Contents

Prologue: A Star Falls – Or, Did It Jump?

Chapter One: Anything Can Be a Human Child

Chapter Two: A Total Eclipse of the Heart

Chapter Three: No One Likes Fourth Grade

Chapter Four: Falling – In Both Senses

Appendice

Prologue: A Star Falls – Or, Did It Jump?

Waves meet shore in crashing arcs of seafoam and salt-spray, thunderous, murky waters; whitecaps reach their peaks and pull back, incessant cacophonies of natural rhythm that dash sand along the cliff-faces and up onto freshly-formed beaches. Thin clumps of straggling bush and browning seaweed adorn like snow on mountaincaps, press into thinly weathered stone as it cracks.

Perched, teetering and high atop these shoals and the criss-crossing chunks of rock and rubble grey-red like the thick daub-streaks of a painting, is a village. It might be considered a town at this point, as hovering on the outskirts of market-stalls pressed inland by dark wooden-roofed houses is the sprawl of a university campus– brick-laid and grassy lawns, though with the kind of flora inhabiting the coastline the yards lay more moss than green– but there hitches a smattering of unrest between the village people and the scholars at the university's insistent presence, and with the burr-like growth of its grey walls came a wave of refusal to accept the change of status.

In their words: the village had been a village for hundreds of years before the university had planted itself inland by them and built up a crowd of people at the edges they considered quite haughty, well-learned and looking down their pointed noses at those who lived their humble lives as cattle-hands and farm workers. Many indeed had been personally insulted, mocked or spit upon by those in ruffled collars with book-bags and quills all wrapped up in their pale hands, simply for not having been born of wealth. It was an interesting dichotomy to be seen from the outside, parasite to prey, because of course these scholars could not survive without the town's goods and trade-hub network to lean on; the village-people knew this, as did the university, but only one took its acknowledgements in stride and did not sneer at them.

So, in due fairness: the village-people did not like the university, nor the people it brought with them, and they made this very, very obvious at any opportune time. The village had been a village for hundreds of years, and by this they were ensuring that it stayed that way.

In such a village, map-marked and built so long ago above the constant roar of the ocean and having laid mostly-stagnant since, people grow used to the groan of root to tree during a

cloud-churning storm, or the rubble-crash echo of a heaving boulder making its rushed way down to the water's edge, cutting a path of sable and shale brought up to be crushed in its wake. Monsoon whips land and cracks branch, houses cry and shift as easy as the canes of sugar or long-grass peppering the fields which ring the forests. The decibel of it all becomes a simple form of background noise, same as a bird's conversation from branch to branch or a cicada's off-tune strumming that fades out the longer it's listened to, and people as they live there tend to grow a tolerance.

Doctors at the time would dismiss this as a common occurrence and nothing to be worried about; though in the modern world, many might say all of the village-people had gone just a little bit… deaf.

Whatever it is, be it deafness or tolerance: when a star falls, for a while no-one notices.

Middle-of-the-night, when even the sheep sleep in the fields and the only things awake are creatures laying shrouded six-limbed in pools of grass and fungus, it divulges from its home lodged into the velvet-crushed night sky like a sliver of fractured diamond, glittering glass spilled across void, endless. Descent cuts a whistling teakettle arc of white and orange blurred together into a gleaming streak, speed amping and peaking until it meets the coastline's long stroke in a shuddering, booming kiss; in a mimicry of a flower's bloom, sand and stone fly outwards in a scattered ring of dust and from the newly-carved hole rises, slowly, a wavering trail pencilling off-grey smoke into the air, leading right back up to from where the star came until it loses sight.

While it lays in its still-burning crater, soft and limp like a babe in its cradle, this being glows so bright and at such a magnitude that, later, if a village-person were awake at the time they might wonder if there was a blaze struck secretive along the seaside in the night and then extinguished, quick as it came.

Cold seawater floods, half-bubbling, into the carved crescent where it splays. Green-white cloud and sticky-residue foam presses to gangly limbs and glowing brilliance, incomprehensibly gorgeous. If for some reason a painter were to attempt its portrait, he might end up with a muddied white stricken over orange and royal purple smear, a feeble image of

what he sees with his too-simple eye at the moment, but upon closer inspection by any other it would be entirely different to each offered person; the human mind can only comprehend so much before it must take great lengths to keep itself unfractured, and one of these lengths tends to be the complete disregard of something if it strays into a territory of unfathomability.

It should, by all means, be panicked. Frantic. Terrified, alone with the hissing of the ocean and the empty sky; but for the moment, the off-blue of the ocean curls over it in waves like a blanket, and for the moment, it simply rests.

Chapter One: Anything Can Be a Human Child

Slowly, night sky meanders away in gentle royal-blue streaks and makes way for the warmth of sunrise, the spill of burning orange into white over the horizon. Water slips away slowly as the tide regresses in favour of the moon's gentle smile, retreats back into itself and leaves the star drying quietly in the budding gleam of the sun like a shining-scaled fish washed ashore.

In the morning-wet air, cool and dew-misted and still smelling of the night before, there sounds a crunching. It's rhythmic, one-step two-step, and tramping along without care for the noise it makes. It takes a bit, but after a long stretch of moments: a village-woman peers over the wave-shorn cliffside.

Her face is pulled taut and folding over itself, tan like leather and deepened kindly with age. Hair falls in a frizzy grey-white braid that drips from the base of her neck to just past her

elbow, years of growth all knotted together with her aching fingers. She hasn't anyone to do it for her, anymore, but in her old age her joints just don't quite cooperate as well as they should so it's not very sturdy, though still it gets the job done.

From her rough-rock vantage point she spots the star, gasps a quick breath, and with the canvas fabric of her skirts all clutched up in her hands and no hesitation whatsoever she begins the treacherous descent onto the soft swells of beach. Over roots that knob up and try to grab her boots, over peels and slivers of cliff-face that pull off of each other and send her slipping and flailing, she rushes; with the speed she's taken up, it's surely more dangerous, but she doesn't seem to care as she nearly flies the last few feet and tumbles, panting creakily, onto the dunes.

"Oh, dear me," The woman croaks once she's caught herself back up, the tense-pulled lines of her back aching as she sets herself upright into a stand. Upon further inspection, she's got a polished wooden cane tucked crookedly into the tie of her apron, and she fishes it out to lean upon as she hobbles urgently over broken shell and sea-foam in clumps to the crater that still wafts gentle blips of smoke.

This woman goes by the name Mrs. Jane Mary-Ellen Ardall, known in the village simply as Mrs. Ardall, or perhaps Jane by those whom she was close with before she married. She is known as a gentle, mellow person to anyone who speaks with her often and even those who don't, and she takes it upon her mind easily that she's quite humble, working day-in at her bakery kneading loaves and mixing batter before retreating to the home she's carved out in the space above it.

"Are you alright, child?" Jane calls, voice thin with exertion as she picks her way towards the crater. It barely carries, but still the star stirs; the crow of her voice is a new sound, a noise not that of the tittering constellations nor the bright face of the moon, scratchier than the whispering of the clouds but gentler than the sun's unforgiving hum as She watches. Reedy and almost-high, like the whistling of comets on their paths, but the tune was so self-preserved in comparison to the abandon they struck that it was simply too jarring to ignore.

Eventually it rises into a curled sit, pulling up from its bed of sand into a languid stretch not unlike how the scruffy cats around the village would whenever caught in a sunbeam, body all one line, extending fluid and smooth. Looks around like one, too: takes in

sky-dashed-with-cloud, never-ending-sea, only barely moving. It could be easily equated to a wild animal, Jane thinks.

"Are you alright, child?" Jane asks once more, softer this time, like someone would in the firelight to a stray, holding out a sliver of meat or crust of bread. Its head darts up, hitches to meet her gaze, and she stutter-stops the slow approach she'd been making, settles back into a hunched stand to watch it. *Not a threat,* she tries to project with the curve of her shoulders and the line of her smile: *safe, harmless.*

It simply stares at her for a while: long enough that Jane takes into consideration that it may have no idea what she's saying, but in spite of that there's an expression past its unreadability– a look, paper-thin, of curiosity. Of interest. It's a small hope, but it's there nonetheless.

"Child?" It asks eventually, against the crash of the waves. Jane nearly startles and then strains forward to hear its voice, so small and gentle against the water's rush as if it hasn't yet learnt quite how to speak: it's a small miracle it can respond, Jane's sure. She takes it at face value with no little amount of relief. "I am no child."

"What-ever do you mean? You must be," Jane replies quickly, with not a small amount of surprise at the ease of which that had come out of it. Of course it must be a child: after all, what else could it be?

Now, Jane is a smart woman. Not professionally educated, perhaps, but she considers herself well-learned, and with her heightening age comes yet more wisdom as it often does. She's the person to call upon if a village-person has a question about their farm animal's ailment or how long it might take for their dying crop to right itself, or how to make bread-batter that didn't fall flat and sad in their tins; and she had, in secret, learnt to read from the soft words of her mother so long ago, and had taken it with her pressed close to her heart ever since. It was a treasured memory of hers, though more and more children around were slowly picking the skill up, of which she was glad.

This is to say: Jane is still, in the end, human. And, as was established previously, human bodies and minds just simply aren't *made* to comprehend some things. Think of it as a universal

failsafe, one which will flip on whenever the human eye or brain lays upon something it never was supposed to know existed: it will jump away from the true revelation to the easiest-known conclusion, the synapse of which may or may not be even remotely correct, but will be *right*. It will be such a blatantly human solution, so obviously sub-macrocosm, that the connections made in the human's mind will be indisputably the answer to them despite any and all evidence to the contrary.

So, looking down upon the tiniest part of the cosmos laying in a still-bleeding crater in front of her, Jane comes to the most obvious conclusion:

It *must* be a child.

A lost child, at that, because what kind of child insisted that it wasn't one? Traumatised, perhaps, convincing itself in a desperate bid to distance itself from whatever had happened that it was not what the truth whispered to it. Jane wilts a little, lines smoothing into half-arcs, and crouches to level with the star before her.

“Where are your parents?” She asks, tentative. At the position she's settled into, albeit not without the groan of protest from her old bones, she's about eye-to-eye with the skittish not-child. It makes her feel a little like she's the trapped animal rather than it, with the way it looks at her: keenly, peeringly, like she's a new and interesting specimen caught in a child's firefly-jar, grubby fingers wrapping twine over the lid. Rather unsettling, she decides. Poor, poor fireflies.

“Parents? I do not have *parents*.” It scoffs, matter-of-fact. Jane blinks, slowly, and turns that over in her head within the time it takes for another wave to roust itself into motion and crash flood-like into the shallow half-sphere clawed into the sand. No parents, apparently, obviously a stray to some extent; no-one in the village really wants another child, she knows this for certain. All of the sweet home-mothers and midwives confide in her to some degree: Mrs. Tatum-Hill's fifth was born into death, and Missus Holly and Brown already have called upon Jane's assistance in watching their rowdy younger ones, not to mention Mrs. Baronnette's expectancy…

Borne from those secretive whispers and tearful pleas, she finds that she just cannot bear to push that kind of burden onto their shoulders. She isn't that kind of person, she doesn't think, childless as she might be she isn't at all bitter.

“Well,” Jane says after a moment, wondering dimly to herself how one exactly goes about adopting a child, “Alright then, not-child with no parents. You’re going to catch cold out here.”

“Catch cold,” It says, consideringly. The icicle-sharp child's gaze refuses to relent, a needle-prick blanket through the skin of her cheeks as it tilts its head up at her. She does not grimace, does not make a face down at the little star, but it’s quite a close thing.

“Yes. After all, you aren’t wearing anything, and I’m sure the water is quite chilly.” Jane gestures with a worn hand at its general nakedness and the stance in which it's taken, peppered with salt-spray in light-catching smatterings of droplet and all curled up, bony-like, in the sand. Without change, it simply looks at her for a long moment, and she inhales against a sigh at the expected indifference. Surely it's at least a little uncomfortable, sitting on the ground without anything to cover it, but if it is there's no sign to grasp.

“I think I might have something in your size, if you’d come with to find it. You can't think it's alright to go around with nothing on.” She continues after, steadily, it does not respond.

“Why not?” It asks.

Jane balks for a long moment, a blink-space all stretching taffy-strung with confusion and, adamantly and making itself quite clear in the forefront, horror. *Oh, the poor thing hasn't had anyone to teach it a lick about the world,* she thinks imploringly at herself, *oh, Jane, you* must *take it in.*

“It's unbecoming,” She settles on. The star nods like a child to a school-teacher: more of an acknowledgement that she had spoken, rather than any sign of understanding. Jane does not sigh again, because sighing that often would probably imply she had a sighing disorder of some sort, but she does puff out a bit of air from her nose in a vague mimicry of one.

“Unbecoming,” The star says after a blink, standing spindly and slow from its crater so it might long-limb over to Jane, a movement that impresses in her thoughts the image of a fawn, “Alright.”

Jane wraps its frame in the thick fleece-weave of her cloak which she had hung about her shoulders, warmed with the heat of her body, stitched on the inside with thick woollen fluff that

the star seems to enjoy– or, at least, find an interest in. It seems it cannot help but fidget with it, running thin fingers through its tangles and rubbing it between its palms in an on-off pattern, almost absent-minded. Jane watches it from the corner of her eye as they ascend the cliff in fleeting head-turns: it slips easy up the rock-face with an odd off-gait that implies a strange lack of tether to the earth, while she stumbles along in tandem. Pebbles come loose easy beneath her boots and its bare feet and tumble, skittering, down the crushed-path behind them.

The village is still under the fog of sleep when they breach the cluster of houses looming picket-y in a mockery of an entranceway arch. Black-rooved, they leer, wooden shingles overlapping, made of the trees that grow knobby all dripping and gnarled off of cliff-side and shale; roots barely clinging, playing at burnt and shrivelled in the sun.

When, so long ago, the village was still fresh and baby-faced and the elden townspeople were making an attempt to feel out where everything was meant to fit, not once did they consider the population's growth as an implicitly *important* factor. They took into account the quietly-crumbling stone of the cliffside and the forest's cut-back boundaries, where creeks might cut in years' time, but never did they assume that their numbers would grow to an extent they couldn't control.

While the easy-faces of the foundational buildings remained the same, any newer building was out of necessity built crammed tight and messy into the spaces left behind or atop of one another like discarded blocks into a toy box. In a few places, Jane's path would take the two of them under a pile of house all flimsy and towering like cards that, for some defiance of the law of nature, had bent over and simply been reinforced with more wood along the hull of it, like the stringing-weave of a spider-web was holding it aloft rather than nail and beam. Upon squinting, Jane could just barely see someone had set hooks into its grain and hung a clothesline.

Around the ring of the town square, from which the buildings distill outwards into houses and shops, Jane takes the star's hand. Even while the sun steadily ladders up into the sky, the tiny thing walking next to her nearly glows against the dusk-grime of its backdrop, the closed shutters and the cold sprawl of paving-stones, cobble rough against its feet. She can't help but wonder if it had even been in a village before: with the way it looked all around, bouncing each step like it was a blink away from spinning circles to take everything in, she presumed easily that it hadn't.

Down alleys, the star peers all light-foot and secretive: a chapel, gold glimmering high and perched upon its steeple, crates and cloth piled over by market-stalls yet to open, the white-stone walls all blurred by the morning fog and the flat-footed pace which Jane was keeping.

They stop, two-wide, at the arch of a squat village shop, tucked into the back of a thin passage upon which every other building houses a shop of a different calibre. Two beams, at a diagonal, meet in an A-frame above their heads layered by the red-white-striped cloth of the awning. It's rather tiny; the door sits at ducking-height were any of its visitors taller than Jane, and as it is she's nearly pushing it.

Now: Mrs. Ardall was, by trade, a baker. She worked quite often at the wood of her countertop, bowls and pins and tin-iron pans and such all dusted with flour she got from the market; the grain-monger was quite sweet on her after her delivery of their youngest, and as such she got it at a hefty discount, one she'd humbly taken to pretending went unnoticed. As it was, the entire bottom floor of her house functioned as a little bake-shoppe; pastries mainly but also loaves of sourdough and imported grain, and on occasion a charcuterie-board comprised entirely of fudge if she was feeling especially fancy. Once the day was done, she would allow herself to retreat upstairs into the top-floor of living-quarters, befitted to house one person and no more. She'd have to fix that, sometime.

Jane leads them in without preamble, and the star looks around with the same attitude it's given everything else: awe, soaking it all in with the interest of a newborn babe, hanging off her hand with easy strides to take the bakery in. She's got a loaf sitting out to cool, nestled on the rack next to a pie, chocolate-chunk and rhubarb respectively and you might not think it but the smells do quite well together. A few tables are scattered, custom-commissioned from the woodworker at the end of the town square and draped in red-chequered tablecloths. Most of the sconces are empty, only those back by the kitchen and her workspace flickering jolly in the wind that comes through the door alongside the two of them.

"Are you hungry?" Jane asks, bustling across the wood-boards to stand at the knoll doorway to the stairwell, up which lies her living-space. The star blinks at her for a moment, feeling out the terminology with clumsy fingers, wood-carving smooth.

Stars, of course, do not feel hunger; they were simply not built to feel it, as is the same with many other emotions, many other experiences which are reserved to those corporeal and simple. Only the black holes, all-encompassing and ravenous with their curse, even know what it is like– to hunger. To yearn, to want; that is the fate of a deadened, collapsed being, doomed for destruction. That is not what any star wants. Yet humans take this twisted thing, this horrible unholy mockery of love like teeth in flesh and bone, and they hold it in their gentle hands and take it with them on their journey as easy as a glove to a hand– they do not know of its terrible glory, instead simply offer food, offer drink, like a child they must hold the hand of.

“I don't know,” The star says, after a while. Jane had paused at the arch of the doorway while it contemplated, but now she moves back into the step-parse of action: lighting sconces, brightening the interior of the shop in preparation for its early morning customers as they begin to wake in the houses around them. She isn't planning on taking the day off simply because of a new, albeit unexpected child,

though she does at the very least *consider* it for a few paces before completely dismissing the idea once she gets to the second pan of cookies she’d have nothing to do with.

“Well, help yourself to anything out there, yes? I’ll go grab you a change of clothes. I’m sure I've got something.” Jane says easily, already disappearing into the darkness of the hallway, tramping sole-on-wood in a quite creaky rendition that fades out as she goes. The star stares after her, before turning once more to what she'd referred to as ‘anything out there’.

The pie is the most interesting-looking thing out of the bunch. It's never eaten human food before: does all of it look so brightly-coloured and wonderful? It's unsure. The crust is woven, it seems, like a sweater and it's all browned on the top, dabbling into lighter spools further down. It's the filling that really caught its eye, though; bright pink and a bit lumpy, it smells like tang and hot and yummy.

It hits its second hurdle quickly, after having decided upon which ‘something’ to eat. Sure, consumption comes easy to humans like a fish to water and fin-motion dart of prey, but it is still not human. It is still a star, and a rather bad one at that, considering how guilty it feels it should feel, and how guilty it in turn isn't feeling at all. And the pie, sitting tantalisingly on the counter it's sat down upon for better access, does in fact look *delectable*.

One small issue: the star still doesn't know how to eat.

“Oh, do you want pie?” Jane asks from behind the counter, having come to it similarly to an apparition with the sheer silence and speed of her movements. It hadn't heard her trundle back down the creaky old sonnet-singing stairs, nor walk across the floorboards towards it, though that might have simply been how immersed it was in the beauty of tart filling and crispy dough. It pulls away to peer up at her.

“How do you eat?” It asks, bluntly.

Jane blinks at it slowly, quietly reconsidering the acquisition of a child.

“What… exactly do you mean, how do you eat?” She asks, a touch confounded at the tiny thing all rabbit-perched on the mellowed wood of the countertop, hunched over the pie like a goblin of some kind with its hoard.

“I mean: how do you eat?” It asks again, and then clarifies to no clarification whatsoever, “I want to eat this pie, but I don't know how.”

“Well, you– you take a bit of pie on your fork, and you put it in your mouth,” Jane says slowly, shifting to have one hand free of the brown-white pile of cloth she's returned with and gesturing as if to show it what she's explaining. Presumably, what she's got under her arm are its clothes, though how size-accurate they are is up to chance. “And you eat it. You chew it, and you eat it.”

“Hm.” The star looks down at the pie again. Jane, a bit hurriedly with the sudden worry of a parent with a child who's particularly prone to sticking their extremities into piping-hot pies and injuring themselves, turns to get it a fork. It takes it like one might a butcher's knife, holds it out for inspection between two fingers.

“I use this to eat?” It dangles it a little, watches the candle-light catch on gold and engraved detailing. It seems pretty, far too pretty to do such a thing as *eat* with. Jane nods, though, gestures encouragingly with the clothing-lump, so it sticks it into the middle of the pie and takes a chunk out, watching the steam of it dance into the air for a tick before shoving the entire mass of it into its mouth.

A pause, stagnant silence in the kitchen like a dropped rolling-pin. Jane has gone from amused to mildly horrified, brows furrowed, fighting to keep her mouth closed through sheer

willpower alone. Her jaw is fighting to drop open, anyway. In front of her, the goblin perched on her countertop stops chewing, turns slowly to look at her.

“It hurts,” The star says, around the mouthful. Puffs of steam come out alongside its words, a testament to the pie's status as freshly-baked. “Should it hurt?”

“No, dear,” Jane says, strained. “It's actually… it's quite hot. I think you've burnt yourself.”

“Oh.”

Chapter Two: A Total Eclipse of the Heart

"So," Jane says, after the star's mouth has been thoroughly rinsed out and held together with cold water and it's let a sliver of ice sit and melt along its tongue, "Whatever happened to your parents?"

"I don't have parents," The star says once more, though it comes out a bit messy and watery this time around the edges of the ice as it slowly slips away. It gives her a look of mild contempt, as if this is an insane and personal question that she's asking, and not the complete other way around. "Like I said. Stars don't have parents, of course."

"Stars…?" Jane's caught mid-turn to hand it its clothing and questioningly peers at it, rather disbelievingly at that. "What does this have to do with them, of all things?"

"Well, I'm a star," The star says, matter-of-fact. This is said like it's a teaching of life, and that Jane should see it easily and with quick acceptance. It, surely, believes it: after all, it *is* one.

Instead of agreeing, though– Jane, slowly as if to prove a point, gives it a once-over, and then chuckles a little, shakes her head.

In many tales such as this, the body of character is met with a general consensus of Christianity, or at the very least some worldly religion centred around God and Jesus and whatnot. This is, by all means, overused and quite a boring concept, one which adds no flavour to the story aside from the bland and vaguely distressing mush of colonialism and centrifuge-like power vacuums; yes, it says, in this story the Europeans in fact have done their terrible things and plundered and spread their religion like disease by force, but look! We have a pretty, shiny dragon, or a maiden in need of saving, or even both as a treat, so of course all is well!

No, there is none of that in this story: in this little village, yew-roof on the chapel, they worship the universe itself.

Their centrepiece, the weather-vane and golden portrait-paint on the wall of every home, is the sun. This, of course, comes as the least of a shock; she is the bringer of food, of harvest and warmth, of grain and lifeblood. She coaxes the cattle out in the morning to greet her with their faces turned into her smiling rays, she grows the grass beneath their feet and gently wakes

the farmers with a brush dappled warm and springlike over their cheeks. When angered, she withers the crops, burns stone and melts wood to ash; this, though only comes if someone has done a terrible thing by her light, and this comes so rarely that only the oldest of the village-elders even remember the heat of her wrath. She has been, steady, above the humans since the beginning of the world, and far before then too.

Her lover is, generally, accepted to be her inverse: the moon. Their tale is, of course, one of tragedy; she comes out at night, glowing and beaming in a cool distinction from the sun's warmth, but she smiles sadly all the same. It's said that a long, long time ago, they had been together, moon in front of sun in such a beautiful display that anyone who saw it lost their vision from the easy and pure love emitted outwards from their embrace. It is seen as the simplest form of love, the way the sun loves the moon and vice versa: but in their unity came the destruction of their world, forests withering and coming alight with fireflies in the day-turned-night amalgamated, and they, for the betterment of humankind, were forced to separate.

And so they follow each other, forevermore hand-held-behind, across the sky– the birds sing the songs of the moon to the sun when they awake, and in turn the crickets play the sun's gentle warbling to the moon at night, a lullaby old as time. Sometimes, so, so rarely, they will fall upon each other once more; but now, they know better, and it lasts never long enough. Jane herself has seen two of these meetings in her lifetime, has missed a few more, and treats the memories' hazy colour with a soft reverence.

The stars, as it is said, stand balance between the two: they are heralds, pastors, believers. They stick around long enough in the daylight to pass message between the two lovers, though for what intents is unknown for yet. Perhaps they are trying to get them back together, to embrace once more in their light; perhaps, they are warning them away from one another, twisting the words of the light into snakeshift-gentle lies. It's an unclear boundary, and a few sects of the ancient Saros-Eclipses Church stray to one or the other side of the scale, while most hover in the grey area in-between where the general agreement is to treat them with kindness and hope they don't do anything rash.

Jane's sect of the Church is one of the looser ones: un-puritan, there is no strict guidance of worship or offering, just the gentle hand of encouragement and the glow in the eyes of children looking up at the glass-blown lanterns in the church's walls. In that stands another

difference: there is no distinct *evil*, in Sarosisc scripture. The Christians and Protestants and Catholics preach of hell and ash and everlasting flame, and in that they cast the warped shadows of their enemies to blame and mock as if righteous; if there is such anger in the village, it is a humanly trait, and is treated as such. Enemies of the flesh are not those of the universe, and vice versa.

This, of course, circles easy and snug right back around: Jane is human. Humanly human, that is, to its greatest extent, and while her mind is stronger than most she still simply can't comprehend the scruffy little child in front of her as one of the columns of her village's religion. So she tuts quietly beneath the whisper of her breath, pats it on the shoulder sympathetically.

"No, of course you're not. Sweet thing, you're as human as I am. Can't you see?"

The star, stubbornly, shakes its head insistently. She's being unreasonable, it's sure. It has nothing against humans, but of course it isn't one either; she just can't see it, somehow. Why can't she see it, when its palms glow with the freckling of stars and its knees burn with galaxies?

"What happened to your parents? Do you remember?" Jane asks, and her voice has softened like butter, gentle to almost a fault, serrated on its insides. It grimaces– it's not traumatised, not an amnesiac, it's something that she doesn't believe and yet worships all the same. Irony is the word for it, it's pretty sure.

"Stars don't have parents," It says again. "I fell from the night sky, and I landed here. There was no parentage involved."

Jane is beginning to believe, worryingly, that the child she made the split-second decision to take under her cloak and into the warmth of her home is certifiably insane. Maybe it *had* fallen– from the cliff, perhaps, and hit its head on the rocks along the way. That would explain the delusions, but of course it wasn't acting like it had been knocked around stone-like, so she couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was just born like this, and that was why it was so insistent that it didn't have parents; maybe they simply couldn't bear keeping it, raising it. That was alright, though, Jane decided, because *she* could.

"Do you have a name, then, if you don't have parents?" She asks, and finally turns to hand it the clothing she'd been holding like a bundle of rags in her hands, burlap-rough and

hand-stitched, probably too big considering the knobs and divots of the little thing now sat in front of her at the counter rather than on top of it.

“No. Stars get a name when they're fully matured– I’m only a nebula, now. I don't get one yet.” It takes the clothing, looks it all over, the lumps and crosses of thread. It's a beige shirt, pants similar in texture to a potato sack, and a pair of socks; the basics, not that it's too well-versed in human clothing, considering stars’ total lack of need for it.

“Hm,” Jane says, a touch weakly. “Well, then. How do you feel about me giving you a name?”

The star pulls away from its observation of Jane's sewing skills to look at her the same way one would at a school-teacher asking a question they had no answer to; apprehension, tensed silence like a string waiting twang-tight ready to snap. Jane tries to give it a comforting smile, pulls off some kind of wince rather around the range of uncomfortable to flat-out anxious.

“Why?” It asks, after a moment. It doesn't come out particularly distrusting, but there's an undertone there– something, something there rushing right below the water's glass surface. Jane blinks a little.

“Well, I’ll be taking you in, and everyone will want to know your name. Should they just call you ‘Mrs. Ardall's child’? No, I think not. So you need a name,” She says, sounding quite a bit more sure of herself than she's really feeling at the moment. The star takes a breath-space to mull it over, rubbing the fabric rough and sandpaper-slithery through its hands as it does, but eventually– it turns back, nods once.

“I don't know how humans name themselves,” It says quickly, as if trying to make sure she’s listening, “I don't know what kind of name I’d like, either.”

“That's alright.” Jane smiles again, and it works out this time, she's pretty sure. “I’ve got ideas. How about Cyrus?”

“No.” It says immediately, nearly sharp with the freight of it. “No. Not that one. I don't like that one, I can tell.”

“Alright, then. Conrad? Silas?”

She's pulling out names quick, easy, like they've sat in her mind and grown there, moss to the shale-flakes of a rock all dug-in and dry. The star shakes its head at each, though, even lets the clothing fall heap-ish onto the counter to cross its arms over its chest just to make sure the

message gets across clear. Each name doesn't— *feel* right, like it's simply for someone else, not something for it to wear.

"Mm. Ollie? Or, *oh*– Hester?"

Side-to-side, the axis of its head rocks, until the last one freezes it– rabbit to hunter, it stares at her for a blink, a click inside of its chest and a name, a name– it likes the name. Likes it, likes it a *lot*, especially put up against the distaste that the others' letters brought with them. Hester. Hester… yes, that one, it decides: it will be named Hester.

"I like that one. Hester." It says, and nods quite firmly, all adult-serious. Jane laughs, rhubarb-sweet with smiling-bright eyes, and nods agreeably.

"Well, that settles it," She says, rather delightedly, and she reaches out with her worn hands to take its thin-strung ones in her palms, hoists them up a bit in an imitation of a cheer: "Hello there, Hester Ardall!"

Chapter Three: No One Likes Fourth Grade

Jane stays true to her word.

Not to say that it assumed she wouldn't: she's an honest woman, one actually quite well-known as one of the most reliable around. It's just done so remarkably, her word's following– by noon the town's set alight with the new information, and Hester's already been clothed in rough-thin beige and then immediately carted out to be introduced face-to-face to what *surely* isn't the normal amount of people who decide to visit Jane's bake-shop at this hour. They simply keep coming, a silver-minnow stream of them through the door and ringing chime-light on the bell, wrapping in a line into the tuck of the porch.

It's gotten so crowded that people have taken to, when they can't get in at once, also leaving packages and gifts on the throw-rugs and rocking chairs scattered around Jane's doorway, which of course immediately is crowded with string and burlap tied into messy bows, bags and sacks and letters. Hester receives no less than three old sweaters, one of which is far too small to reasonably fit it; a wicker-woven basket filled up to the edges with children's toys which Jane takes one good look at and says immediately and without question that she'll bring to Missus Brown; a mildly sunken-in loaf of sourdough bread and a chunk of white-yellow-ish cheese still wrapped in cheesecloth that it hands over to Jane yet again; and a pair of well-worn, though still properly fitted, boots.

It's quite appreciative of the boots, actually. They're a nice, starchy leather, pulled together at the front with thick shoestring and knotted into a bow; the soles are soft on the wood, near-quiet, especially stark against the din.

"Oh, what a sweet thing you are!" The woman who had wandered over from one of the squat little houses across the street crows at him, reaching out with bony-like fingers to pinch its cheek between thumb and fore and pull it around a little. Her name is Mrs. Baker, Hester's nearly certain, because Jane had said it in a certain way when she'd walked through the door to the jaunty tune of the bell-chime.

It's a rather ironic name for her to have, considering that Jane had muttered scrupulously under her breath that she was a seamstress, and her husband a carpenter. “Such precious eyes, Mrs. Ardall! You've really gotten lucky this time!”

Hester wasn't actually aware that it had eyes, to be honest, much less that they were ‘precious’. Precious implied gemstone, or gold, or whatever else kind of glittery, shiny thing the humans liked to hoard all crow-like. Precious implied that humans– *people*– might want its eyes, and it would quite rather keep them, thanks.

Mrs. Baker *does* look like the type to snatch eyes. It blinks very hard, just to make sure she hasn't grabbed them.

Immediately after it about-faces to peer back up at Jane, angled from its guard-position beside and a tad in front of her, one hand slipped loose around her palm. She looks kind of like she's bitten her tongue really hard, except she’s also trying to be polite about it. It isn't really working, honestly. Actually– it kind of looks like she just doesn't like Mrs. Baker, Hester ponders.

It pulls its head around once more to look up at the other woman, harder this time, with a squint. Her hair's very frizzy, brown like a mouse with streaks of grey all peppered in and fanning out in a bulb around her face. She's smiling at Jane, but there’s too many teeth all yellow and straight, and the curve of it doesn't seem very genuine at all. It makes Hester's gut twinge like it dislikes her, just a little bit.

“Aren't they just?” Jane responds after a too-long pause, a bit tight, a bit sharp. Hester pretends staunchly that it doesn't notice the grip she's suddenly pulled around its hand, like a vice, tight and choking.

This constant overflow continues with many, many, *many* people. It begins with Mrs. Baker's husband, a rather pleasant man compared to his wife but still overall not a joy to spend too much time around; the group of women boarding together down the alleyway titter and also pinch its cheek around in a way that, impressively, make it feel far less uncomfortable than the seamstress did; and, most notably, the head of the school-house. The latter stops by with a soft greeting, golden-slick hair pulled back and set stark against the quietly glowing orange of the sky through the door's little window.

She has apparently just dipped into the shop to check in on Jane and how she's faring with the newly-booming attention all falling on her and the new child, but also to ensure that she enrolls Hester into schooling as soon as possible. Together, they have a lengthy ping-pong debate about Hester's age, both choosing very directly to ignore it when it tries to inform them that, in relative terms, its age would sit somewhere between two and three hundred years; eventually, they come to a shaky and not factual at all agreement, which is decided to be ‘about ten’.

This lands it in fourth grade, Mrs Brooke-Wick says, and very nearly the second that the words slip from her mouth it comes to its own decision quickly that it rather doesn't want to be in whatever ‘fourth grade’ is, but Jane looks quite pleased at the information so it does at least abstain from the verbal complaints for the moment.

When the day finally fades completely into dusk and then twilight, the gentle darkness Hester's so accustomed to, Jane leads it up the creaky, thudding stairs that sit shoulder-squeeze thin in a passageway unfit for Jane's height and settles it down on her bed. It's a cot, really; all it has is a rough off-white sheet, a matching pillow and a thin brown-wool blanket, positioned right under the cracked-open window to get at least a tiny bit of airflow. It's feeble against the stale, near-oppressive weight of the attic's stuffiness, but it's doing its best despite.

“You must be tired,” Jane says, quietly. She's dressed in a night-gown now, a thin-pale thing with a buffer of crinkled ruffles hemming the bottom of it, resting almost at her ankles. A flash of gold around her neck while she turns pulls attention; she's got a sun pendant, and in the moonlight it catches and sparkles, draws Hester's eye like a beacon. “That was a lot to take in, I’m sure.”

“Yes.” It says, equally soft, as if the air itself is keeping the sound in its lungs from fully escaping. An inhale and the wood smells mellow, sliced-through with a gentle acidic tang of stain, and it lays unmoving where it's pressed into his nose. “It was. I liked Mrs. Holly, though. She was kind.”

“She is kind,” Jane agrees. She isn't facing it while she talks; she's doing something on her nightstand, something shaky and gentle with her hands hidden in the cast of light in front of her. It doesn't peek. “You’ll be going to school next month if all goes well, Mrs. Brooke-Wick says. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Mm.” It says, and gingerly pulls its back onto the mattress, listens to the dry-straw all stuffed in it crunch with the movement. Jane falls silent, simply listening to the sounds of it trying to get comfortable while she does what-ever she's doing, shifting and wriggling hooked-worm for a bit before it finds a position that’s relatively nice to sleep in and stills. The blanket's gotten a little wrapped around its leg with all of the movement, but it's too much effort to get untangled, so it lets it be.

The last thing that it sees before sleep pulls it into waltz is Jane hovering over it, a little smile soft and secretive as her hands come up to tuck it in.

–

There is a star missing from the night sky, but still life continues on.

A month or so into its time under her care Jane guides Hester across the cobble-square path through town to the school-house's stout and bell-adorned roof, hand-in-hand, and it is led into a classroom of gangly boys and too-loud words, which is apparently what they meant by ‘fourth grade’. It does not like them all that much, and they in turn don't care for it at all; it's mocked, mainly, because the lot of them all farm-tanned and spitting must assert somehow that they're the leaders, the strongest ones in the room at all times. It's an animalistic instinct, Hester observes quietly, like those of rabid dogs or especially territorial sea life, razor-tooth and fin.

In school it learns of math, of reading and writing, but also of survival. Cut firewood thin, keep it dry and out-of-sight; always drink running water, rather than still. It’s all rather simplified, but it takes a while for the other students to grasp it anyways. And, of course, they catch onto it when they see just how quickly it understands; call it names, sneer and leer with broken teeth and wild eyes.

So: in school, it learns of survival. It learns to keep its head down, look unassuming and bored for hours rather than keeping head-straight attention. It learns to smile with its lips pressed to one another, no teeth, no threats. It learns to be invisible; and where stars glow brilliant pinpricks in the night sky, it instead sits in a dusty classroom and pretends it isn't there at all.

As it had been for a long time and would for a long time more, winter comes, a trickle and then a full-on storm of it in gale and frigid snow. The sun flits and dances and leaves the sky a dull grey like smoke, garnished with the white of cloud and snow threatening embankment; farm-animals are herded hurriedly into the warmth of their pastures, fires are sparked in chimney and blankets piled atop beds. The temperature drops quick in a spike like the icicles that decorate each awning, and Jane has to scramble to find Hester a coat and pair of warm mittens so that it doesn't freeze stiff on its morning commute.

After school one day, Jane takes its hand from the path to her bake-shoppe and leads it instead through the town-square, where the village people have a bonfire all set up in the middle, ringed by paving-stones. The flames lick up towards the sky like snakes' tongues, tasting and darting back, slashes and curls of heat so brilliantly white; Hester can see small, plump-handed children stretching out skewers of lamb and pig, holding their chapped palms out to siphon warmth.

The two of them stop and stare for a moment at the spectacle. Snow's drifted to lay upon the ground like a thin silk, fine and powdery, broken-up icy by the bootprints of so many people as they went easy upon their day to the market or the shops, but the warmth's melted a thin circle out around the stone-pit where everyone stands.

"I don't think the people in my class like me all that much," Hester confesses quietly, watching as a pair of bundled-thick children dart towards and away from one another like the tides, playing a game of tag that winds around the adults' legs and across the slippery ground. Jane stirs beside it in a little shudder-y motion, though it takes a moment for her to actually speak.

"Why not, honey?" She asks, eventually. Resolutely, Hester continues to watch the two playmates, rather than chance meeting her eye; one is dressed in a blue-ish leather coat and the other in a woolen red, and they're wearing matching purple hats. It's adorable, it thinks, and also blue-coat is currently winning.

"Well," It gives her the same pause, softens into a little entrenched sigh, "I'm different than them. I'm a star– you don't think so, but I am. And I'm not like them. They know it."

“So they don't like you because you're… different?” Jane asks, voice dropped to nearly a hum, cut-out by the wind's whistles tune as it plays with her hair, running its fingers through the drip of curl.

“Mm,” Hester nods. It doesn't know, really, why it's saying anything at all; Jane can't help, it's very aware. She might be a great many things, but above all she is human, and Hester might be young in the face of the sun but it still knows just how much power the humans truly hold against the universe's vast spider-web of neural patchwork. It isn't a lot.

So: she cannot do anything meaningful to make the hatred stop, yet still it finds that the words are out hovering in the frigid air around them, and it doesn't quite recall the thought process behind their spoken existence in the first place. Jane hums back at it; despite the cold, it feels the heat of the bonfire dance over its cheeks from so far away, torching them rosy.

“I'm sorry,” She says after a breath, gently, and the warm press of a hand falls flat and open to rest on the plane of its shoulder. If the burning of its cheeks was mildly uncomfortable, this is the exact-polar opposite of that; the touch makes its chest unclench, somehow, like her simple sympathy was pulling it back together manually, stitched meticulously like the clothing she had given it that first day.

Hester doesn't say anything, but all at once it realises: *oh, so this is why I said anything at all.* The idea of it lingers, sticks to the walls of its head and bubbles up in the burn of its tear ducts just a little, molten like stardust and nebulae; the easy kind of love, radiating off of Jane like firewood-glow but kinder, sweeter.

And isn't it such a human concept, this comfort, the need to lean on one another like this? There's a reason, after all, that each star is a light-year distance from all of the others, yet humans pull themselves together so tight-knit at any opportunity.

“It's alright,” It says, and quietly, it thinks that it means the words.

Chapter Four: Falling – In Both Senses

Growing up different is easy.

This is meant as such: it is easy to survive. It is easy, so, *so* easy, to run from any looming flicker of shadow, and it is easy to avoid conflict and bow your head in deference like the beautiful face of a sunflower, golden and dragged away from the sun. It is easy to do the bare minimum, to not look for enjoyment in the little things, to fall into the loop-stalk of negativity that pulls limb from body and flays mind from reason; it is almost *too* easy, especially for those already predisposed.

The passage of time comes like a river, and it stops for nothing in the way of its constant thunder, simply carves a passage around it channel-carved from riverbank and disrooting the trunks of yew and redwood that grow there, had lived there for years before the water ever even reached them. Growing up is being pulled into the white-caps and under them into the murky silt, pushed along and jarred again and again and again until there is nothing left but the constant movement and the sickness, the exhaustion, that comes with. Growing up different is easy because there is no other option but to be pulled along, dragged into the riverbank, left with an ache that never really goes away.

Hester knows this, now, firsthand.

Every weekend, once the sun has begun to dip beneath the flare-blade of the horizon and the houses cast blue-tinged shadow over the alleys all wrapped and twined between them, he stakes out on the rock-ragged hike up one of the craggy piles of land set right behind the town, bordering it like a miniature mountain complete with a dusting of peaked-snow on particularly chilly days.

He couldn't remember when the tradition started, or why; perhaps when he was still tiny, when he still had these silly child-like ideas about himself and everyone around him, the travel of it and its subsequent solitude had become some kind of escapism. All he could really say was that it had, at some point, started; and that it would probably, at one point or another, stop.

He, of course, not *it*. It was the word that they used as a place-stand definition for the stars, when Hester and Jane went across the town square to church together, knelt in worship in-front of the stained-glass murals. Jane's knees didn't take to it as easily as they used to, so often he came just to help her up and down in case something were to go wrong; the religion in itself was nothing interesting, and the reminder of it more often than not made the pit of his stomach warp and ache uncomfortably all black and broiling; not that he'd ever voice this to Jane, not when she looked up at the depictions of the sun and the moon intertwined in glittering life-size before them with a gaze of such adoration, such reverence that it felt a sin just to try and take that from her.

It was funny, almost, looking back on it. A kind of childish fantasy, of course trauma-induced, ragged with the tears of false memory and torn-raw body. A star, really? That was the best he could come up with, rather than any kind of reasonable explanation for what had truly happened to him when he was at his youngest, his softest? Hilarious, in an off-crude way.

He pulls himself up, body cording with the twist of his arms onto the rock that he'd taken up as his personal seat for each expedition. The outcropping he's perched himself on has been deemed the highest of the three that hover around the village's borders, aside from the one which rests on the coastline's cliff-drop; this one in specificity has been chosen for a reason, and the reason is in the way he leans back, spine-curve pressed to the bite of cold stone like the notches of teeth, and looks up:

The stars lay, like a tapestry, above him. It's almost like a switch-flip, like he's the one hovering thin and weightless and looking down on the spread of them; they stretch to the very edges of his vision, pull at the corners of his eyes, glittering and wide. They're beautiful, even if he doesn't consider them truly familiar anymore– he couldn't imagine being a star, so distant and cold, a constant loneliness that burns like their cores and fuels them. He quite likes being human, he thinks.

From the teachings of the church, strains of choir and speech he's caught echoing off of the carved walls, he can name and point out quite a few: Procyrion most notably, striking orange-brilliant and tinged with red around the edges, and beside it Capella. In the middle of it

all, the moon's blank-pocked face smiles down on him, glowing soft and cold. It reminds him, distantly, of a mother, but fleeting like a dove-feather the feeling of it slips as quickly as it comes.

Hester lays there for a while, just like he does every weekend, until all of the candle-lit windows disappear into the fog of darkness and the stars shine ever-brighter, and he gets that tight feeling in his ribcage like something's pulling on it from the inside, trying to get free. Then, he stands, and under the cover of the night he walks back home.

This, at least, follows quite strictly his standard routine. But today he hasn't yet gotten up when his mind whispers that something's off: he can't pin-point it until, quietly but cresting like the hissing-crash of waves that come from the sand and push up against worn-weathered stone, footsteps off to the right and a bit further down the crest of hill fade into the very edges of his perception.

Although he does consider it for a long, woolen-stretched moment that's punctuated by the gentle croon of crickets and the wind's attunements, in the end he simply doesn’t muster enough interest to actually move, nor enough to pull the burn of his eyes from the expanse hanging above, diorama-perfect and distantly cold. Hester just listens, listens to the footsteps stop abruptly at the sight of him laying, black and splayed on the flat plate of rock; listens as they start up again after the puff of a soft chuckle, and then the shuffling of sole-on-rock as whoever has decided to inhabit his lounging spot takes post next to him and, far less tentatively than expected, sits right down next to him and settles in quite comfortably.

“Hello there,” They say after a moment, sounding soft and somewhat amused, a lilt upwards and quietly-accented vowels. Hester doesn't turn, simply studies the night sky in front of him, like he knows the other is; intrinsic, somehow, a flat line of knowing and awareness that feels odd yet, somehow, right. He has an inkling of why, but larger and more importantly and easily overriding that little twinge, he has no actual idea.

“Hello.” Hester says, despite this. It's only polite; Jane had taught him that much, and all of the sudden he finds himself quite grateful that she did. Absently, his gaze hitches to follow the blooms of grey fogging from his mouth as he speaks, drifting gentle into the air in front of him. “How are you?”

“Alright. Rather cold, actually, and of course a mite surprised that there's someone else here,” The stranger says, and it comes out so easily for them that it’s nearly a shock to consider them something other than, say, a long-time friend– which, in itself as a thought to have it is one of the odder ones Hester recalls, and that's saying something. It's just– there's something there, he can *feel* it– a connection of some kind. “You?”

“Similar. I come up here every weekend, yet I've never seen anyone else around.”

“Ah,” They say, and it's accompanied by a rather peculiar blowing sound, like they're mimicking him and puffing the heat of their breath into the stark cold of the night sky. It takes a bit for them to pull themselves back on track. “Yes. Usually, I come up here at the end of the week, rather than today, but I missed it yesterday so I decided just to come now.”

“Oh,” Hester says. There really isn't much else to say: oh, that makes sense. Alright then. “Well, then. What's your name?”

“Daniel Fairbains, but Danny is fine,” Danny says.

“Hester Ardall. Nice to meet you, Danny.”

–

Hester does not usually have a companion during his weekend-light star-gazing activities.

This is to say: he has no idea how to act around Danny. Sure, he's gone through the grating ordeal of schoolroom bullies and the occasional passers-by on the street who's heard more lies than they ever had truth through the twisting pull of the grapevine, but this instance has cemented itself as completely different from that. It requires a different level of precision, an understanding of other people that Hester is rather sure he does not possess.

Thankfully, Danny makes it easy for him. He's nice to talk to, with a lull to his words, like the rhythmic push of the water; he keeps the conversation going deftly, but still he chances silences and lets words linger in just the right moments. He speaks the same as a symphony, directed by one person alone.

Hester turns, at one point, to talk to him face-in-face. It seems like the right thing to do, because he's sure that's what Danny been doing, with the way his voice shifts from ear-to-front, and–

The world stops for a moment, grating to a halt.

He can hear it, somehow– the sharp drag of stone on rubble, a shuddering intake of air like a gulp that, belatedly, he realises was in fact the sound of him sitting up ramrod-straight. Danny jumps– *Danny* jumps, and in the same frame like an overlay the star, glowing unearthly white-orange tinged with deep hues of blue and green at the edges, jumps too. Hester blinks, looks away, looks back, but it's still there and still looking at him, and he just.

Breaks, for a compressed-short moment, ceramic to the floor and scattering in tile-shards.

Was this how he looked, when Jane first found him? He finds himself thinking, and it comes off half-desperate and rather hysterical, because, in all truth and honesty Danny is one of the most absolutely breathtaking things that Hester's ever seen; stunning, in all senses of the word. And he's– and *it's* a star, which would of course explain the connection between the two of them, except:

Hester isn't a star.

Hester *can't* be a star. He is an odd person, to be fair, different and unique and whatnot, but that's just because… because, when he was younger, something happened. *Something* he can't remember, because it's been written over with falsified, glamourised memory like path-chainmail draped across the real fabric of neuron. Childhood fantasy, that was all it would ever be, and he was as human as humans came.

Now, though, he looks at Danny and the curls of stardust that ream and drift, sparkling in the lowlight and drifting in nonexistent wind from his shoulders in twin scarves, and thinks helplessly: *what if those memories were real?*

–

It takes Hester a while, a long, long while, to accept it. The idea that everything engrained in it from its initiation into the village's hierarchy by everyone around it, including its own mother, was the result of ignorance and oblivious tradition: but Danny takes it through it with the

ease of someone who had done it a million times over, and would do it a million times more. Sometimes, it serves really as the only point of stability in the rock-churn of Hester's tiny, flimsy boat, in the sea of unrest it finds itself stranded in.

During that time, the two of them can't help but talk. There of course has to be a way to pass the time, and the popular village-child game of listing off stars' names gets vaguely uncomfortable when the two of them agree that they're probably distantly known by every title they utter, so that's put off the table quickly. Instead, they stray towards mundanity: simple conversations, little tidbits about their days to keep the air from dipping too quiet.

"I got my grades back for the last quiz I did," Danny says one day. It's a little soft, a little sheepish: it'd confessed, a week earlier, that it was going to the university across the stretch of town to study historical literature, which Hester had lightly ribbed it for, though without any real bite. There might have been a feud between the village and university, but as far as it was concerned neither of them were truly of either, so it found it didn't mind in the least.

"Oh, yeah? You passed, yes?" Hester hums back. It's especially quiet, that night; the crickets have fallen into the lowest grade, just a barely-there strum that you'd have to strain to listen for. Danny chuckles awkwardly, shifts side-to-side.

"Barely. But yes, yes– I passed."

"I knew it!" Hester crows. They're sat shoulder-to-shoulder, tonight, so the celebratory little movement it makes jostles Danny's frame like a scarecrow. The other star takes it in stride, though, laughs it off in time with Hester's ribs as it bounces up and down.

They find themselves like this often, now. Sure, in the village they're separate things, entities pulled apart and turned easy into what they're not: Daniel Fairbains the scholar, a man after his parents' many talents and working to live up to his adopted legacy, and Hester Ardall, the baker's boy, quiet and deferent behind the counter but with the pastry-making skill to rival his mother's. But in the dark, like this, with only the stars to see them?

They agree, between themselves in hushed whispers so close they nearly share breath, that it's the only time they truly feel free.

So, they learn each other. Words play off of one another and come simple, without thought, bouncing together and twining quick-tongued, laughter as easy as breathing. So, they grow together, gorge themselves on the open expression that comes with having someone who knows who you are, flaws and all, and takes it in stride and says ‘look, I’m still here, I still want to know you’. They hold hands, under the watchful gaze of the moon's bright eye, one night; and then the next, and then the next, and that too becomes a tradition.

They're making many new traditions, now.

“Hey, have you ever actually… like, courted anyone?” Hester asks, one visit. It's got Danny wrapped around its shoulder, watching as it sews a little felt doll for one of the village-children who's taken a liking to it when it works behind the counter in the bake-shoppe. It has a blue coat, and a little purple hat; it's currently taking a needle to its matching purple mittens, though they're proving to be difficult.

“What, like romantically? No, I don't have the time for that,” Danny says, right next to where Hester's ear would be.

Hester was right, by the way; neither of them actually possess any facial features at all, just imitations of the senses they should have. It gives the illusion of being human, but not very well if one realises what exactly is going on.

“Fair,” Hester says, slowly. It can feel the coal-heat of Danny's hand pressed into the dip of its shoulder; the breaths just off of the side of its cheekbone.

If it were to turn its head–

–

Jane has, by all means, an odd child.

She loves him anyways, of course, even if he's matured out of the bubbly and inquisitive little goblin he had once been and into a quieter, gentler man, who works the bakery counter like she taught him. But there is no denying that, beneath the easy pattern-fold of dough that he's

seemed to perfect and the soft smiles he offers the customers who are especially nice to him, he's still *different*.

She recalls, faintly, that he had said something like that long ago, when she could still dress him in her dear Mary-Ellen's old clothing, the ones she'd never grown large enough to wear. It was bittersweet, seeing them on him.

The street was empty, mostly, cobbles cold and quiet as they lay in front of her like the sprawl of the ocean, shrouded with night. It was a late-running shift she'd taken, delivering leftover bread to the newer housewives and mothers who needed it under the cover of darkness; as it was, she really would rather not be out this late, but there wasn't much else to do so she would just finish up this house, the spindly red-roofed one round the corner and then go back home–

It starts nearly invisible, naught but two tiny sparks flying at the very top of the basin-hill directly north. She perks up to eye them, but nothing comes of it for a long, drawn-out moment, and she nearly begins moving again before all at once:

Shooting stars. Two of them, one blue-tinged and the other a brilliant flaming orange, fly in a dazzling slash of colour across the painted blue-black that seem to drag on. They twine around each other, a wave and ripple-pattern, nearly playful.

Jane thinks that in seeing such a rare, such a holy sight with her own two eyes would likely have anyone else in the village professing a miracle, praising the moon and stars and recounting to the sun the greatness of the moment. Surely, these should be the emotions evoked within her: yet, when she looks up at the twin comets as they streak towards the moon's gentle crescent-pull, all she can feel is the heavy melancholy settled in her stomach of the feeling she's come to consider under the name *loss*.

Afterword

‘The Village’, known as the Village on the Cliff or by name as Sebury, is a small knoll-bound community that was formed hundreds of years ago on the coast as a seaside trading port.

In the more recent years, as literacy and trade has gone up and passages to the mainlands have opened to more and more merchants by ship, Sebury has become both a bustling trade town and a hub of scholars; the University of Sebury, aptly named, offers a litany of arts courses and astronomy classes, which students are drawn to due to their underrepresentation in other universities or schools. Oftentimes the courses taught double as education on sailing, navigation on the open sea and many other trade jobs. The university is well-renowned for the opportunities it provides to its graduates.

The most popular religion in Sebury is referred to as ‘Sarosism’ and is practised in the Sarosisc or Saros-Eclipses Church, in which they worship celestial bodies as deities and follow, often, Celtic or Pagan tradition of religious sacrifice and worship. The common and most family-friendly way of worship involves the creation of small edifices or depictions of either the Sun, Moon or Stars or, sometimes, a deceased loved one, out of wood, cloth and on occasion precious metals like iron, bronze or gold. These edifices are then ritually burnt, in an event which is often referred to as ‘Bonfire Day’ and is treated as a holiday for those working in the trades, and in sending the sparks and ashes of the burnt dolls or depictions it is believed that they will join the Stars as messengers of the night sky.

Worship often simply involves prayer, but even the simple act of perceiving the stars or the sun and moon is considered worship in and of itself. In-house observatories or maps and artistic depictions of the stars and constellations are commonly found within mainly-Sarosic villages, as many on the coast are; the most popular messenger Stars are of course those of the Dipper constellations and the North Star, also known as Polaris, as they're practical in navigation and vastly important to sailors and merchants alike.

The Seburian people's diet, clothing and traditional practices revolve mainly around the connection it has with the sea– its waters are rather cold, and in it live whales, a sparse variety of

seal and many large fish which provide ample meat– but also its placement at the very edge of a thickly wooded area; wood is the main material used in buildings, tools and trade items, and Sebury is known in trade for its dark, thick-grained and flexible products. Common trade items include wood and bone carving tools; fish meat, bones and scales; whale blubber and oil; wood for construction; and golden ornaments or decorations, from the abundance of the metal found in its soil and mines.

Its location is geographically disadvantageous for farming-focused trade and community building, and it has very thin and nutrient-bare soil in which many things simply don't grow; stews and soups of hearty vegetables are a staple, alongside fish and seal meat and bone broths. The diet of the average Seburian citizens isn't very heavy on grain, but sourdough bread with soup or stew is considered a delicacy, and pastries made with imported goods such as non-native vegetables and fruits have increased in popularity in recent years. Livestock are usually traded for; sheep tend to flourish in the rocky, overall chilly and wet conditions, but cows and chickens do not. Mutton is, therefore, also a staple within Sebury's traditional dishes.

Sebury tends to be on the colder side temperature-wise, with its proximity to the ocean making flash storms, cloud covers and cold fronts very expected. The townspeople favor thick clothing, dyed bright colours with the different mineral dyes that can be found in the cliffs; especially on Bonfire Day, saturate reds, oranges, blues and even pure whites are popular choices.

Economically, Sebury operates mainly on a bartering system, but due to the integration of overseas and travelling culture over the centuries have also picked up use of the common Mainland currency; merchants often pay in gold doubloons with wavering value, though it is said that as a baseline three solid doubloons gets the buyer a finely-fed and in good health adult pig. Class disparity is rather uncommon, due to the proximity of the villagers, the stiff bartering system, and the tightly-woven community of people ready to support one another at any bend.