clambering on hands and knees in the dark they continued, the sea shouting and shouting wordlessly behind them over and over again, drowning out their desperate cries and gasps.

Just as they breathed in another wave fell upon them, choking them as terror seized their mind. They were drowning, they were sinking, an open sea flashed around them, blood swirling in the water as they thrashed around, black buzzing at the corners of their vision. They couldn't be back here, they couldn't face this again-

They heaved air into their lungs, still crouched upon the stairs with the hissing, wailing sea behind them. They looked upwards into the darkness and there, the faintest glimmer of starlight, faintly outlining the topmost steps.

With the last of their strength Kami dragged their body up and over the threshold, shivering, crying into the cavern before them. The sea seemed to have stopped just shy of the last turn of the stairs.

They lay huddled on the rock, fur plastered to the skin, leg throbbing with pain from the gruelling climb.

It took a long time there in the dark for Kami to raise their head, arms trembling as they propped themselves up. All around was thick darkness, even blacker than the passageway they had come through. They had no way of

seeing how large the cavern was, but it seemed to be expansive, with a high roof above them, picked up upon by some primal sense in the body.

Their wheezing breaths echoed around the space into the silence, throat rubbed raw by seawater.

No light must be cast here, or perhaps could not be made here, not that they had the energy to try; all Kami could do was wait. Their mind was still shaken, flashes of the sea, of sinking, frantic pulling and dragging, gasping, crying, of pain.

They dug their claws into the flesh of their arm, trying to ground themselves from memories they did not have the courage to face.

A slight shift in the air or apprehension of motion made them lift their head, listening.

The only sound was the sea, which seemed to be still lapping at the steps, calmed as if the room had some sort of charm, allowing it no further.

A single drip of water falling sounded in the darkness, as clear as the note of a bell, water falling into water.

On hands and knees they crept forwards, brushing across the stone floor continuously back and forth until it fell away, and their fingers dipped into cold water. They retracted their hand in surprise. The fingers that had touched the water seemed to buzz, their pulse pushing under the skin. A great low humming seemed to fill the chamber, vibrating through the stone floor, through Kami's bones.

An echo of light, a shadow of a shadow seemed to creep into the room, and slowly they began to see the outline of their hands upon the rock. In front of them in the grey, grainy textured darkness was a great pool, impossibly still and unknowably deep. The water was as black as the night.

A blade of white light caught the surface, and suddenly the pool was alive, surface moving with sparks and leaping light.

Kami suddenly found themselves staring down into their own startled reflection, distorting and swimming across the liquid. High up in the rock a crack no wider than two fingers was letting in a sliver of the full moon, filling the entire chamber with an ethereal opalescence.

They looked past themselves in the water, snapping their eyes up to the roof.

A comet, carved deep into the ceiling ran the entire length of the cavern, revealed only in this brief instance by the light of the moon.

Its long tail cast out behind it, stretching out over the pool in deep jagged lines. Below this were repeating symbols, etched delicately into the rock face.

Their heart leapt and jumped in their chest, these were symbols they recognised, mirroring those ancient language books kept in the farthest corners of the monastery.



*Star, night, power, bird, star. 37 moons to the spring, west,
the comet will touch the ground, changing souls.*

In their mind they played this translation over and over, a reverent prayer recited to the comet above, as if the message had been left for them and them alone.

The eye of the comet looked blindly down upon them. Searing it into memory they continued to stare upwards in rapture, but the light around them faltered. The charged humming in the rocks became silent, and they were plunged back into that ancient, immovable darkness; as the comet had sat and waited for countless years.

The spell was broken, the darkness soothing out the manic energy in their eyes. But their mind clamoured on; all their searching, all their pain, had led them here. The comet was for them.

“I will be there. I will be there when you appear.”

They spoke this out into the darkness, rising, standing straight and fervent in the ancient cavern, the comets tomb.

A great inhale of breath seemed to echo all around them, whistling out of the cavern and away, the salted sea air replaced with something sour, older.

Groping back to the stairs they found the sea gone, dragged back down by an invisible hand.

At the top of the spiral staircase they paused, looking up into the great timeless pit of the dark, up into the hidden immovable comet.

Their voice shook, “You are what I was seeking, I see that now.”

The comet, as it had always been, was silent.



Rowing back was made easier by a stiff breeze cascading along the headland pushing its way into the bay, making Kami's oar-strokes as smooth as silk as Seashell scudded over the choppy water.

The little rowboat had been tossed right up alongside the cavern entrance when Kami had returned, left as if a gift from the sea itself, or perhaps even the bay spirit. Kami had sent up a swift, silent thanks for it either way.

High up clouds, the colour of golden cream began to catch the invisible sun, a premonition of dawn.

Kami's limbs buzzed, both with fatigue and exhalation. Their relentless travel had a purpose, a goal. Maybe this would truly be the key to fixing what they had done.

A spike of pain shot through their leg, as if jeering at them for their optimism. But their heart held fast, daring to feel a pearl of hope within their breast.

Though, before they could set off towards the comets meeting place, they had an oath to upkeep.



Lucie woke early, seagulls mewling and squabbling on the roof above her room.

The sun wasn't quite up yet, but a rosy light was starting to leach its way through the open shutters, lighting up her strung up collection of sea-glass. The pastel greens and blues blurred themselves into the light across her little bed. No

one would be awake yet, she thought to herself, feeling satisfaction of being the only one in the silent dawn.

She lay back and thought of her little rowboat with a thrill, she wanted to see it again.

Opening the wooden frame windows carefully she sat on the sill, dropping the short distance down to the cobbles with a little clack of her claws, landing on all fours, cat-like.

With sure little steps she set off running to the boathouse, the stones cold and crisp from the night.

She expected to see Kami there, slowing slightly, unsure how to approach them after the previous day; but the boathouse was still. Walking up to the wooden door she pushed it slowly, peering through the doorway, but no one was there.

She ran instead round to the jetty, tail raising in pleased surprise. There sat her rowboat, picture-perfect in the dawn light, proudly displaying its name along the side. The green gleamed like a sea-glass bottle.

Putting a little paw against the wood she spied a small pouch on the thwart, and some text etched into the wood beside it.

Lucie,

I keep my oath to you.

Look after Seashell well. I have charmed her to always watch out for you, and she will always find her way home.

Please take this gift too, I hope one day we will meet again.

-Kami

As she read each word they dissipated into the golden dawn light, leaving the wood unblemished as if they had never been there.

The pouch itself was embroidered with delicate golden thread, which glimmered a little in the light.

Opening the pouch with the drawstrings Lucie found a wooden figure, rough cut with two strange eyes looking out at her, and funny little horns. She wagged her tail as she stared at the odd creature.

Clutching this in her palm she looked out across the bay, the great golden disk of the sun coming out to greet her as she stood, silently.

PICTURE OF WOODEN SCULPTURE HERE, AND
DRAWSTRING POUCH.

