

Chronicles of Üfersae

by

Emma Lynch

Honor Project

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of English

in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

December, 2020

Approved by:

Mark Powell, M.F.A, Thesis Director

Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Ph.D, Second Reader

Joseph Bathanti, M.F.A, Third Reader

Dr. Jennifer Wilson, Departmental Honors Director

Part I

When Rhys found the calf's body in the dirt, it was the beginning of the world changing, though he didn't have any way of knowing that. He found the calf on the bank of the river that wound through the Upper Pasture, already bloating and covered over with flies.

"It looked like she drowned," Aiden said. He was chewing on a thing of straw. He thought it made him look experienced, although his cheeks were still round with an excess of baby fat.

Rhys nodded. "The water isn't high enough, though. She's all the way over here, and I don't think there was any flooding last night." He touched the calf's corpse gingerly with the toe of his boot. "It's like she drowned on dry land."

Aiden nodded crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe she starved. We could go check out the mother, see if she's producing."

"If this calf was starving yesterday, we would've noticed. We're out here every day, Aiden, and this calf clearly isn't emaciated. Look—" Rhys bent down and touched the side of the calf. Her skin sloshed underneath his fingers, like she was already dissolving on the inside.

Rhys stomach turned abruptly and he threw his guts out on the riverside. Aiden watched him impassively. "I'll get a team to bury her," Aiden said, when Rhys was finished.

"Yeah." Rhys wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His teeth tarted sour. "Bury her in the grove, away from the main grazing area. If she's diseased, I don't want something digging her up, or her blood leaching into the river."

Aiden saluted mockingly. "Aye aye, captain."

Rhys' eyes went all the way up into the back of his head. He left Aiden to it and followed the tracks of the herd up to the top of the hill.

Rhys was two years older than Aiden, and he was in charge of this herd, but Aiden liked to act as though they were boys in school again. Rhys didn't know what to do about it.

They'd grown up together in the lakeside community of Upper Pasture, just outside the dark foreboding walls of the city of Üfer. The community itself was a cluster of houses against the cliffs of the Üfersae, which was only a lake but Rhys was told was as big as the ocean itself. Upper Pasture was the thirty houses clinging to the pebbly ground right above the gray water, and the pastures dedicated for herd animals that roamed outside of the walls of Üfer.

All the jobs there were for a young man in the Upper Pasture were in fishing or herding cattle, and Rhys found cattle much more suited to his temperament, and they were sweeter besides. He'd been working in the pastures, keeping watch on one of the secondary herds, since he'd left school, and had agreed to take Aiden on as an apprentice as long as he didn't make things too difficult on everybody, though more and more every day that seemed to be Aiden's specialty.

From the top of the hill, surrounded by the gentle lowing of cows and the growing springtime grass, Rhys had a view of the small wooden town he called home and the great black stone wall that cast a shadow over the west pastures. The chewing of the grass mixed with the ambient buzzing of flies. The morning smelled cold and crisp and damp, separate from the overwhelmingly offensive must of cattle, and the hem of Rhy's pants were soaked through.

How could the calf have drowned on dry land? Rhys retied his hair above his ear, the strands blowing in the wind that swept across the lake. She'd been at the river when she died, drinking, probably, but that didn't explain how she'd died. Choked, maybe. But it had to have been overnight, and how would her—how would her insides have gotten twisted up like that?

Thinking about it made Rhys sick to his stomach again.

News of Ide's apprenticeship at the tea shop came in the post on Wednesday, and when she realized what the letter said, she almost cried from joy. She ran up the three flights of stairs to the top of floor of their tenant building and threw open the doors to their flats, where her mother was standing at the kitchen counter.

"I got it!" She said, breathless, throwing the letter down. "I got it, out of all the people in the city, I got it!"

Her mother smiled at her, benevolently. "That's lovely darling. How much does it pay, again?"

Ide laughed. Not even her mother could deflate her spirit right now. "I don't know, but once I work there, I'll get a job and I'll be good enough to have my own tea shop, Ma, and then it'll all be easy from there. One day, I'll buy you and Father an apartment on the west side of town, and you won't have to smell the docks anymore!"

Her mother laughed indulgently. "Wouldn't that be lovely? Ide, while you're rushing about would you put water on for dinner tonight, I'm going to make stew. And chop up some carrots?" Her mother was washing dishes in the sink under the new spigot the landlord had installed over the weekend, the water was rushing into the basin and splashing out against Ide's skirt and over the wooden countertop.

Ide found the carrot and the stew pot, balancing it all on top of each other while she wobbled to the counter. "I just feel like everything I've been trying to do my whole life has led up to this, and it can only get better from here, and also, I'll get to smell all of the teas before they go on display. All the herbal teas from up river, all the fruit teas from down river. I'll get to meet so many people—"

“That’s lovely, dear. When you’re done with the carrots, could you work on the potatoes for me? And put them in the same bowl as the carrots?”

“Yeah, of course.” Ide didn’t need anyone but her to be happy about the job at the tea shop—her joy was a jubilant force of its own that carried her through her chores and then through the living space, fluttering with the curtains that blew in the breeze that lighted through the open windows. It carried her into the small closet she called her room, and onto her bed where she pinned the letter lovingly above where her head lay.

At the foot of her bed was another window, and a breeze swept in stiffly from the Üfersae, full of the smell of brackish wharf water and freedom. Soon, Ide would be a part of that world too, bartering at the docks for the best prices, driving wagonloads of loose leaves back to the shop on High Street. It felt like everything was just beginning. She could sing about it.

In the big room, Ide could hear her father come in through the front door. Roald was a dock worker, but he didn’t see the romance in it like Ide did. For his part, though, he just unloaded the cargo and crates, unloaded pounds of dried fish from ships. He came home with stink on him, and it wasn’t anything good. The smell of dead fish and alcohol.

The alcohol was all Roald’s fault, though.

Ide didn’t go out into the main room to tell him the news. If anything, he would be less indulgent than her mother, to the point of intolerance. And maybe he was right, all of Ide’s friends from elementary school were either engaged or married already. Ide was seventeen, but her mother was thirty-six, and it felt like there was a clock embedded in Ide’s forehead that let everyone around her know she was frittering the time she had left on earth.

Ide undid her braid and let it fall out around her shoulders. Sometimes, the urge to climb out her window and run away was so overwhelming that Ide didn’t know what kept her on her

bed. Times like those, she went to the window and climbed out of it, onto fire escape. Even three stories from the ground, Ide felt like she was at a godly height, and when the wind rocked the wooden frame, she could feel her heart pounding frantically in her chest.

Still, though, she shimmied up the ladder that led to her window, and clambered onto the roof of their tenant building, her eyes shut, feeling her way up the splintered and rough rungs.

The top of Ide's building was like the top of every other building. Sparse and exposed. It was the same height as all the other tenant buildings, and Ide could just see where the block of buildings dropped off, right where the wharf began. A manmade cliff, into the Üfersae. To the north, the water; to the east, the Upper Pastures and rolling waves of grass. To the south, Maihome; to the west, Calloway.

From the top of her tenant building, Ide could barely see any of it, but knowing that it was there made Ide feel Godly, like if she could just stretch up tall enough on her tiptoes, she could take handfuls of the clouds and drink them out of then palms of her hand. Ide, the tea shop apprentice, Queen of the Üfersae. Now, she could really get started.

Rhys was the first one to notice how the world began to change. For Susie, at first, it hardly changed at all. Hollis plantation, where Susie had been born and where Susie hoped to die, was an oasis in the poverty that decimated the Pastures and the tenancy system of Üfer. Their main crop was indigo, and they grew fruits to sell in Üfer on the weekends besides. The Lady and the Lord ran the big house, the white one covered all around in weeping willows, and the men and women took care of the plantation in return for enough food and a house along the North River.

Susie's parents had taken care of the stables at Hollis, and now it was Susie's turn to do the same. In the late light of springtime, Susie's fingers were cold around the currying comb, and she could see her breath as it hung in the air.

"I think he'll propose at Midsummer," she told Caroline. "It would be the perfect time to do it too, when we're all in our white dresses, and the fireflies come over the bank. I don't know, I just think it'll be perfect."

Caroline laughed. "How do you know he wants to marry you?" She was done all her work for the day and was sitting up on the stable wall, her pretty hair braided over her shoulder. "Maybe he just fancies looking at you."

"Who else is there here that's pretty enough to marry?" Susie laughed and tossed her golden curls over her shoulder, aware of the dirt that was streaked down her cheeks and the mud underneath her fingertips. All things considered, though, Susie did find herself pretty. "Besides you, and Jamie can't marry you, you're his sister."

Caroline laughed. She was younger than Susie, but not by much. All three of them (Susie, Caroline, and Jamie) had grown up together, and it was difficult to remember that as they got older, things changed. Susie inherited her father's job, Caroline was placed in the kitchens, and Jamie was one of the men who took livestock and crops from the Hollis Plantation to the Üfer wharf. He was gone three days out of every seven, but Susie was convinced that whenever he came back home, he smiled just to see her.

"Maybe I'll move out of the plantation," Caroline said, watching the barn wall somewhere over Susie's head. Her tone had a dreamy quality to it. "I could keep my own kitchen, and my own garden. And, there are more men to marry out there, men who aren't my brother."

Susie laughed. “And where would you go? There’s no way there’s a place better to live than here.”

“I mean, at least in the pastures you can choose what your job will be. I could farm sheep in the Upper Pasture, grow grapes in Lower, or find a husband who does.” She kicked her bare feet. “I don’t know, it would just be nice to have an adventure. Jamie says it isn’t all that bad out there.”

“Jamie loves to see the good in things. I think he still wants to take a boat up the North River, and see what’s at the end.”

Caroline laughed just a little. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“What if it is? There’s no way that the world outside is better than the world here. Food costs money out there, the Lady and Lord don’t charge us to live on their land, our homes are here, our whole family is here. If we just started leaving, what would we have left?”

“Well, Susie, if you left with me, then we would have each other.”

Susie stopped what she was doing to smile at her dearest friend. “Oh, yeah? And how would poor Jamie’s heart break when I wasn’t there at the Midsummer festival, waiting for him?” She wound horse’s braid into a quick braid, so it wouldn’t get tangled up on itself.

Caroline stopped kicking her feet. “Why are you so keen on the idea of Jamie?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, you’re really taken on the idea that he’s gonna pick you at the Midsummer dance, and he hasn’t even asked you for a walk through the orchard yet. I don’t know, I just don’t want you to get hurt if he eventually asks Georgia ... or Clara, or someone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we all grew up as a trio, you know? He remembers when you were a babe in diapers.” Caroline tried to laugh, but it sounded forced. “That’s not necessarily something you want in a wife.”

“Well, you don’t know much about relationships, do you? Having a ten year yearning for Michael doesn’t make you an expert on how anything works.” Susie dropped her currying brush in the equipment bucket and slammed the stable door shut, shaking the wall Caroline was sitting on. Susie locked the stable door without making eye contact with her friend.

“I’m not trying to upset you! I just don’t want you to be sad if the, you know, if the worst happens—“

“It’s fine, Caroline, it’s fine. What you think becomes the truth, though, right? Hollis plantation isn’t good enough to live on, I’m not good enough to be your sister? It’s fine, Caroline, it’s fine.” Susie pulled her hood over her head and stormed out of the barn, snuffing the oil lanterns as she went. She didn’t turn back to see Caroline, sitting forlornly on the stable divider, the shadows slowly taking over her face.

Part II

Rhys’ mother fell ill the next week. It started off sort of slowly, so slowly that Rhys thought he might be imagining it, or Maybe his mother was just getting older and frailer and it was something Rhys would have to live with and come to terms with. He would go home in the evenings and his mother would be asleep in the rocker on the porch overlooking the garden, and Rhys would know that she hadn’t left that spot since she’d settled into it that morning. All the while, more cows were dying.

First the calves, then the older cows, the ones that had birthed a few calves and were now standing with one hoof in the grave. Aiden thought they shouldn't be too concerned about the older cows dying. "Less feed we'll have to give out in the wintertime," he pointed out to Rhys. "Less mouths to worry about, less chance that they'll die from something worse. I saw we just focus our energies on trying to save the calves."

Rhys agreed—they needed to save the calves, make sure that there would be cows for next spring, but it was worrying that cows were dying now too. "Calves," he told Aiden, "I can understand. They're small, small as a dog, almost. But a cow? Aiden, these creatures are massive, big enough to take one of us down. Their muscle mass—whatever is killing them is taking them down within a week. What if it gets passed on to humans?"

What if it had already passed on to humans? Rhys didn't say anything about that.

"What would this even look like if this passed down to humans?" Aiden laughed at the idea. Even he, within the past week, was looking different, sallow, his baby cheeks hollowing out and his eyes deepening. Was it the death? Was it the death that Aiden was forced to see every day, or was it something else? Rhys couldn't tell what was real anymore, what was real, and what was constructed out of his fear. "What, would they just dissolve on the inside?" Aiden laughed, and Rhy's stomach flipped.

"Right," he said. "Right." He bit his lips, the hole he was wearing on the inside filling his mouth up with blood. "Maybe, the next cow we see, we cut it open, and see what's really going on in the inside of it. Like, if what's supposed to be there is supposed to be there, or not."

Aiden made a face, but he didn't take the suggestion lightly. He only nodded. Rhys wondered if Aiden was just as scared as he himself was.

It was around this time that the food started drying up too. Not a lot of things grew in the Lower Pastures this time of year, but the spring tubers that found their way to the Upper Pasture market were withered and wilted. When Rhys brought them home, boiled them up for a stew or a what have you, the roots didn't have any sort of taste to them. This was another way in which the world had changed, but Rhys hadn't noticed it yet. He ate the dry, withered starches, ignoring the grainy feeling with which his tongue was coated, while he thought about the dying cows and his aging mother and forgot to notice the way other parts of the world were dying around him.

So, next time a calf died, Rhys and Aiden pulled the calf away from the herd and into the grove where the graves were piling up. Rhys pulled out his hunting knife, Aiden took a strip of his mother's linen and tied it around his nose and his mouth. "What's that for?" Rhys demanded. *You look like a wrapped pig*, he didn't say.

"What if it comes through the smell of things?" Aiden asked. "Want a piece?"

Rhys agreed without a second hesitation.

Aiden's mother linen pressed his nose flat to his face, and Aiden held the legs of the calf flat against the earth, even though its muscles were tight with rigor mortis—Rhys took the knife and made the first incision. The whole scene, the blood leaking into the dirt, the willows that wept and cast their shadows over the growing grasses, the earth overturned that still smelled like earth; it all felt a little like religion to Rhys. Or maybe the opposite. He cut the calf open, even though it was already dead.

Inside, inside the calf, everything was where it was supposed to be, except for the water that poured down the sides of the calf. Water that poured down the side of the calf and wet the clearing floor. Aiden jumped back in revulsion. When Rhys stood up, his hands weren't covered in blood, his jeans weren't soaked in blood. It was water, all water.

Aiden shook his head. “What is this? What is this?” But Rhys had no answer.

Ide noticed the world changing as she stood in line for the market. Before the springtime struck, there hadn’t been a line for the market, but every week it grew longer, and by the time the end of the line got in the marketplace, there wasn’t any food left at all. No food left in Üfer, the city at the center of the world. Ide didn’t know what to think of it. She brought it up to her mother on a day when the basket was empty and her stomach hurt.

“Maybe there just hasn’t been enough water in the Lower Pasture, I’m sure a drought won’t last into summer.”

“But Mother, there hasn’t been a drought. It rained almost every other day in the beginning of the season, and look, even now there’s a storm rolling in across the lake. Maybe the wealthier homes on the west side are taking the best produce before we get any.”

“Ide, that’s nonsense, you can’t just—“ Ide’s mother shook her head. Since the water tap was installed in their kitchen, Ide’s mother had hardly found a reason to leave the house. She was becoming small and shriveled in the shadows, and she refused to understand anything outside herself. “Maybe the problem is that we don’t have enough money. Can you tell the man at the tea shop that you’ll work for him again next season? And get a job in the meantime, just to help until the food comes back.”

“There is no food, Ma, not for love or money.”

She shook her head. “There is anything if you try hard enough. Look for a job around the docks. Go to work with your father tomorrow, see what is happening.”

Ide wouldn’t. She would go back to the tea shop tomorrow, and then back to the market, and maybe to the docks if she could find some of the wild rice that was sent down from the north

river and would try to buy the wheat from the wagons that came from the Hollis plantation. But that wouldn't be enough for the city of Üfer for long. Ide tried to save what she could and cinched her corset, relied on the smell of steam from the kettle to fill her up.

The as the days became hotter and hotter, the wait in the line to the market got longer and longer, long enough that it wasn't worth it, long enough that Ide's legs would tremble as she waited, and the hunger in her stomach would for force her to sit on the ground as she waited. Spring turned into summer and when Ide got up to go wait in line before the sunlight colored the clouds, the line already stretched halfway down to the harbor. She took to waiting at the gate with other tenants, begging for the drivers of the Hollis plantation to throw them some wheat. She would've given anything to the drivers of the cart for a loaf of bread. *Anything.*

She didn't think to ask where they got the food from. She only knew she wanted it.

When Ide looked in the mirror, it looked like she was sucking in the hollows of her cheeks, but really that was how taught her skin was drawn over her cheeks. Her hair fell out in clumps too, into her fist, onto her bare arms, out in the cloth that she wrapped her hair up in. Summer rolled to a halt in Üfer and Ide rolled with it, her elbows and arms hitting against the cobblestones, her stomach growling in anger.

"Why don't you bring home any food?" Her mother demanded, both of Ide and her father. The dinners they ate were as thin as they had become.

Ide's father, who worked at the docks, had no answers either. He said the fish that were caught in the Üfersae were already dead when they were caught—that the fishermen were just scooping their dead bodies off the top of the surface of the lake. Would the people, the fisherman wondered, be desperate enough to eat the dead, stinking fish? By the time the people were, all

the fish were gone, and everything in the Üfersae was so dead that not even corpses floated to the top of the lake.

So Ide's father said nothing.

"Why don't you bring home food?" Ide's mother demanded of Ide instead. And Ide herself, had no answer, only empty words and a belly full of steam.

When the bodies began to pile up on street corners, Ide just closed her eyes.

When Jamie came back to the Hollis plantation, he was covered in bruises. His arms, his legs, all bore the fingerprints of the desperate people who tried to pull him off of their cart. Susie helped Caroline salve his legs as he leaned back against the bed frame, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy.

"I don't know why they think that this would be okay," Caroline clucked. She worried over her brother with a mother's fervor, idly mad at everyone who did her brother harm, more concerned with the marks than with who caused them.

Susie, though, could feel her blood boiling in the tips of her fingers. Her hands shook as she laid ice on Jamie's legs, her heart shuddered in her chest as she thought about the force that must've been used to make these bruises.

It was Jamie's job to bring shipments of food to the Üfersae from the Hollis plantation. Usually, in the springtime, there wasn't any danger in the job. It had just been a job. Now, though, the people of Üfer, the dirty poor people who ran rampant through the streets and around the wharves of Üfer, would try to pull Jamie out of his cart and pull the food out of it too. Every week, he would come home, back to Hollis plantation, back to safety, and Caroline and Susie would try to piece him back together.

“What do they want from you?” Susie demanded, and Caroline tried to stop her with a sharp look, but Susie persisted; “Why would they hurt you.”

Jamie’s eyes were closed, but she could see tears beading on the top of his cheeks. “They’re all corpses, fighting over flour so that maybe they can bring it home without it getting stolen so that they can maybe make bread and draw it out with sawdust.” He sat up and grabbed Susie’s wrist, so hard that maybe it would bruise her too. “Susie, all of them are dying.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean you have to die too!” Susie let him keep holding onto her wrist, felt the pulse of his fingers through her skin.

Jamie nodded and leaned back. “They’re not trying to do that. They’ve just stopped caring about anything other than themselves.” Caroline and Jamie’s small cabin was filled with the silence of three different breaths. Jamie let go of Susie’s wrist, and his hand fell limply against the floor. It seemed like he was worn out just from thinking, just from seeing all of the things that he had been seen outside of the plantation.

“Why would they be starving?” Caroline broke the silence. “There’s been good enough rain all year, why would they be starving, and not us?”

Jamie shrugged. “When I drive through the Upper Pasture, the cows are dead. When I drive into Üfer, the gates are left open, because the men set to watch aren’t strong enough to open them. When I get the to wharves, they’re putting corpses onto ships to send out into the Üfersae to burn. It’s a disease, or maybe it’s something worse, but everything has it. I don’t know.” He didn’t move his head. “I don’t know.”

When Susie and Caroline left him on the mattress, covered in salve, they went to the elm tree, a little bit away from everything, so that no one could hear them. Susie’s hands were still sticky. She looked worriedly at the heads of corn that bowed in the summer heat.

“Do you think the the brought it here with him?” Caroline asked. “Brought it back home, whatever is out there?”

Susie shook her head, even though that was a lie. “We’ll keep an eye on him, just in case. If he has to go out there again, we’ll make sure that he has leather underneath his clothes so that they can’t touch him again. And we’ll make sure that if he does has it, it won’t spread.”

Caroline took a deep breath, and she shuddered. “It’s not going to be the same this year, is it? Midsummer, I mean. It won’t be the same when Jamie’s arms are all covered in bruises, and we’re all worrying about him instead of worrying whether or not we have the best dress around.”

Susie wrapped Caroline up in a hug, trying to take the worried look off of her face. “I don’t think Jamie will be the same after this, but maybe that’s part of growing up, too. Maybe—I don’t know—“

“You’re happy about this.” Caroline’s laugh was smothered against Susie’s shoulder. “You’re happy that we found out now that out there is dangerous, instead of later, after I left you.”

“I am. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Caroline broke the embrace to look her friend in the eye. “I—I don’t want to see Jamie like that ever again. I don’t want to be those people either—I mean, here, we work for food and we get it. We don’t—I don’t know.”

“We’re not walking skeletons,” Susie said. “I get it. I’m glad you’re safe too, that’s all I ever really wanted—“

Caroline looked over her shoulder, at the house where her brother was asleep on the bed. “Why them?” She asked again. “Why them, and not us?”

“That’s a silly question Caro, you just answered it. We work for it. I mean, when I go to sleep at night I earned it. I wouldn’t ever, ever hurt someone just because they had something that we didn’t. The difference between us and them, Caro, is that we’re good people, and we keep each other safe.” She pushed her friend’s hair out of her face, so both girls were eye to eye. “No need to worry.”

Part III

Rhys’ mother died and he left her in the back garden because his back was sore from digging graves and his stomach was empty and his arms shook when he tried to do heavy lifting or pretty much anything at all. So Rhys left her body in the back garden and covered her up with a sheet so that the crows couldn’t get at her eyes. It was a bad sight, but it wasn’t any worse than what else Rhys was forced to see every day. If Rhys was being honest, somewhere deep down, he had expected to find his mother lying on her bed, eyes closed, unbreathing, the moment he had found the second dead calf.

The pasture was full of the dead. The homes, too. As spring turned into summer, Rhys and Aiden had moved into the pastures, camping out under the trees, wrapped up in burlap, to keep whatever was out there from coming home. When they finally gave up on the herd, gave up on the trees that were dying over their heads, and came back home, there was nothing left.

Rhys locked the front door of his house. No mausoleum better than the house his mother had loved. He went to find Aiden.

The streets of their town were empty of people, but full of overturned carts and children’s toys. Shop doors were left empty and swinging open, but it didn’t look like there had been any food on the shelves anyways. It looked like the sickness, or whatever it was, had taken the people by surprise, taken them up off the streets when they were least expecting it, and left them dead in

their beds. How they got from one place to the other was something Rhys didn't know how to piece together.

As he walked, Rhys noticed that the sounds of his footsteps over the gravel weren't the only things echoing in the street. He looked up, and over the horizon, opposite the direction of the wall of Üfer, came a cloud and the sound of hooves. Someone else. Another person. Coming in an awful hurry from—what was up there? The plantation?—to the city. Rhys planted himself in the middle of the road and dared the driver to run him over.

The driver almost did it, too. Rhys was on the point of regretting his game of chicken when the cart slowed, and he was able to see the driver's face. Not only that, but the driver's body, too. It was a man, about Rhy's age, but with a face still full of baby fat. Someone had tied a saddle around the man's midsection, and strapped a basket over his head, like makeshift armor. The ludicrousness of the man, armored and fat in the center of a town full of dead, made Rhys laugh until he was doubled over.

"What do you want?" the driver demanded. If it weren't for his homemade protection, he would have looked like the picture of menace.

Rhys hooted once more as he straightened. "You're a sight for sore eyes, then. Is everyone dead? Everywhere?"

The driver shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable with this question. "There are a lot of poor folk in Üfer who are surviving, a lot of the wealthy have moved down to where things are better, on the other side of the South River. But—there's no one here, no one in the Lower Pastures, and Callowee and Maihome have all been wiped too."

Rhys nodded. That wasn't the whole truth. This man had come from somewhere. "And yet, you have a cart full of food that you're going to sell down the South River, so you've suited up to save yourself from all those poor folk."

The driver seemed affronted by this suggestion. He bristled, held onto his whip a little tighter. "They hurt me when they try to pull me off my cart. And besides, they don't have any money to pay for anything."

Rhys felt his eyebrow creep up his forehead. "Of course. The masses of the starving have no money for you to bring back to... where is it, the plantation that's up on the North River?"

"What of it?"

Rhys shook his head. "And how were you so lucky while we were not?"

"Luck has nothing to do with it," the driver said, his face incredulous. "Do you know how long and hard we worked for what we had? We were chosen to live in the plantation because of our work ethic and our dedication. We would never let our people starve, the way you've let yours."

Rhys looked the man over again and stepped out of the way of the cart. The man looked from Rhys to the road, and took off without a second thought, whipping his horses (all alive with full bellies, muscles churning in the morning sunlight) as hard as he could, full tilt to Üfer.

Rhys found Aiden locking the door of his family's home, tears running down his cheeks. They didn't need to speak. Instead, Rhys took his brother's hand and led him down the road, away from Üfer, out of the home they had fled to save, out of the home they had failed,

Ide didn't know what made her mother sick to death until she realized that her father was an alcoholic and that Ide herself only drank tea. Ide didn't realize what killed her mother until she

saw that the water that came out of the tap that had been installed in their tenant apartment was cloudy and grainy, and she realized that she had never drunk water right from the tap. She had boiled it all before she poured it into her mug.

Roald, for his part, hadn't had a drink of water since he was thirteen at the latest.

When Ide realized it was in the water, whatever the sickness was—whatever was killing the livestock and the crops and the people—she thought that she had a chance to save everyone. It was the peak of summer, and Ide tried to convince the neighbors, the ones she had left, to drink tea, or wine, or anything but water. She filled up her home with steam and handed out boiled water on the stoop of the tenant building.

Roald went out too, knocking on doors, bellowing that the water wasn't safe to drink anymore—he went to each building and pounded on each door. Ide didn't know how many people her father's words reached, didn't know how many people there were left for her father's words to reach. At the end of July, Ide and Roald were heroes, and they were going to be the ones who were going to save Üfer. Ide handed out cups of water to people, dozens, then hundreds a day. And no one in Üfer drank the water that came from the taps anymore, and no one in Üfer got sick anymore, and for the last weeks of Midsummer, it felt like everything Ide and Roald were doing was going to make everything okay.

Susie didn't want to let the men in to the plantation. She saw them through the bars of the gate, their faces so skinny that it looked like their eyes were sunk all the way into their heads. She saw their fingers, the way that they held onto the metal bars of the gates, their fingers so winnowed that Susie didn't know if they would be strong enough to pick anything up.

“Hello,” the taller, red-headed one said. “Would you please let us in?” His jaw was tight. He wasn’t asking.

“Please,” the shorter one, with darker hair said, and he sounded like he was begging, although Susie couldn’t see his entire face. “Please, we’re so hungry, we haven’t see anyone else since we left. Please, everyone else is dead.”

Susie stepped back. She had just been by the front gate to check if Jamie was back yet, she shouldn’t have been by there anyways. “I don’t want to catch what you’ve got.”

“What we’ve got? What do you mean, what we’ve got? We’ve been out in the pastures, we just got back and there’s nothing left—“ The small man’s pale face was desperate as he reached out through the metal bars, his fingers pale and skeletal.

“We don’t have anything, it’s not a sickness. Come on, you have to let us in. We’ll die of starvation if we stay out here.” The taller man’s voice was harsh, and Susie knew that he would do whatever it took to get within the walls of the plantation. She swallowed, and stepped back from the gate.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll talk to somebody. I’ll come back.”

She backed down the lane quickly, trying not to turn her back on the strangers, trying not to trip over her own feet. Just this morning, she and Caroline had strapped Jamie into his makeshift armor and sent him off to Üfer with a shipment for the docks—the worst possibilities came to mind. They didn’t have the horses, have the cart, have the food that Jamie had carried, so they hadn’t killed him, right? If they had run into him on the way here, and decided to make a example of him—

If they had, Susie reminded herself, they would have run into the pastures. Disgusting thieves, they would’ve run with everything they had on them. And the tall man had said it

himself, that they didn't have any sickness, practically an admission that they weren't sick, that they were starving because they had spent their time away in the pastures, rather than working. She would spit at them, she would tell them to go back to where they came from, to go to hell, but—

She looked back over her shoulder at the big house, then to the gates where the men were standing, their hollow eyes a reproach. They were just standing there, watching her back away.

“What did you do with Jamie?” She called to them, standing in the middle of the drive. If they had done something with Jamie, she would have the Lord of the house kill them as they stood, begging.

The taller man, the sure one, the man who was in charge of the pair, answered her back, and Susie couldn't tell if his answer came too easy. “Nothing. We need nothing from Üfer, nothing from the man on the cart. We just need a job here, a way to feed ourselves for the day.”

“Please!” The smaller man shouted, and even from this distance, Susie could see the tears that left tracks down his cheeks, “We'll work, we'll do anything!”

Susie shook her head. “You had your chance for that, but now the summer's past, and you'll get what you deserve. Have you ever—have you ever really worked? If they let you in here, you'll work from when the sun rises until it sets—“

The taller man laughed, bitterly, and Susie's words caught in the back of her throat. The taller man left the gate, left Susie standing there, and the smaller one followed after. She shook her head as she watched them go. Pity, that they didn't understand how it worked, that the threat of hard work could scare them off like that.

Before Susie's father had died, he told her the world was made up of two people. The people willing to work, and the people too selfish to understand that they were breaking the

backs of everyone in the first group with their need. The people who lived in Hollis, he used to say, were a rare and dying breed. Now, though, it seemed that the tables had turned.

Ide stood at the pier with her father, Roald, and on their backs they carried everything that they owned. The water of the Üfersae slammed against the pier, kicking up the smell of seaweed and dead fish. Ide swallowed, and looked behind her, at the walls of the city, at the place where she used to live.

“It’ll be okay,” Roald said, and that sounded like a lie.

“I tried, so hard. I thought—“

“I know. I did too.” Roald had stopped drinking spirits for a while now, and his voice became steadier the more sober he became. His deep voice fumbled through Ide’s chest, and she could tell that he was trying to hold back tears himself.

People, the citizens of Üfer, couldn’t survive off of clean water alone. The spring crops were long dead, the summer crops were rotting in the field of the Lower Pasture, and there was no way that Ide and Roald could hold onto their empty stomach until the fall crops had grown in. There was nothing left. From the Upper Pasture to the Lower Pasture, down the South River all the way to Calloree, there was nothing left. The water, whatever was in the water, had devastated the entire region.

Whatever Ide could have done would have been no help at all. Her heart broke with the knowledge that she couldn’t clean all the water they used to water crops, and that clean water wouldn’t be able to fill all the hungry stomachs that came to her doorstep every day. She couldn’t clean all of the water that would be needed to keep everyone alive, and, in some ways, she was just keeping the people in her city alive longer, letting them die slower and hungrier.

Ide took a step closer and rested her head against her father's side. In the spring, he had been a heavy set man, but now his muscles had faded and he had shrunk into himself, the bones of his body pressed starkly against the skin that was pulled loosely over him. Ide herself was almost translucent. She could no longer hear the rumble of her stomach over the beating of her heart. A crewman motioned for Ide and her father to come aboard, and so they did, leaving their wharf and their city behind.

Part IV

Rhys and Aiden climbed over the stone wall that wrapped around the Hollis plantation and found themselves in an apple orchard, the fruit on the trees not yet ripe enough to pick, but more than ripe enough for a starving man to eat. Rhys' stomach turned in on itself just looking at the fruit, the thought of eating until he was full making him sick just by itself.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Aiden dropped down into the orchard besides him. “The woman around front seemed pretty sure that we shouldn't come in here unless we were absolutely sure that we could work off everything we ate—“

“Don't worry about her. Did you hear all the bullshit she was saying? Like, only she knows what work is. I'm sure her job got handed to her, and that she's never had to make a choice that had actual consequences before. Look, we'll take what we need, then leave. No one could ever eat this much.”

Aiden nodded, his eyes round at the amount of food that was laid out before them. They had been rationing dehydrated food—jerky, dried fruit, hardtack—for the entire time they had been camped out, away from the Upper Pasture, and they had been luckier than most, but the

thought of food with actual substance to it—Rhys pulled an apple from the nearest bough and bit into it.

The fruit was so tart, it made Rhys' eyes turn to the side of his head, but it was the best thing he had ever tasted. Juice dripped down his chin, sticking to his cheeks, staining his torn and dirty shirt. Aiden followed suit, and soon the two had made a good sized pile of apple cores between them.

When he was too full to eat anymore, which was sooner than he thought it would be, Rhys moaned and fell on his back, his stomach aching and his mouth still smacking of a sour-sweet, which was very overwhelming to a mouth that had tasted nothing but itself for the past three months.

Next to him, Aiden did the same, his arms outstretched. "I think I'm going to throw up," he said, and Rhys laughed.

"Look, all the trees, they still have leaves on them." He pointed above his head at the branches that bobbed above them. "And the grass, it's so green."

"Do you think that we we could be dead?" Aiden sat up suddenly. "That we could be dead and in Heaven?"

Rhys closed his eyes and thought about it. He poked his stomach, which hurt from both emptiness and apples. "No," he decided. "If we were dead, it wouldn't hurt this much. And, our parents would be here, not—"

Not dead, in our gardens, with sheets pulled over their eyes, is what he didn't say.

Aiden didn't need him to say that, he just nodded. "Maybe it would've been better if it had us who died, you know? Like, we're just cow minders. Those weren't even *our* cows. Out of all the things to leave behind, why leave us?"

Rhys wished he had a better answer than what he did, which was to shrug. The late summer wind played over their faces, and the sky was the bluest blue Rhys could remember. Maybe, the great wheel of the universe had just forgot about them, leaving them these last, quiet moments, before it turned again, bringing them back to the place they had just left.

Ide first saw Callowee from the bow of the ship, where she had taken to sitting as the ferry made its way down the South River. Callowee was smaller than Üfer, but it was closer to the capital city and was a key part of the region's agricultural economy. If there was anywhere to get food, Ide decided, it would be Callowee.

The ferry that they'd traveled on had food and water so clean it practically sparkled. Ide still boiled it anyways. The food they were served wasn't impressive by Ide's old standards, but now she had taken to stowing what she couldn't eat in her bag or the folds of her skirt, to save for later. The whole trip down the coast of the Üfersae and down the South River felt like a dream, and Ide was half expecting to see rainbows and streamers flying from the towers of Callowee, like a fairytale dream come true.

Callowee wasn't anything like that. There wasn't a wall around the city like there was around Üfer, and the town seemed to be smaller, a settlement nestled within a valley, smoke streaming from chimneys. "It's beautiful," Ide decided, her knuckles white as she clenched onto the railing of the ferry.

"Isn't it?"

Ide startled at the man's voice behind her, and she turned suddenly. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

“No, it’s alright. You and your Da are leaving Üfer, yeah?” The man, a ferry worker, shook his head. He was burly and well fed, and his beard tickled at his chest. He looked at Ide, his cheeks chapped and wind blown. “I’ve got to tell you, Callowee is doing better, but not by much.”

“What do you mean?” Ide could hear the panic in her voice.

The sailor shrugged. “Whatever’s up there is down here too. It’s almost like there’s something in the water.” He laughed. “That’s why you keep boiling it, right? But downriver isn’t the smartest move.”

“What do you mean? Where does it stop, is it—is it in Maihome?”

The sailor shrugged. Maihome was the capital city, but it wasn’t accessible by boat. “It’s in all the cities that get water from the Üfer, you know? You’ll need to go a while before you find some place is untouched. If you can keep paying, though, we’ll take you as far as you need to go, you know?”

Panic overwhelmed Ide, to the point where the only thing she could hear was the blood in her ears. She held onto the railing, her fingernails dug into the meat of her palm as she squeezed the metal as hard as she could. Did they have the money to ride the ferry to the end of the river? Would it matter if they did? But then again, what choice did they have?

The ferry stopped at Callowee’s small port. Ide and Roald didn’t get off, and neither did anyone else. There was nothing in Callowee for them, nothing left in Üfer, nothing anywhere for either of them, except for the beds they could still afford on the ferry. Ide held her father’s hand as they went down the river, her spirits deflated, tears dried on her cheeks.

Caroline was the one who found the men who had called to her from the fence passed out in the apple orchard, and Susie was the one who had gotten the rifle from over the door of the hunting shack. She pointed it at the two sleeping men, who were sprawled out in the grass, a small pile of apple cores between them.

“Wake up!” She shouted, Caroline hovering over her shoulder. Susie had never held the gun before in her life, and she was suddenly afraid that the gun was going to fire unexpectedly, killing one of them violently in front of her. She shouted again, making Caroline flinch.

Blearily, the taller one stretched and stretched. He eyed the gun Susie was pointing at them, but didn't seem too concerned.

“The safety is off,” Susie said, trying to sound as threatening as possible.

The man reached over and shook the sleeping man besides him. “I'm Rhys,” he said to Susie, instead of addressing the gun. “We just dropped in.”

“Get out.” Susie tried to keep her hands from shaking. “I knew you were nothing but thieves who wanted to take from us, I should go right up to the big house and tell them that you're here, that you snuck in—“

“Do it, then.” Rhys stood up. His companion followed, clambering to his knees, obviously more nervous about the gun than Rhys was. “How sad your life must be, to not even have permission to shoot me without someone asking.”

“How sad your life must be! To, not even be able to feed yourself, to have, to have to steal from us in order to stay alive because you don't even try to work!” Caroline shouted over Susie's shoulder, and Susie was glad she didn't have to say it herself.

“You don’t understand,” the smaller man said as he took Rhys’ hand, the taller helping him to his feet. “You’ve never left here, you know nothing about what’s happening outside, you weren’t the one who- “

“Hey, it’s okay.” Rhys put a hand on the man’s chest, and steered him away from Susie, who was still trying to make the most menacing face possible. “Things will be better the further we get away from—“ he looked over his shoulder, and Susie couldn’t tell if the man was talking about her, or if he was talking about this part of the world in general.

The smaller man nodded, and without even talking about it, the two began to pull unripe apples off of the boughs. “Knock it off!” Susie shouted, “You can’t steal from us, drop them!”

Rhys looked over his shoulder, holding apples to his chest, wrapped up in his shirt, as he pulled more from the branches. “Why don’t you run back to your Missus and ask if you can shoot me? If you were going to do something to me, you would’ve done it by now.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do know that. Listen, what’s your name? It doesn’t matter. At the gate, you said that we would have to work from sun-up to sunset, what do you think we do? What do you think that we spend our time doing?”

“If you spent more time working, you wouldn’t be here, stealing our food, asleep in our orchard.” Susie tried to make her words as nasty as possible, but she dropped her gun. There wasn’t a need for it, right now. It looked like they were leaving, and if they didn’t, Susie was still ready.

The smaller man looked at her. “Do you think that we want to be here, in your orchard, instead of in our own house?”

“Jamie says that you keep trying to steal our food!” Caroline’s rage was palpable.

“And you would let a people starve, just so you can sell the food down river? What is your Missus going to do with that money when everyone else is dead, burn it? Sleep on it?” Rhys shook his head. “I would explain it to you, but I don’t know if you would be able to understand, caught up as you are in yourself. Let’s get going Aiden, we’ll find somewhere else.”

Aiden, the smaller man, nodded, and nimbly climbed over the back wall, one hand holding onto the apples that were tucked up in his shirt. Rhys, without even looking to see if Susie had lifted the gun, followed him, and Susie heard the gentle thump as the two hit the ground on the other side of the wall.

“You should have killed them,” Caroline said, “those were our apples. They didn’t have the right to take them—“

“They said they didn’t hurt Jamie, they didn’t really do anything—“

“But look how much they ate! A whole pile full. We could’ve sold those in Üfer, made pies, they weren’t for those vagrants!”

Susie shook her head. “I guess. I have to go put this gun back, and then check in on the stables. Keep a watch on the orchard if you can from the kitchen, and if they come back run and get someone important, like Donny or Campbell.” She named the two men in charge of security, and Caroline nodded.

“You run and tell me when Jamie gets back,” Caroline requested, and Susie nodded, though she could feel her stomach twisting. She doubted that the two men would be back, and she hoped Evie more that they wouldn’t.

Caroline left, went back to work, while Susie went to the gun shed and hung the rifle up. The faces of the two men caught her eye in the reflection of the window as she locked the door,

and she turned suddenly, expecting to see their gaunt faces watching her. There was nothing but the whitewashed farm building and the rustling fields.

She looked at her own hands, her fingers surprisingly short and without calluses, her veins hidden by her thick wrists, the image of her own face in the window. She should have shot them. She *would* have shot them. She would have.

Susie went to the stable and pulled herself up onto a low-lying wall, letting her leg hang down over the side. What would it be, to be so hungry that you would eat a pile of hard, sour, unripened apples? She was glad that she would never have to find out.