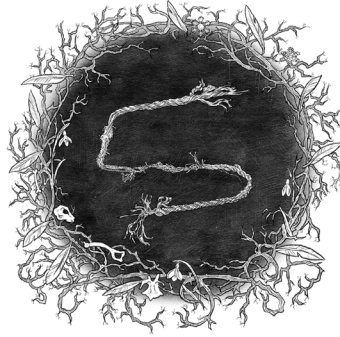


They met in secret. They met in darkness. Light was not welcome. The stars pulsed weakly above. They were not welcome either. The walls rose thick and ancient around them – walls of stone; walls woven with bone and magic; walls built not to keep things out, but to keep things in. Beyond, London roiled, restless by night, blaring and bellicose, but within, silence reigned. Silence prickled. The Tower of London had never truly belonged to the city.

One robed figure in the centre, four around the outside. The moon was dark above – the Dark Moon made for the darkest of deeds. They raised their heads but the night recoiled from what lay within their hoods – for they could hardly be called faces at all. Half flesh; half skull. Half living; half dead. One half reflecting the light; the other sucking it into their dark caverns – the voids of their faces where eyes and noses and lips had once been, and now, only rot and bone and hollows deep as death.

They opened their mouths – one side, cheek, lip and tongue flexing; the other, skull, teeth and chasm – and they spoke, but the words were too terrible to comprehend. Words that could have shrivelled the night; plucked the stars from their orbits; stopped London in its tracks; turned everyone within it mad with fear. Words more dead than alive. They echoed like a trapped thing, their echo rebounding between the walls, climbing higher and higher, desperate and hungry, clawing for life, for death, and then, over the walls, escaped—

Flying off into the night, black as the feathers of Hel.



BURIED

Do not bury your dead for they live among us. While their spirits remain active in Hel, their earthly bodies should be regularly bathed, fed and honoured with offerings; their death days celebrated and their altars attended to.

Tending the Dead, Hel Witch Initiation Stage One

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

Anna pulled the cord between her fingers. It was habit more than anything. It offered no comfort now, no knots left in it to hold her together – only rough, bristled cord beginning to fray, like a memory. It had once contained so much of her: her joys, her fears, her silenced griefs, her buried longings, her rage and hate; her love, perhaps. Her life with Aunt ordered into tight bindings of everything she had not been allowed to feel. But the knots were gone now – *why can I still not feel?*

The sky was the emptiest sort of grey, ravens scoring its colourless murk as they moved between the trees, their shrill, indifferent calls the only music in the mute air. The funeral guests huddled around the open grave, their coats black and slick as the birds, their faces grey and bleary too, as if they'd been carved out of the drizzle. There weren't many in attendance – some of Aunt's work colleagues, a few neighbours, a handful of old acquaintances. No Binders. Selene stood out among them in a purple outfit that bordered on inappropriate. Her hair, brighter than anything for miles, tumbled beneath a wide-brimmed hat. No one else seemed to notice that she was entirely dry beneath her umbrella although

the rain was coming in sideways. She tried to catch Anna's eye but Anna could not meet it. Instead, Anna looked out over the vast, modern cemetery. Aunt would have approved of its efficiency and organization – endless rows of polished graves, as faceless as death itself. Some had flowers tucked beneath them, wilting in the rain; faded offerings. No one would leave Aunt flowers. No one would visit her grave. It would soon be forgotten, lost among the masses.

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

Anna clutched the limp and lifeless cord, the world warping and bending around her. Was she really here, at Aunt's funeral? Aunt. *My aunt.* Was Aunt really dead? It didn't feel possible. Aunt had always seemed invincible. An inescapable force. Anna tried to imagine what freedom might feel like but all she could see was grave after grave after grave. How could she live when Aunt was the one who had always given her life shape and meaning? How could she live when Aunt's death was her fault? *All my fault.*

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

I won't look down.

But the cold of the ground began to rise up – over her feet, climbing up her legs like stiff roots, wrapping around her – squeezing – darkness swallowing Anna's mind as she remembered. The day she had undone her knots came back to her in a devastating blur of images: the Binding ceremony, vines tightening, rose petals flying, Attis's blood erupting, her hand in Effie's, their magic uniting, the ragged sound of Attis's breath returning – the most wonderful sound she'd ever heard; the golem's fingers around Aunt's neck as she gasped for air – the worst sound she'd ever heard. The world had turned to magic that day and Anna at the centre of it, sewing its threads into something powerful and terrible.

'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.' The priest bowed his head and the guests followed suit.

I won't look down—

I won't look—

I won't—

I—

Anna looked to the sky. To the leaves dragged from the trees. To the desperate emptiness inside of her. And then – she looked down.

There it was. Aunt's coffin gleaming at the bottom of the grave. Aunt down with the dirt and the worms and decay – everything she'd always hated. Anna tried to look away but she couldn't. The darkness had taken over now – swallowed her. She was down there too. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe – falling and falling with nothing to hold onto—

A scream tore through the air.

Another. Another. Screams erupting all around her. Anna struggled against the darkness – her head jerking back up – trying to understand what was happening, but what she saw did not make it any more comprehensible . . .

The guests were screaming. All of them. Eyes flared wide, mouths gaping, features carved with terror, hollow screams rising from deep within. Mrs Chapman, their neighbour, gripping her face and shrieking; another guest stumbling backwards as they erupted; the priest dropping to his knees and howling to the heavens, as if they held none of the answers he'd promised. The ravens in the trees screeched along, a wretched choir, the noise unbearable, shredding the sky to pieces, so loud it seemed it would wake all the numb and silent dead.

Selene was the only one not overcome. She looked at Anna aghast and then raised her hands to the air and called out: 'Alsamt!'

The screaming stopped abruptly.

Slowly, the funeral attendees began to return to their senses – shutting their mouths, shaking their heads, adjusting hats and coats and clasping hands together once more, as if nothing had happened. As if they hadn't just lost their minds.

The priest clambered back to his feet, continuing. 'Now, let us say the Lord's prayer—'

The guests cast their eyes back down to the grave, and the service trudged along through the rain to its bitter end.

Anna did not look down again.

They held the reception at Aunt's house on Cressey Square. The place had never been so lively – guests nibbling at sandwiches and sipping on sour wine as they offered Anna limp, insincere smiles – *so sorry for your loss*. Anna nodded her way through the room like a hollow wind-up

toy, saying the right things, feeling nothing, Selene playing the gracious host – *yes, we were old friends. I know, so terrible, a heart attack at such a young age. We'll miss her terribly.* Anna suspected most of the guests had only come so they could snoop around – to judge and sneer at the house of the woman who had judged and sneered at them.

No one stayed long. After an hour, the whole thing was done and dusted – Aunt's life wiped clean like an accidental spill no one would remember. *Love is all that is left of us and you had little of that, Aunt.* Anna and Selene sat in the kitchen, Selene trying to chase away the silence with chatter, making her way through a bottle of wine.

'Thank the Goddess that's over! Some man had me cornered for half an hour talking me through his fly fishing collection. I do hate cowan funerals. So sombre, so much black. Black is for seduction, not for mourning. I want my funeral to be bursting with colour and men falling to their knees. Champagne fountains. Dancing all night. Wild rituals beneath the moon. It's not a funeral worth attending if there's not *some* nudity—' She tried to catch Anna's eyes with a smile, but, giving up, tipped back her glass. 'Are you sure you don't want some? It might help take the edge off things.'

Anna shook her head faintly.

'It's not the funeral wine if that's what you're worried about. I filched it from the drinks cabinet. One of Vivienne's best, I hope. Makes it taste better knowing it would piss her off.' Selene cackled but Anna didn't respond. Selene bit her red lips and put down the glass. 'Matchstick, what happened at the service . . .'

Anna tensed. She could still hear the screams, she'd been hearing them all afternoon. She lowered her eyes, shrinking into her seat. 'I didn't do anything . . .'

'I know you didn't do it on purpose,' Selene said softly. *Too softly.* 'But I'm worried, darling. Your emotions . . . your magic – they broke free. You have to allow yourself to grieve. It's OK to cry—'

Selene reached a hand towards her. Anna looked at it, not knowing how to take it, not knowing how to cry.

She stood up from the table, gathering the plates. 'I better clear up.'

Selene sighed behind her. 'Don't worry, darling, I've got cleaners coming any minute. Are you sure you don't want me to arrange removal men too? We can get this place all cleared out—'

'Not yet,' Anna replied abruptly.

‘OK.’ Selene sounded unsure. ‘Well, why don’t you check there’s nothing else you want to bring back with you before we leave?’

Anna looked around the kitchen. Aunt’s tea towels. Aunt’s glasses. Aunt’s weighing scales. Aunt’s shopping list, half-written on the fridge. The scent of her still in the air – magnolia perfume, garden soap, the sharp oil of her hair. Anna didn’t want to pick through it all, to pack it up, she just wanted to shut tight the doors of the house and leave it all to rot.

‘It’s all yours now,’ Selene muttered inauspiciously.

It was. Anna had learnt the full truth of it all now. Her mother, Marie, had bought the house quickly and quietly with family money left to her after her father had died. After Marie’s death, Anna had inherited it, not that she’d ever known. As Anna’s guardian, Aunt had simply taken control of proceedings and had chosen to move them in. *Why? Why live in the house where you killed her?* It was a fine house, a respectable neighbourhood – Aunt would have liked all that, but no, that was not the reason. Anna knew Aunt would have wanted to be close, to soak in the blood of her sins, to live beneath the shadow of the curse, to keep a dead-eyed golem-version of Anna’s father in the third-floor room where she’d killed Anna’s parents. *Punishment and pleasure. Pleasure and punishment.* They’d been one and the same to Aunt.

Anna wondered why her mother had chosen this unassuming house on this unassuming street in Earlsfield. Perhaps its inconspicuousness was exactly what she’d been looking for – somewhere to hide, to disappear so Aunt and the Binders wouldn’t find her. But they had. Once Anna was eighteen and could legally sell the place, she would, but until then, she just wanted to lock its terrible memories away.

The doorbell rang.

‘The cleaners!’ Selene jumped up from her seat, clearly glad for the distraction. ‘Go on, have a quick look around, see if there’s anything you want to keep. Or burn. I’m a dab hand at sacrificial bonfires.’

Anna managed her first smile of the day. She went through the other door into the quiet of the living room and it died on her lips. She could see it all before her – the Binders lost in their magic, thorns piercing flesh, Attis and Effie bound in the centre, Aunt beckoning Anna to *kill them, kill them, kill them* . . .

The room before her was chilled and bare now. Everything as it had always been – the photographs of her and Aunt along the mantelpiece,

Aunt's books on the shelves, the roses still in their pot, withering now. Anna walked past Aunt's armchair, still moulded to the shape of her head. She drifted a finger over Aunt's Bible on the table beside it – Aunt had used it to select their embroidery verses from. *Stitch in, stitch back . . .*

Anna turned to the piano last. It tugged at her from somewhere deep but she snipped the thread. It had never been her piano. All the music she'd ever played, all the moments of joy in her life . . . all of it had belonged to Aunt. Aunt had been conducting the whole damn thing. Anna could almost hear the sound of the metronome ticking with Aunt's judgement even now. The feeling of Aunt over her shoulder ready to tell her she wasn't doing it right – to play faster, slower, different, better; to be more than she was. *Never enough*. Blood began to well up through the cracks in the keys, onto the floor—

Anna blinked and it was gone.

She stumbled from the room and into one of the cleaners. 'I'm – sorry, sorry—'

The woman smiled. 'Want me to start in there, love?'

'Sure – I – yes—'

Anna made for the stairs, wondering if she was going mad. *Will I ever be free of Aunt? Will I ever breathe again?* She looked up the stairway and could feel it already. The darkness of the third-floor room pouring down from above – a flood that would drown her. She hadn't been up there since that night but it had filled up her dreams ever since. She would go there now and face it. Lock it shut and be done with it forever. *No way out but through*. Aunt had used to say that. She'd never believed in giving up easily, Anna had to give her that much credit.

Anna started upstairs. On the first floor, she walked past her old bedroom, the shadow of her and Aunt flickering in the corner of her eye – Aunt combing her hair in the mirror as they had done every night of Anna's life. She passed Aunt's room, still as meticulously ordered as ever. She stopped at the bottom of the next staircase. Her legs felt suddenly like stone, the stairway above her narrowing and stretching out as if it would go on forever. As if she'd never reach the top. *One step at a time. I can do this*. She began her ascent. Each step harder than the last. The air seemed to thin, a dizziness took over her, her feet growing heavier, like anchors trailing through sludge. The darkness pushed down on her, squeezing the breath from her. She gripped the

bannister, pulling herself upwards . . . *one more step . . . one more step . . .* Her vision began to cloud at the edges. She leant forwards, feeling as if she might faint. *One more step . . .* It took every last scrap of her effort in her, and then—

She rounded the corner at the top and scabbled for the light switch. The light came on but the shadows did not dissipate. The silence slipped itself around her.

The door ahead was open.

It felt wrong to see it that way. Its secrets released. The room in which Aunt had killed her parents. The room that had contained their family curse for sixteen years. *Open.* The curse was out there now. *Inside of me now.*

Anna propelled herself towards the door. Once inside, she twisted around, expecting something to jump out at her. But there was nothing – no ghouls or golems or Aunts waiting to get her. Nothing but a room. Someone had opened the curtains and made the bed. Light streamed in. And yet, Anna could feel the violence as if it were written into the walls, a language made of blood and screams and terror; as if, somewhere, what had happened here was still echoing over and over . . .

She spotted her mirror on the dressing table. The mirror she'd made out of magic and moonlight, the mirror that had helped her get into the room, cracked into pieces now in its case, a shard fallen loose beside it. She picked up the broken slice of glass and placed it back into the missing space. She gasped. The pieces of glass began to melt together, turning briefly mesmerizingly liquid like the surface of a lake finding stillness after a storm. And then – the mirror was whole again. Anna tapped the glass and found it solid, only the smallest whisper of a hair-line crack at the bottom where the large shard had rejoined. But when Anna picked it up – she almost dropped it again.

Aunt's face stared back at her. For a split second, Anna had thought it her own face – the same high cheekbones, red hair, green eyes. But it was Aunt. Anna moved her head to the side and Aunt's moved too. Anna's insides turned to worms, writhing and twisting with horror. She felt her own face drain of colour, but the face in the mirror did not. It flushed with life. The eyes gleamed. A smile played dreadfully along the lips. Aunt tipped her head back and began to laugh. It was Aunt's laugh too, like vinegar poured on a laugh so that it was puckered and sour and bitter and taunting. Blood dripped down the walls behind her—

‘Matchstick—’

Anna spun around to find Selene in the doorway.

‘Darling, are you OK?’

Anna held the mirror to her chest, her heart hammering against the glass. ‘I – yes, I’m fine.’

Selene’s frown deepened. ‘You shouldn’t have come in here.’

‘I just wanted to . . .’

‘I know, but places like this are better left shut. No point opening old wounds. Come on, it’s miserable in here, let’s go.’

Anna noticed that Selene had not crossed the threshold of the door. The room held dark memories for her too. Selene turned and Anna quickly wrapped the mirror in an old sheet – around and around like a shroud. She tucked it under her arm and followed Selene down the stairs.

Selene slowed on the landing and swivelled back to Anna, fluttering her fingers. ‘Actually, darling, there was something I’m looking for. Perhaps you could help?’ Her voice was light but there was tension beneath.

Anna took a moment to answer. Aunt’s face was still in her mind. ‘Er – yes, sure. What?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing really. Just a ring. A trinket. It used to be mine. I already checked Vivienne’s jewellery box but it wasn’t there. Anywhere else she might have put it?’

‘There was another box in her room . . . I can check.’

They entered Aunt’s room, Anna doing her best to ignore the scent of Aunt’s perfume still souring the air; the uneasy feeling, as she reached into Aunt’s bedside cabinet, that she might be caught in the act. She pulled out a small wooden box – she’d come across it when she’d searched Aunt’s room the year before. It had been full of all sorts of bits and pieces.

Selene took it hungrily and began rifling through the contents, discarding old tickets and receipts, trinkets, a white key – *Attis’s skeleton key!* – Anna picked it up off the floor and put it in her pocket as Selene’s breath caught. She was holding a thick, plain band between her fingers. It was exceptionally ugly – its thickness uneven, its metal dark and tarnished.

‘Is that it?’ said Anna, doubtfully.

Selene slipped it onto her finger. It looked out of place next to the vivid, twinkling colours of her other rings.

‘Why did Aunt have a ring of yours?’

'Oh, I lent it to her once . . .' Selene stared down at it, looking both relieved and burdened. Anna knew there was more to the story but she didn't have the energy left to question it now.

She stood up. 'I'm going to get some fresh air. I won't be long.'

'I'll just have to open another bottle of Viv's wine in the meantime.' Selene winked. 'When you're ready, we'll go home.'

Home. The word rose up, adrift. Anna didn't know where home was any more. It wasn't here in this empty, besieged house. It wasn't there either – in Selene's house in Hackney. *Effie's and Attis's house.* It did not belong to her. *They* didn't belong to her.

Anna made her way to the gated garden in the middle of Cressey Square. She took out Attis's skeleton key and put it in the lock. It opened with an easy click. That afternoon he had visited her here came back to her like sudden colour, a vivid flare burning the grey film of the day away.

No. She would not remember it.

She'd become good at that – closing the doors in her mind and keeping the keys hidden where even she couldn't find them. She'd tried to shut them out – *Effie and Attis; Attis and Effie.* Where they were. What they were doing. They'd gone away together. *Together.*

She traced her old route down through the garden, the wind pale and still, the plants around her threadbare, clutching onto life. She made it to the oak tree and slid to the ground, its trunk so familiar that somewhere, deep down, her heart began to ache. The rain had stopped but the earth was soft and damp, droplets falling from the leaves like the tears that would not come. It was as if when Aunt died, she'd tied a Choke Knot around Anna's life, cutting her off from it, from herself. A final punishment.

Anna's eyes wandered over the grass, to where she and Attis had lain in the garden and not in the garden at all. A magical world he'd created for her and then taken away. The boy she and Effie were cursed to love.

Effie. My twin. My sister.

The thought still felt too big to comprehend. She'd spent her life believing she was all alone in the world except for Aunt and now Aunt was dead and Effie was her family. Aunt snickered in her head . . . *out of the frying pan and into the fire . . .*

The curse rose up around Anna like black smoke – uncontainable, uncontrollable, overpowering.

One womb, one breath, sisters of blood, bound by love, so bound by death.

How far did it go back? How many lives taken? Sister after sister fated to love the same man and to tear themselves apart over it – one to kill the other. Anna would hardly have believed it if she hadn't seen it, hadn't lived through its destruction.

Aunt killed my parents. My mother.

And I killed you, Aunt. Oh Goddess, I killed you . . .

Anna fell to her knees.

She raised her head to the sky and screamed – but no sound came out. She watched as every leaf on the oak tree fell one by one. She didn't look away until the last leaf had fallen, the branches left bare as bone.

What's happening to me?

She couldn't trust herself and she couldn't trust her magic. She'd seen what it could do; *felt it*. Anna took the cord out of her pocket and tore her fingers through the earth. Once the hole was deep enough she dropped it in. *Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust*. She pushed the soil back over it and covered it with the fallen leaves.

Buried.