

2015

Hallowed Be Thy Fall

Kristina Smeriglio

Nova Southeastern University, ks1683@nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/writing_etd



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Share Feedback About This Item

NSUWorks Citation

Kristina Smeriglio. 2015. *Hallowed Be Thy Fall*. Master's thesis. Nova Southeastern University. Retrieved from NSUWorks, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences – Department of Writing and Communication. (35)

https://nsuworks.nova.edu/writing_etd/35.

This Thesis is brought to you by the CAHSS Theses, Dissertations, and Applied Clinical Projects at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Writing and Communication Theses by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

HALLOWED BE THY FALL

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Writing

Kristina Smeriglio

College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Nova Southeastern University

December 2015

© 2015 by Kristina Smeriglio

All Rights Reserved

College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
Nova Southeastern University

We hereby approve the thesis of

Kristina Smeriglio

Candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing

Date

Juliette Kitchens, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Writing and
Communication, Thesis Advisor

Date

Kelly A. Concannon, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Writing and
Communication

ACCEPTED

Date

Shanti Bruce, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of Writing and
Communication
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social
Sciences
Nova Southeastern University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I'd like to thank God and the strength he gave me to write this story. Although it was a challenging journey, one of the hardest I've yet to face, I really couldn't be happier. I can finally move forward.

As for the people closest to me, I thank you too. I don't know what I would've done without your presence in my life.

Lance, I know you would agree when I say that no words are truly needed when it comes to all of this. A hug would suffice. It always has. But if I'm to be open and honest, may I eternally acknowledge, here on this page, that you were my greatest inspiration in all of this. Here's to finally seeing the tree through the leaves.

As for my parents, grandparents, my Aries Soul Sister Diana, Martha and the rest of family, thank you for being there for me and playing such a major role in my life. I have always been proud to not only have such a big family, but a family filled with such essential souls. May we continue to grow as one, and only deepen our bond each passing day.

To my Faith and the City girls Raquel, Keren, and Michelle, you've all motivated me in so many ways. Thank you for everything you've done. But most importantly, thank you for being my friend. You have no idea how much that means to me.

And finally, to my fabulous team Dr. Juliette Kitchens and Dr. Kelly Concannon, thank you both for believing in me and guiding my steps throughout this entire process. I owe you one of my most life-changing realizations. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

This journey has meant so much to me. Thank you all for being a part of my life and this truly fabulous existence. I love you.

HALLOWED BE THY FALL

I bit the fruit. The sweet blueberry nectar trickled onto my tongue and down my throat, coursing through my body. The juice's power instantly took effect. My senses heightened and my body opened to the elements. The bright morning sun shone fiercely against my skin, traveling through my pores and warming my entire being. I inhaled the intensifying smell of morning dew as my body sank lower into the soft enveloping grass. I stared into the dark green eyes of my admirer. At once, he grinned and took a deep bite into the berry.

His flesh met mine. The fever radiated off of his pale and naked white skin as he grabbed my face firmly with both hands and kissed me deeply on the lips. He released me quickly, leaving me breathless. He stared deeply into my eyes and kissed me fiercely again. His slick hands grabbed my perspiring chest, massaging my swollen breasts. He traced my curves slowly with his fingertips, tantalizing me as he traveled down my waist, until he reached between my legs and opened the warm yearning portal of my femininity. He swiftly dipped his fingers inside, soaking them in circular motions. Moans escaped me, juices secreting down my thighs. The carnal temptation was overwhelming. I had to have him.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him closer to me. He quickly entered me with his manhood. I gasped, arching my back in pleasure. Our eyes met once more. My eager lips latched onto his. He thrust his long shaft deep inside of me over and over again. I held on tight. I moaned into his mouth, he groaned deeply into mine. He pulled away at once leaving me with my mouth open, my lips tingling and thirsting. He then swiftly climbed over me, his upper body falling heavily as he ejaculated into my

mouth. The oozing white sap swirled on my tongue then ran down my throat as I convulsed in orgasm. I swallowed the seed. The deed was done and I was satiated.

Lying on the soft olive grass next to him underneath the marmalade sun, the euphoric sensation quickly left my being. I looked over at him. He lied there with his arms rested behind his head as he faced the sky. His eyes were translucent, his dark hair with subtle streaks that brightened in the light. He really was handsome. But as intimate as we just were, he was still a stranger. I was no closer to knowing anything deeper about him beyond his libido.

He looked at me for a moment then got up and walked away. I sighed. I had hoped he would say something, at the very least comment about our swift union that had felt so effortlessly blissful only moments ago. But his quick departure revealed there was nothing more to say or do. It was time to move on.

* * *

The Garden of Earthly Delights was alive and awake. Lying on my moss carpeted ledge, I saw my peers: an array of nudists, both human and mermaid, delighting themselves in a rainbow of pleasures spanning across the vast landscape.

The pasture blew a soft whispering air that brought my attention to my immediate surroundings. “Come here,” I heard a woman say.

I peered over the edge and looked toward the ground at the bottom of my plateau. There lay two beautiful blondes staring at each other. I stayed mystified watching the two women lying silently in a moment frozen in time, unable to take their eyes off of each other, until finally they sank into a deep embrace. They released and a strong wind

suddenly blew their long tresses into each other's faces in a tangled mess. They began giggling.

The woman leaned in closer. "I don't know what I would do without you," she whispered as she caressed her lover's blushing cheek. She planted a sweet kiss on her forehead. I smiled.

Watching such romantic moments always re-ignited my hope and solidified my confidence that someday I would find someone who would love me like that. And it wouldn't be fleeting.

I observed the others close-by. To my left were a group of women gathered together, one of which was holding a radiant cherry. They seemed to be contemplating a cluster of multicolored berries hanging from a string of vines. I was curious to know what they could be saying. What had them so fascinated? Most berries were rarely discussed. Rather, like the group of men a few feet away from them huddled around a supple blackberry, most were ravenous, ready to latch on and bite.

My fellow humans, some alone, some in groups, were always bearing and eating a variety of fruits. These were grand fruits that would feed us potions of all kinds depending on which ones we ate. Whether it was red or blue, and what type of berry it was, made a difference and determined the fruit's unique effects. I wondered what those men and women felt as a result of the fruits they chose. My life, like so many others' in the Garden, consisted mainly of blueberries and strawberries: fruits that induced passion and sexual desire—a release of inhibition. And what a release it was. In the Garden, nothing could quiet the constant moans of ecstasy that traveled with the wind.

Then, there were the humans interacting with the animals. Like the ones bathing in the glittering cerulean lake in front of me, the lake whose surface rippled ever so gently and flowed towards the edge. Over by the furthest edge, was a pale thin man hugging a grand mahogany owl. The owl closed its eyes and sank into the embrace of his human companion. Many humans cherished the animals of the Garden in this way. It was a bond strengthened by the constant exchanging of various goods. Like the group of sparrows and thrushes perched on the mountain of rocks ahead of me feeding a variety of fruits to the bodies around them. They held the berries in their beaks and delicately placed it in the humans' eager mouths to eat and enjoy. These animals were large and impressive, most of them even bigger than the humans. And they were always around.

Our lives revolved around these fruits. And the Garden was effective in regenerating them. Sometimes trees and plants would bear new produce overnight, depending on our feast. It was a flux of supply and demand. But no matter how many we had, we always starved for more. It was a hunger that kept us alive. It kept us going, it gave us purpose. And the Garden provided every ounce of desired provision.

Past the hedgerows, I could see my best friend Alura in her usual bathing spot. Making my way over to her through the small opening in the hedgerows, I admired her glorious raven skin as she sat poised on the edge wading her feet in the steaming pond located at the Garden's nucleus. She glowed amongst the others. Especially with her prized peacock that lay on her head like a hat, its long feathered tail like a cape against her bare back. No one could deny her beauty, especially not her.

“Well, well, Priella. What are you doing this way so early? It's barely noon.” She smirked.

“Oh, stop it.” I entered the pool and rested beside her against the meadow edge, propping myself on my elbows and closing my eyes as I basked in the sunlight. The warm rays filled my pores. “Where’s Dillon? Isn’t he usually with you at this time?”

“No. He’s still with the Circle. He’s been staying later than usual with his griffin. He’s trying to build a sense of camaraderie with the other riders. Foster that male bond, you know?” She paused. “But enough about that. Talk to me. What brings you over here so early in the morning?” She began playing with my hair, twirling my long brown waves around her finger.

“If you must know, I had an early start. I was with someone. And, well, you know how it goes.”

“Who was it this time? Were you with Jonah?”

I pulled my focus and looked at her. “No, it wasn’t Jonah.” I paused. “Actually, I met the man I was with just this morning.”

“Someone you met this morning? Really, Priella?”

“Well, we’d seen each other a few times before and exchanged glances from across the Garden. But today was the first time he approached me. He’s so handsome, Alura. And his presence is so powerful, seductive.” I smiled and looked away, blushing.

It really was unlike me to engage sexually with a complete stranger. But, well, I gave in anyway.

The Circle of Beasts began to charge as the warm dawn greeted the new day. The stirring of the elected humans, the time-tellers of the Garden marking the start and end to each day, rode fast on their various bulls, horses, and other mammalia around the Garden’s center.

I woke up with heavy eyes and swollen lips. I was laying on the ledge, curled up on my left side, and there walking toward me was this magnetic man holding a luscious cobalt blueberry. His name was Gale. I had seen him before, but we had never been close enough to interact beyond glances. The titillating soft berry aroma entered my nostrils as he drew nearer. I closed my eyes and inhaled it like a potion.

He lay beside me and began running his fingers through my hair, then bringing his hands toward my face and softly tracing my cheeks with his fingertips. I was being lulled back to sleep. It was odd. His caresses felt so familiar. It was as if we'd known each other for years. But we didn't know each other at all. It caught me off-guard. And in a sudden thought, I had no idea what to make of what lay in front of me.

I've never been one to get intimate with someone I barely know, with someone I hadn't been pursuing a romantic relationship with. But here was a man I was seriously attracted to, a man whose presence entranced my senses. It was effortless. As I stared at his blueberry wonder, I realized he was a man I could take an absolute risk with. It'd be a blind submission that could provide the passion and romance I've been looking for.

I didn't know what he really wanted. It was unclear what would happen. But I was open. And it wasn't long before he revealed himself. His manhood grew hard and erect, and soon my sweet drowsiness turned into a hot entanglement of desire and submission.

“Priella?” Alura teased, softly tugging one of my curls. “Are you reminiscing?”

I shook my head. “Sorry.”

“Mhmm. So tell me, since when do you give in so quickly?”

“I know. But, Alura, there was something about him so—.” I sighed. “I don’t know. What can I say? I mean, at first, I wasn’t sure what to make of it all. But, then I thought, maybe I should be more spontaneous. Maybe it’s what I need. I should just go for it. Take a chance and see what happens.”

“Be more spontaneous?” She released my curls and sighed. “No. You’re going about this all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Priella, what is it that you’re looking for?”

“You know what I want. I want passion. Romance. A love that moves me.”

“So you say.” She paused. “So this desire drove you to have sex with someone you barely know?”

I bit my lip. “Yeah.”

“Mmhm.” She shook her head. “You have a lot to learn.”

“Learn?”

“Yes. Learn. As a matter of fact, I recently put together a women’s group with the ladies here in the pond. I lead some of the daily sermons. Why don’t you join the others and start coming to our morning talks?” She said as she started stroking the ends of her peacock’s emerald, turquoise and plum feathers that lay gracefully along her hip.

“Daily sermons, huh? I’m surprised you didn’t think of that before.” She looked at me sideways, I laughed. “Alright. What have you all been talking about?”

She straightened her posture, pleased with herself. “Well, actually, this week we’ve been discussing self-love and confidence, and their importance in regards to

relationships with other people. You have to love yourself before you can really love anyone else.”

My defenses started rising as her gaze hardened on me. My attention quickly faded away from her to a group of women in front of me with white cranes on their heads. They parted toward the edge, blurring around me, and my vision was suddenly shifted past them to a red flash on the horizon. I swam toward the opposite end and began to get out of the pond, my eyes fixed on the flashing object before me. “I have to go.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back.”

Caught in a trance, I walked over to the red entity calling me. The sun dried my moist skin as I traveled the meadow through the natural chaos that piqued around me.

The weeping tree that met me stood low to the ground, in a corner isolated in the far reaches of the Garden by the famously fragrant jasmine bushes that now filled my senses. The weeping branches cascaded sage-colored leaves, creating a dome of shade that hid within it a splendor of red berries.

Everyone seated around the tree seemed to be caught in a sweet haze, as though daydreaming. They sat against the bright brown trunk with their legs crossed and their hands rested on their knees. Their postures were poised and alert, yet at ease. They all drew deep breaths, as if in unison, and stared out into the Garden.

I was at the Cherry Tree. It was within sight of my beloved ledge, but for some reason I never ventured in its direction. I had, however, heard about it and its power. Every time a fruit was plucked from a branch of this magical tree, another one was born in its place. But, the cherry that grew anew was not like the one before. Rather, it was

brighter and more enchanting. It was interesting really. Why had I avoided this corner of the Garden for so long?

Among the branches was the object that had been calling me. It was one of the cherries—bright and young, yearning to stretch its waxy peel. I reached into the tree and grabbed the cardinal fruit. An emerald bud remained, marking the place and fertile beginnings of the new fruit that would soon grow.

There was an enigmatic quality about this smooth red fruit I now held. I sat under the tree, rested against the welcoming trunk, and held it near my eyes. I began to examine the supple berry. I wondered. If it was born from this enchanted tree, what magical powers did it possess? What kind of elixir would it provide?

It was red. Would it be lustful and romantic? It was round. Would it be impulsive?

My reverie was halted when Jonah appeared by my side. His torrid demeanor and subtle grin instantly caused my gaze to lower and my breathing to slow. He sat by my side and kissed me.

“I came to see you, beautiful.” He began running his fingers down my arm, caressing me. “Alura told me you wandered this way. What are you doing all the way over here?”

“Well, I—.”

He looked down to the fruit I held in my hand. “What’s that?”

I handed him the cherry. He twirled it in his hand, regarding it. “It’s a cherry. Every time you pick one from this tree, an even bigger and brighter one grows in its place. Isn’t it amazing? What do you think it means?”

“What do I think it means?”

“Yeah. It’s the only plant of its kind. That means it’s special.” He looked at me from the corner of his eye, silent. I nudged him gently. “Come on, haven’t you ever looked around at the world and thought there had to be more to it? Some special meaning and purpose for our lives? Who knows, maybe this fruit could provide us with an answer. After all, neither of us has ever tried one.”

He frowned, handing it back. “Priella, the fruit are meant to be eaten and enjoyed, not mused. I admire your imagination, but I must prevent you from treading into the depths of the unnecessary. Illusion will consume and deceive you into madness if you try to create some extraordinary meaning of this life beyond what you see.” He stood and spread out his broad arms, presenting me the world. “And why would you even consider the possibility? This is paradise.”

I looked past Jonah and out onto the vast expanse. The blissful blur of colors washed over me. The Garden came into focus and the sea of people painted the most fascinating picture of skin, fruit, and beast. Even in a moment suspended in time, one could witness the never-ending commotion that was life in the Garden: naked humans mid-kiss, fruits being offered and bitten, birds flapping their broad wings and flying through the sky towards tree branches that swayed gracefully with the wind. Whether it was with each other, the animals, or the landscapes of the earth, there was constant interaction amongst every living being.

“I suppose you’re right. I can’t imagine a garden more beautiful. Or full of life and passion, even.” I sighed. What was I thinking?

“There you go. That’s the Priella I know.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at the cherry nestled in my lap.

He crouched down beside me once more. He cupped my cheek with his hand and captured my gaze, encapsulating me with his bright hazel eyes. “Be with me,” he said, staring intensely at me. I felt hypnotized, unable to move. He then turned around and reached for something behind him. “Here, take a bite.” I looked down at the fruit he suddenly held before me. It was an impressive ruby strawberry. Like the many others he had offered before.

“Another one? We took one just last night.”

He grinned. “Oh, Darling. Can you blame me for wanting more? You know I can never get enough of you.” He winked. “Come on.”

I inhaled the sweet and tangy aroma and bit my lip. “Alright.” I closed my eyes and sank my teeth into the frail peel. The succulent juice traveled down my throat like silk. I opened my eyes and watched as Jonah’s skin began to glow. My body began to warm and tingle all over. I took a deep breath. My limbs soon became heavy and relaxed. I fell back against the ground and reveled in the sweet sensation taking over my being.

He took a bite and set down the fruit, swiftly leaning over and lying on top of me. Our bodies lay heavily against the blanket of grass. He began to kiss me. I was lost.

* * *

“You dropped something.”

I was awakened by the shadow of a grand figure with wings. The afternoon sun shined bright against it. The contrast was harsh on my sleepy eyes. But as I began to awaken fully and my vision cleared, I realized the figure standing above me was a man. A man with wings. I had never seen such a man, but for some reason I wasn’t afraid.

He was so beautiful. He had olive skin and long brown hair, and stood tall with a strong lean frame. He was naked like I was, but his presence seemed different—ethereal. And his wings! They were ivory and bigger than any I had ever seen on any land creature. I remained lying on my side, stunned. I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

I propped myself up on my elbows, finally gaining my composure. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said you dropped something, Priella."

"What? How do you know my name?"

"Oh. Right. I'm Michael. One of the angels."

"Angels? I've never heard of any angels. Where in the Garden do you live?"

"I don't live in the Garden, Dear. I live in Heaven with the divine beings. But, every now and then, we come to deliver messages. And to ensure such divine messages are received and not overlooked. Like that one over there." He pointed past me towards the ground.

"What?" My head felt fuzzy and confused, as though there were ants scattering around my brain. It took me a minute, but I finally sat up completely and looked behind me to where he was pointing. It was the cherry I had plucked earlier. It was darker than when I last saw it. It had begun to ripen. "Oh. Yeah. That's the cherry I was looking at earlier. I must have dropped it when Jonah gave me the strawberry."

"That cherry called you in some way, didn't it? Enticed you to pick it from the tree?"

"It did, actually. I saw it flashing from across the Garden. How did you know?"

“Those are Cherries of Spiritual Truth. When a human is ready to eat one of them, the cherry will become visible. Like it did to you. In which case, I then come and guide you through the process.”

“Spiritual Truth?”

“Yes. See, there are times in life when things happen, things that can be hard to understand. Especially, when surrounded by such negative notions and conflicting ideas. The only solution is to make a choice and move forward. But to do that, one must become aware.”

The sun glowed against his face. I smiled. “What?”

“Priella. Listen to me. You need to know that what the cherry is going to show you, will shock you. But I’m going to need you to just trust the process.” He looked up at the sky and began to lift off the ground. “I have to get going now.”

I shook my head. “What? Where are you going? I have so many questions!” It was too late. He had vanished into the clouds and out of sight. What just happened?

As I sat there with my knees bent towards my chest, still underneath the tree, I reached for the cherry once more. Its skin began to feel softer as it transformed into a deeper crimson, the tiny fibers on its skin tickling the inside of my palm. I held it to my nose and inhaled the fruity aroma. Vegetation laced with promise: the promise of Spiritual Truth. I had no idea what that meant. What would happen to me?

All this time, I had longed for a chance to experience something new, to venture away from my routine and into the unknown—an opportunity that now lay firmly in my hands. But now I felt so unsure about it all.

The sound of frantic giggling brought my attention to my peers in the distance. The violet and orange sky shined streaks of warming light onto the field. Within my view were the many, but my focus was on a couple enclosed inside of a large navy clam held up by a struggling woman. The two were closely entwined, with only their lower halves receiving light and air from the outside. Then, I looked a few feet away from them and saw a group of people huddled tightly inside of a red teepee. Their faces were hidden within the confines of their private nook.

All were closed off and could not witness the beauty of the glowing sky outside. And there were many others just like them, living concealed in their giant shells and bubbles of seclusion. I began to feel hot and sweaty. An uncomfortable stir suddenly formed and began to amplify in the pit of my stomach. My focus shifted back to the cherry.

The Circle of Beasts began to roar in the background. The beating of hooves and charges of celebration grew loud as it called my attention to the impending night. It was dusk, and it was now or never.

Without hesitation, I took a hard bite into the cherry. The bitter acid nectar jolted my taste buds as it traveled down my throat and all throughout my body. In an instant, I felt a wave of electricity creep up from my feet to my legs, through my genitals, and up my stomach until finally a shivering shock rushed up my rib cage and into my heart. The surge, like a bull, rammed me head-on into the ground.

* * *

I woke up feeling drunk. It was nighttime. I remained staring at the full moon above surrounded by a myriad of stars visible through the openings of the Cherry Tree's

broad dome of leaves. I remained frozen and unable to move. But soon a sea of clouds rolled through the sky, and the moon and the stars were lost.

I slowly sat up, my legs lying flaccid before me. My lips tingled. I wiped the corners of my mouth. It had crusted with remnants of the juice that had dried. A sharp spherical pain, like a rock pushing against my forehead from the inside out, suddenly formed between my eyebrows. The pain blurred my eyes until my irises became thick like slime and glazed over. My body felt drained and heavy. It took me a while, but eventually I harnessed the strength to grab onto the tree beside me and lift myself off the ground.

I scanned the Garden. For the most part, all seemed typical: some humans engaging in a nocturnal tryst, some aimlessly wandering the fields, and the rest sleeping in their nooks. But there was something eerie about the image that met my eyes. Usually, the Garden was as vibrant in color at night as it was during the day. Now, everything was muted. Even the magical cherry tree behind me had changed. Its trunk was now darker than before—rough. Its leaves were now a dark moss. I found it hard to recognize any of the typical nightly hues of emerald and ruby.

I thought the cherry would make the Garden seem brighter, more vibrant and alive. But no. Instead, I was confronted by dim shades and a cold black fog that now pierced my eyes and nostrils. It permeated through me like a poison.

I walked hesitantly through the smog. I soon found myself at the hedgerows, by the small entranceway. I maneuvered and pushed my way through.

“Ah!” I screeched as I felt something nick my arm, causing me to fall to the ground. My mouth gaped open. I had been gashed on my right shoulder and now a thick

red liquid was slowly sliding down my arm. I had begun to bleed. How in the—? I looked back and peered closer. The hedgerows were suddenly filled with sharp protruding thorns.

I breathed in deeply through clenched teeth, letting out heavy sighs as I exhaled through the stinging pain. I felt my heart throb in my arm as blood slowly trickled out. It was like a red caterpillar crawling down my arm, extending with every pulse. I wiped the running blood and pressed firmly against the wound. The hard throbbing continued for a while, droplets of blood seeping through my fingers, until finally it slowed to a stop and created a brownish patch over the wound. I looked around. No one seemed to notice.

I leaned over and slid my hands through the juniper grass to wipe off the blood. The blades were rigid between my fingers. Still, I ran them through until I fell completely forward and lay against the ground. The brown roots of the earth appeared before me.

I stared straight ahead. The grass suddenly started to whirl, my vision beginning to blur. I couldn't focus on any one blade. I began to feel short of breath. I grabbed onto the floor, trying to slow down the dizzying motion, but I couldn't stop it. At last, I grabbed at the ground with full force and ripped out a handful of grass in frustration.

"Michael?" I began to cry out. "Michael, what's happening to me?" I looked up at the sky and the clouds too began to swirl around the sky. I felt my irises swirling round and round my eye sockets, the clouds then swirling into waves. "Michael!" I cried out once last time. But there was no sign of him in sight.

I fell and lay there with my arms crossed, my head facing the ground in between. I closed my eyes and cried. My head began to pound with pressure. I began to get the

frightening sense that I had made a huge mistake in biting the cherry. I sighed. How long was this supposed to last?

* * *

My attention was drawn to the Finnegans in the distance. They were frolicking in the northernmost lake, as usual. I went to a tall black rock nearby and hid. I leaned against it. It was cold and rough.

Dagan and Meena were kinky. They contorted in all sorts of strange positions and wrapped their long mermaid fins around each other. And I was always catching them in the act. They kissed each other passionately, him pulling her long blonde hair and then kissing her neck, all while entangled in each other.

I envied their love. There was no doubt they were absolutely infatuated with each other. And they were inseparable. Theirs was the kind of love, and the relationship, that I strived and hoped for. And it was that hope that kept me staring, captivated and wondering. When will I have that?

Yesterday, they finally caught me spying.

I was lying by their lake admiring the delicate blue water lilies that sprouted from the edge, while occasionally looking up and catching a glimpse of them kissing. I thought my curiosity was elusive until Meena's eyes suddenly opened and caught my stare. She released her lips and whispered something into her husband's ear. She then grabbed his hands and soon they were swimming my way. Dagan's metallic skin shimmered in the sunlight as they slithered on over. While I had seen them many times, we had never spoken. But the truth was, I had been secretly longing for the chance to meet them.

“Well hello there,” Meena said as she swam towards the edge. Her luminous bare upper body greeted me and I remained fascinated by her strikingly long blonde hair that draped over her supple pink breasts and down to her hips. “What’s your name?”

“Hi,” I finally replied, “I’m Priella.”

“What a lovely name. I’m Meena. This is my husband Dagan. We’ve seen you wandering the Garden.” She grinned. “We’ve also caught you looking.”

“Oh. Yeah.” I blushed, brushing my hair behind my ear. “I couldn’t help it.”

“Well, we’re flattered. We think you’re very beautiful.” She looked at Dagan and then back at me. “In fact, why don’t you come back and visit us tomorrow night?” She slinked closer and whispered in my ear, “We can all get to know each other a little better. See where the night takes us.” She distanced herself once more.

My focus shifted back and forth between them. Are they suggesting what I think they are? I became nervous. I had never really thought about being with more than one person before, let alone another woman. Or a married couple, even. I smiled and stared blankly. I didn’t know what to say.

“Think about it,” she went on, “We would love to have you.” She winked. And before I knew it they had swam away.

I have to admit I was curious. And excited. This was my chance to finally get to know them. But what about their suggestive offer? If they were to make a move, could I really go that far? Could I be that sexually free?

I mean, what about the fact that they were married? I always thought marriage was special—sacred. The process itself was so exclusive, and extensive.

Alura once told me about her wedding day. Her and Dillon went together to the building at the farthest end of the Garden, the one that looked like a blossoming blue lotus from which sprouted a burst of gold cylinders. On top of which, was a large metallic ring with a smaller ring on top that held a red spherical fruit. There, they met with the designated officiate and exchanged a set of vows that were then made official by the ceremonial act of taking a bite out of a special fruit. I assume it was a fruit similar to the one perched atop the tower. But to this day, every time I ask, Alura refuses to give me any other details, neither of the fruit nor what was said between them. The most she's ever said is, 'you'll just have to find out one day for yourself. Marriage is the ultimate state to be attained, Priella. It's nothing like anything you've ever experienced.'

I peered over the edge of the rock. The Finnegans were wading by the border, isolated from the others in the lake. There were tussling with each other. Fins began flying in and out of the water, encircling them in a whirlpool of desire. There was just no stopping those two, was there?

I had to do something. Tonight was the night. I was hesitant, but I figured I should at least go and talk to them. Regardless of what happened, I had been looking forward to this chance to get to know them. Besides, what ever happened to me being spontaneous?

I was starting to get up when, suddenly, Dagan hovered over Meena and wrapped his fin tightly around her skin. I crouched back down.

“Time's wasting and I'm getting frustrated, Meena. Where's our guest?”

“I don't know. She must be running late.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? I thought that pretty body and charming mouth of yours was supposed to secure her. Isn’t that what you’re good at? Luring people into giving you what you want?” He scoffed. “Certainly hooked me, didn’t you?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Look, I don’t know where she is. What difference does it even make?” She paused. “We’ll keep it just the two of us tonight. It’ll be—.”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t want it to be just the two of us tonight.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you so insistent on this happening?”

“Because I’m miserable, Meena.”

“What? You don’t mean that.”

“Yes. I do.”

“But—.”

“Darling, listen. You’re beautiful. And yes, the sex is incredible. But the truth is, I can’t stand you. You’re nothing but a manipulative whore. I see that now.” He held her gaze for a moment as her eyes began to water. “You know, I must’ve been a real fool to marry you.”

“Dagan, please.” She pleaded. But before she could say anything else, he shoved her fiercely into the water.

I immediately turned away and hid behind the rock out of sight.

I didn’t understand. The Finnegans always seemed so happy. I thought they were perfect for each other. I thought all spouses were supposed to be. But it didn’t seem that way. All I saw was discontent, abuse and manipulation. Was that love? I sighed. To think this whole time I aspired to be just like them—married.

The grass was like muck underneath my feet. I began to think of all the times I idolized them. A bitter sensation quickly rose up my chest and lingered in my throat. I looked around hurriedly. Jonah.

He was at an orgy nearby. He watched intently as the cluster of multicolored bodies, like one giant lung filling with life, inhaled and exhaled as one in sexual splendor. “Jonah!” I pulled him away from the crowd. “Jonah, I need your help. The Finnegans, they—” I gasped.

His eyes were bloodshot, his pupils like black holes. “Priella, darling. You’re just in time.”

His presence felt different, strange. His stare was harsh, sucking me into the darkness of his eyes. There was no tenderness in his gaze. His face was flushed, his entire flesh sweaty. And his throbbing penis was unnerving. I began to step back. But he was too quick. He grabbed my limbs and slammed me against the ground.

“What are you doing?” I yelled as I tried to push him off of me. He leaned on me harder, his body heavy against mine. “Stop it, Jonah. I’m not in the mood.”

He spread my legs open with his thighs and held my arms against the ground. “Oh, Priella, don’t act so prudish with me. You know you want me.” He began roughly kissing my neck.

“No, Jonah. I just came to talk. Can’t we just sit and talk for a minute?”

He groaned. “We always talk. Come on, I want to feel you,” he muffled against my neck. He separated himself and started grinding against me, staring down at me harshly.

“Please. Just let me go.”

“Darling, just relax. Don’t fight the urge. Doesn’t it feel good?”

“No. It doesn’t. Now get off me!”

“Hmm. I know what you need.” He reached beyond me. Instantly, he held a brown and rotting strawberry before me. The pungent smell made me gag.

“Get that away from me! I don’t want it.”

“Oh, no? Since when?” He held it by my mouth. “Bite it, Priella.”

“No,” I said through burning eyes. “Now let me go!” I tried to wriggle myself away from his grip, but it was no use. His strength overbore my exertion.

“I’ll let you go when I’m done with you. Now open wide.”

“Excuse me?”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s quite an attitude you’ve picked up all of a sudden. You know that? Now do as I say and bite the fruit.”

“No.”

“That’s it.” He took a bite of a strawberry and threw it, the black juice dribbling down his broad chin. He then gripped my cheeks, forcing my mouth open.

“Ah! Jonah, stop it!”

He kissed me hard, spitting the acidic juice into my mouth and forcing it down my throat. I began coughing, choking, tears streaming down my cheeks. He was soon blurred before me. My body quickly became heavy. And soon, I couldn’t move.

But I could feel it all. He squeezed and bit my breasts hard, groaning loudly. He then pulled back and grabbed me by the shoulders and quickly shoved his stiff penis deep inside of me. He held me by the waist, buried his hands into my skin, and thrust over and over again as he glared down at his shaft going in and out of me. He groaned as he

leaned in, forcing himself deeper into me. Every harsh penetration crushed through my pores, ripping me apart from the inside out. It was never-ending. I stared blankly at the sky, receiving in silence. My eyes filled with tears, Jonah and the sky blurring above me.

At once, he pulled out. I began to feel a sense of relief, until he harshly grabbed my thigh and turned me over onto my stomach. I lay there facing the grass beside me. He grabbed me by the hips and entered me again. He began to thrust with full force, going faster and faster. He pulled my hair by the scalp. I clenched my teeth in agony. He shoved my face back into the ground. He sank in deeper into me, pushing my face against the dirt. He went on and on until finally he let out a heavy grunt, pulled away, and bursted his burning white seed all over my back.

I was left paralyzed. I remained staring as he stood up and strode into the distance, disappearing once more into the orgy. There was no consolation for the internal burn of crushed organs I felt within me. How could he do that to me?

After a while, the effects of the strawberry faded and I gained control of my limbs. I slinked myself off the ground. I remained hunched for a while with my hands rested on my knees. His seed had dried in the bend above my rear. I felt faint.

I looked and noticed that, underneath the dirt I was covered in, blue and purple blotches had formed on my breasts, ribs and inner thighs. I brushed my skin to wipe away the dirt, but when I touched the dark blotches, a surge of pain overwhelmed me. I clenched my teeth and let out a harsh sigh. I gently skimmed over them and continued to wipe my limbs front and back. But no matter how much I wiped, the filth remained.

I looked towards the large group. Peering closely, I noticed the huddled men watching the roaring orgy had bloodshot eyes like Jonah. They were all too consumed in

their erotic obsession. No wonder they weren't disturbed in the slightest by Jonah's harsh behavior towards me. To them, we were part of the act. I shook my head and sighed.

I dragged my feet and made my way towards the small lake nearby, the lake that always comforted me. I needed to get in, now more than ever.

I stepped into the lake and paddled to the center. It was lukewarm. I took a deep breath and immersed myself into the depths. I opened my eyes and looked toward the surface. For the first time, I couldn't see the glow of the moon and the light of the night sky beyond it. There was only a thick wall of darkness above me. I sank lower and I waded, twisted and turned, checking my surroundings. There was nothing but darkness. No bright marine life, just black reef.

I began to think about Jonah and the first time we had sex, the events that led up to that metamorphic moment three years ago. I had long forgotten the details of that night, only remembering a blur of blissful nights filled with sweet conversations, our dance underneath the moonlight, and deep kisses that eventually led to our inevitable union. But now all I could recall was that memory I had long repressed, the moment I had chosen to ignore, the moment he uttered those shrewd words.

“Priella, I can't take these juvenile affections anymore. I want to be inside of you, feel you completely. Without that connection, how else will our relationship grow?” He asked me after our late night swim. We lied beside the lake, wrapped in each other's arms and kissing, letting the summer breeze dry us.

“What do you mean?”

“Priella, you've spent your entire life seeing the constant erotic splendor being enjoyed by everyone in the Garden. You long to feel it for yourself. Remember when you

opened up to me about how you wondered what it felt like for them, and what you hoped you would feel when you finally experienced it for yourself? Well, now's the time to find out." He caressed my cheek and stared at me with tender eyes. "Let's go on this journey together, Priella. Be with me."

"Well, yeah. But right now, Jonah? Don't you think it's too soon for us?"

"Too soon? We've spent all this time together. Plus, I've never met anyone like you, anyone who's ever attracted me like you do. Now's the perfect time."

At that moment, he then offered me my first strawberry. I took a deep breath. I was hesitant to take it. I had heard about the strawberry's power. I knew it would cause me to surrender my control, my body, to him. I had never allowed myself to experience that. I was hesitant about fully losing my senses. But I was curious. And ultimately, I wanted to us to get closer.

I bit my lip and looked up at him. "Do you really want me?"

"Yes, Priella. I do. Now take a bite. I promise it'll be worth it."

I sighed. "Okay."

And so I bit the vibrant freckled berry. The juice, like satin, ran down my throat like a swishing river through all the parts of my body. My body began to warm and tingle all over, becoming heavy and relaxed. I looked out towards the Garden, but it was soon blurred when a sudden force pulled my attention to a titillating pulse beating between my thighs. I let out a heavy moan, licked my lips, and glanced at Jonah.

He held my glance as he took a bite and groaned. The effects quickly took over, his body sinking lower into the ground. He leaned closer and began caressing me tenderly, Starting from my neck, traveling slowly down to my waist, he finally reached my

thighs. "You have such soft skin," he whispered in my ear. "And your curves. Mmm." He sank his grip deep into my inner thigh and an eager moan quickly escaped my lips.

He swiftly grabbed my face and kissed me deeply, our tongues tangled in sweet fruity splendor. He then slid his hand down to mine and placed it on his manhood. I pulled away and looked down at it. It was hard and long, impressive. I stayed staring at it, unable to look away from the pulsating protrusion.

"Put it in your mouth," he finally demanded. I cocked my head back and met his gaze. He grinned. "Come on." I licked my lips and smirked. Obediently, I then slithered my heavy body down to meet his erection and slid my wet lips over it. "Okay, now gently move it in and out of those sweet lips of yours." He began to moan as I slowly and deeply embraced his hard penis in my mouth. It began to grow larger and harder inside of me. Suddenly, he grabbed the back of my head and pushed it down deeper, his penis hitting the back of my throat. I gasped and released from the impact. He laid me down on my back. "Come here."

Without even a moment to catch my breath, he shoved his penis deep inside, his cylindrical force ripping through my pristine insides. "Ah!" The sudden surge of pain overwhelmed me, causing tears to run down my face as he thrust fast and hard inside of me. I turned away and with heavy arms tried to push him off. "Jonah, wait! It hurts!"

He stopped and, still inside me, began caressing my face, turning me toward him. "Shhh. Priella, look at me." I met his gaze through swelling tears, silent. He went on, "Feeling pain the first time is normal. Just give in to it. Let yourself feel the pleasure." He paused. "Do you trust me?" I nodded and closed my eyes.

He kissed me hard and slowly began again. I surrendered. I opened my legs wider and wrapped my thighs around him, his penetration deepening with every moist undulation. The pain began to fade and give way to the rising of a warm enveloping sensation that overcame my body like a sweet fever. I let out a heavy moan that vibrated with the wind.

“That’s it.” He started thrusting faster and faster. “Mmm. Are you ready?” he asked, breathless.

I bit my lip. “Mmm. I suppose you’re going to come inside of me now, huh?”

He paused. “Oh, baby. No.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t that what’s supposed to happen?”

“Yes, Priella, that’s usually how it’s done. But we’re not ready for that yet. Now hold on.”

He immediately began thrusting again, going into me hard, with full force. The sweet high I felt began to sour inside me. My face began to feel hot and feverish. I was confused. Hastily, he pulled away and shot out a fountain of hot white ooze all over my torso.

Depleted, he looked at me and grinned. “Mmm. There we are.” He then leaned down and swiftly kissed my forehead, leaving to go wash himself off in the lake. And there I was, left lying on my back, short of breath and staring aimlessly up at the sky through tear-stricken eyes, with his seed on my stomach and a pool of blood underneath my sex.

I was yanked from my reverie when I began to feel my chest caving in. I was starting to drown. I ascended in a rush and gasped as I surpassed the surface. My heart rate began to slow down as my chest expanded in relief.

Tears escaped my eyes as I thought about how Jonah had influenced me with his words, the way he just left me once the act was done—the same way he did tonight. This whole time, I had let his constant pursuance of me after that night muddle me into thinking he really cared and had developed devoted feelings for me even though we never became exclusive. I had kept my eyes shut to the truth of what he really wanted back then, what he proved he still wanted now—what every guy wanted. I was nothing more than a sexual conquest. How could I be so blind? I shook my head, disappointed in myself. How could I let that happen to me?

I needed to get out. The lake no longer embraced me like it used to. My once glittering pool of blue silk was now a puddle of leaden mire.

I swam to the edge and wriggled out. A gust of cold wind blew from the trees and my wet body dried instantly. My hair tangled in a nest of damp havoc. My skin began to tremble. I crossed my arms and moved forward against the current. I walked for what felt like a mile, staring aimlessly at the ground. I finally collapsed by a large smoky stone near Alura's pond. I stared out for a moment then looked toward the sky.

"Michael!" I began to call out, searching for him through the dark dusty clouds, waiting for his broad wings to finally swoop down to the earth. "Michael, can you hear me? I need you!" Nothing. He was nowhere to be found. "Really?" I lay against the frigid rock with my knees bent against my chest and my head lying heavily upon them, my arms wrapped around my shins. So much for him being my guide.

I glared down between my legs at the ground beneath me. The brown grass felt dry against my skin. A black caterpillar then emerged from the ground and began crawling over my toes and onto my feet. I could feel each little peg of its legs pinching

my skin. But instead of brushing it off, I just stared as it made its way up my leg. I figured it would soon bite me. Maybe then, I would wake up from this nightmare.

Soon I noticed Alura walking my way, her peacock following close behind. I straightened myself and wiped my eyes, brushing the fuzzy insect off of me.

She kneeled down in front of me. “Priella, what’s wrong? You left so suddenly this afternoon and I haven’t seen you since. Are you okay? Why are you covered in bruises?”

“Oh, Alura.” I hugged her tightly and cried.

“Priella, what hap—? Wait.” She grabbed me and held me in front of her. She held me by the shoulders, stared at me hard, and then suddenly separated herself completely. She paused for a moment, looking away then closing her eyes. When she turned back to me her eyes had darkened. She smirked. “Okay, Priella. Tell me what happened.”

A strange pain emerged in the pit of my stomach. I had lost my desire to talk. I didn’t like her smile. But I knew I had to tell her. I took a deep breath. “Well, I was upset by something I saw. The Finnegans they—.” I stopped. She seemed amused. I shook my head then went on, “Anyway. So then I ran to Jonah. All I wanted was to talk. I was trying to process what I had just seen. I thought he would help. But before I could really say anything, he pushed me onto the ground and made me have sex with him. I really didn’t want to. But it didn’t matter. No matter how much I pleaded, he didn’t stop. It’s like he didn’t care. He kept going until he finished. And then he just left.” I paused. “So then I went to the lake to wash myself off and I started thinking about—.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset. What else did you expect to happen?”

“What?”

“I mean, you’re practically begging for it all the time. The way you move around and carry yourself screams ‘give it to me!’ Plus, you’ve always said yes to Jonah. What makes you think he, or anyone, would suddenly believe you didn’t want to have sex with him?”

“What? How can you say that to me?”

“Priella. You give in to any and every man that gives you even a speck of attention. I’ve yet to hear you say ‘no’ to any of the men you’ve ever mentioned. You’re out of control. In the past few months alone you’ve had sex with what, five other men besides Jonah?” She scoffed.

I looked away. “Stop it.”

“Besides, after everything that’s happened, did you really expect otherwise? Even if by some strange chance you really didn’t want to have sex with him, why would he care? He doesn’t take you seriously, Priella. Not in the way you want him to. He’s only around because you open your mouth and legs every time he asks, weak at the mere sight of him.” She got closer, glaring down at me. “You’re easy and he knows it. We all do.”

A wave of heat rose up my chest and into my face. I met her gaze with fevered tears. “Even you?”

She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head sideways. “Especially me.” She shifted her eyes away from me and onto her dainty hand that she now held by her face. She began looking at her nails nonchalantly as she continued, “I mean others can speculate, but I know firsthand. After all, I know all of your secrets.” She looked back towards me. “How many times has it been that you’ve confessed to me that you’ve regretted giving in

and settling for a sexual relationship when you wanted something more? And the next day after a tryst you're telling me that you love your sexual encounters? You know, how you revel in the orgasmic pleasure of it all? Now you expect me to believe, what? That Jonah, the man you've been obsessing over all these years, took advantage of you? Please." She shook her head. "I feel like I'm constantly dealing with two different people, two people with two very different desires. Which one is the real you, huh? Who should I believe?"

I stayed silent. I didn't know what to say.

She shrugged. "You know what I think? I think you base your feelings on what you can get, not what you really want. In fact, I don't think even you know what you really want. You have no true sense of self, Priella. What with all your contradicting stories and confessions. And even when you do claim to really want something, to want a change, and actually take the chance to make it happen, if it doesn't go your way you just slip right back and allow things to stay the way they were. I mean, what did I tell you that night after you talked to Jonah, huh? You know what I'm talking about."

"Don't do this right now."

"I warned you. But obviously, you didn't listen. Maybe now you'll realize I've been right all along. No wonder these things happen to you. That's what you get. You can't just say you want things to change, and then continue behaving the way you do. How can you expect anyone to ever treat you differently if your actions never change?"

"Are you kidding me? How dare you say that to me?" I stood up and glared down at her. "I've opened up to you this whole time thinking I could confide my real feelings to you, no matter how confused they were. Because that's what they were, confused! I

thought I could turn to you. I thought you were my best friend. And now when I'm feeling the lowest I ever have, you're just going to sit there and tell me that I had this coming all along? That I deserved all this?"

"I'm just telling it like it is. I wouldn't be a good friend if I wasn't honest with you now, would I? You need to face the truth, Priella. You'll never be wise, nor find a man to truly love and respect you, if you don't confront your faults and admit the part you've played in all this."

That was it. "I can't believe you." I turned and began to walk away in a fury. I took one last hard look at her. "I refuse to believe I deserved what happened to me."

* * *

"Michael. That's it. I'm done. Get me out of here. Now." Nothing. "Ah!"

My thoughts drifted back to Alura. Who does she think she is talking to me like that? Who is she to judge me? That's the last time I open up to her, about anything. I don't deserve that kind of treatment.

I stopped. I began to feel short of breath. My eyes filled with tears. I needed to hide. And so I ran. I ran through the crowd to the pink sandstone watchtower. It was the broadest monument in the Garden, the one farthest West. The one to house my pain.

I entered the dark building and climbed up the rough cold stairs to the third floor, the one with the ledge. My feet dragged on the roof. The stone was cold and rough. My soles chafed against the ground in agony, my fists clenched in disgust. I walked slowly toward the edge and sat. My bare feet hung in midair. I gripped the rock ledge underneath me. I cried, staring out into the blur that was the darkness of the Garden.

Before tonight, I thought the Garden was such a wonderful place. And then I bit the cherry. I thought I would discover and see more beauty than I had before. But instead, all I got was pain and confusion. Everything I thought I knew, along with the people I thought I could trust, was all just one big lie. As I looked down into the Garden, all I could see now were fits and yells. There was nothing but pain and harshness coming out of the mouths of every human. And in the ones I couldn't hear, all I saw were strikes of violence and abuse. How could a world with such pleasures be so cruel? And then it hit me.

My mind drifted back to that dreadful stormy night a few months ago. It was right here in the watchtower.

"Priella, what's wrong?" Alura called as she walked towards me.

I sat by the cold doorway with my knees bent toward my chest, staring out into the Garden. The rain poured sideways out of the thick gray clouds. Harsh thunder rumbled, resounding from the fierce crackling lightning that boomed behind Alura as she entered the tower. She wiped her skin, shivering from the rain, then bent down in front of me. I rested my head against the wall and cried.

"Priella, talk to me. Dillon told me he saw you running in here earlier. He said you looked upset. What happened?"

I wiped my eyes. "I did what you asked and confronted Jonah about us being together, about becoming exclusive."

"And? What did he say?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, he said he liked me, but that he wasn't sure he was ready to make that kind of commitment."

“Oh, Dear. I was hoping to be surprised, for your sake. But I had a feeling he would say something like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, based on the way he’s acted, did you really expect him to tell you otherwise? Did you really think he was going to want to be with you exclusively?”

“Yeah.”

She smirked. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. We’ve spent all this time together. We’ve been intimate. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Priella, all Jonah sees is a woman who gives him everything he wants, whenever he wants. Maybe if you wouldn’t have had sex with him, and been more firm about the fact that you wanted a deeper relationship, he would feel differently about you and wouldn’t hesitate at the chance to be with you.”

“So you’re saying that because I had sex with him, now there’s no chance for us to be together? Isn’t sex supposed to bring people closer? Doesn’t it mean anything that I’ve given myself to him in that way?”

“He doesn’t see it that way. Most men don’t.” She paused. “Look, I know you really like him. And you say he likes you too. But he told you that he wasn’t ready. And that’s the end of it. Now you have to make a choice.”

“What choice?”

“Well, you have to decide what you’re going to do. Are you going to stand up for yourself and what you want or are you just going to keep seeing him casually in the hopes that one day he’ll change his mind? I sincerely hope you don’t. Trust me, you’d be

wasting your time. He'll never be ready. You need to just let him go and move on. And when another man comes along, make sure you make him wait. Don't just give in to him because he asks you to. This is something I've been telling you for some time now. I hope you'll finally listen to me. Otherwise, things will just keep being the same for you. And I really don't want to have to repeat myself." She got up and looked down at me. "Do something about this, Priella. Now."

Alura was right. I did deserve this. While I did open myself up to other men, whom many came my way, nothing changed. And I never let Jonah go. I kept him around in the vain hope that I would finally get what I wanted. But I never did. I should've stood up for myself. Maybe tonight wouldn't have happened and I wouldn't feel this way. But it did. And now I'm forced to face the truth. I'd been acting like every single one of those rabid humans this whole time, taking what I could get, quenching my thirst with what was right in front of me no matter the cost. I suppose it's only fitting this should happen to me.

I knew I wanted more, wanted a relationship that transcended casual sex. I wanted someone to love. I always have. But over and over again, I did what I was told. I gave what was asked of me despite my hesitations. I showed my devotion through sexual favors and convinced myself that I would in turn receive the love and affection I so craved, that behaving this way would lead me to that deep love I was looking for. I even convinced myself that I was righteous in my behavior because love was behind every kiss and tryst. I figured it would be worth it and I would eventually achieve what I really wanted. But I was wrong.

Even this morning I told myself I was doing something right. Even though I was hesitant and felt uncomfortable after my union with Gale, I told myself, even told Alura, that I was simply being spontaneous and embracing my sensuality as I gave myself to yet another man, gave myself to a complete stranger. All I did was convolute my life, pushing my heart's desire farther away.

And then there was that desire, complicated by those treasured fruits that stirred my passions. I had never won the battle against the fervor of my own human nature when that passion overcame me. Was I even supposed to? According to everyone, lust was all I could ever achieve. Love was not my fate. I was craving a feeling that was supposedly unattainable to me. It was a feeling I obviously only conceived of in my mind, for tonight more than ever, I doubt it even exists. My life was the proper product of a truly barbaric reality. And that's all it was meant to be.

Was that the so-called *spiritual truth* Michael wanted me to learn? To accept the fate of the earthly world even though my heart ached for more? To accept this existence I was apparently doomed to since I lost my virginity and was awakened to the adulterous dynamics of the Garden? A dynamic only solidified by the horror of this never-ending night? If that was life, if tonight was a reflection of truth, I wanted no more of it.

I stared off into the Garden one last time. A sea of lust roared at me through my tear-blurred eyes that now seared with rage. Perhaps the truth was this: perhaps we were all just a bunch of fruit to be devoured until we could no longer provide any ration of nectar and were left with nothing but a layer of lifeless flesh. Perhaps the Garden was just one large cherry tree and now it was my turn to be plucked to give way for someone ripe

and new, a chance for someone else to witness the truth and glory of this ever-so-enthralling human existence.

I thought about it no more. I stood up on my toes, closed my eyes, and launched myself off the edge. The wind caressed my body, trying to seduce me one last time, and the never-ending lure of passion that had followed me my whole lifelong flashed before my eyes.

Suddenly, I was swept midair. I opened my eyes. It was Michael.

“You? What are you doing here? Let me go.” I tried to release myself from his grip. He rippled his wings against the wind and we remained floating in air.

He looked at me, stern. “Why did you throw yourself off the roof?”

“Because I want this to end already. This place. My life. It’s all a nightmare.” I shook my head. “And it’s all my fault.”

“Priella—.”

“You know what? No. *You’re* the reason all of this happened. You were the one who told me to bite the cherry.”

“I did, yes. But I didn’t show you the cherry so you would try to kill yourself.”

“Oh, really? Well, what do you care, anyway? I’ve been calling for you all night and you just left me here to suffer alone. I had to jump off a building for you to show up.”

“I know you have. But I couldn’t come.” I rolled my eyes and looked away.

“Priella, I warned you about this. You knew you’d be shocked by what the cherry showed you.”

“Yes. And I was. Now please, make it stop. I learned my lesson already.”

“Priella, you obviously haven’t learned your lesson. Trust the process. This is all part of it.”

“Trust the process?” I scoffed. “So you’re okay with all of this? You’re okay with me feeling this way? What if it gets worse?”

“Priella—.”

“No. How dare you?” I met his gaze and stared hard. “You’re no guardian angel. You’re merely a fiend with wings. Now let me go.”

“Oh, I’m going to let you go, alright.” He looked me in the eyes, his stare harsh. “Good luck in Hell.”

He swooped fast through the air and dropped me. My chest caved in as I fell fast toward the ground.

* * *

I woke up. Eerie black leaves cascaded over me. I was back at The Cherry Tree. I had landed by the outskirts and towards the outer edges of the grand dome. It was as dark as ever. Somber leaves stemmed out of obsidian branches connected to a trunk that was now rough and chipping. I sat up and peered closer. The splintering bark was slowly seeping a red-orange sap. A rotten cherry then fell and cracked open, oozing steaming oil onto the ground.

The voice of a woman enveloped my senses as it whispered my name, “Priella.” I looked around, but saw no one. She teased my ears again with her slurred call, “Oh, Priella.”

Soon a woman appeared from behind the tree, sliding her fingertips along the rough bark. She was a magnet for my eyes as I followed her long legs, up her voluptuous

hips, along her slender waist, and up to her swollen breasts that peeked through her wavy black hair. Her skin glowed a soothing pink light. And then, I saw her face. It was the most alluring part of all. She had plump mauve lips that slowly began to curve with a smile underneath dark heavy eyes.

She released the tree and began her approach. Her body swayed like a snake—fluid and loose. I stayed staring, mesmerized. There was something about her. She was the only one in the Garden I had seen all night with any real brilliance and beauty. She was a spark of light amongst a night of pure gloom.

She stopped in front of me, her weight shifted onto her hip. “I’ve been looking for you all night, Priella.”

“Looking for *me*? Have we met before?”

“No, we’ve never met. But I’ve been nearby. I’m Priscella.” She batted her eyelashes, smiling and brushing her hair behind her ear. I gasped. “I’ve been watching and admiring you from this very tree,” she went on, “I’m actually surprised you don’t recognize me.”

“I’m sorry.” I paused. “Well, I—.” I looked away and blushed. “I’m glad you approached me.”

“Good. I knew tonight was the night for us to finally meet.” She sat down next to me, her legs extended in front of her. “How has your night been?”

I took a deep breath and ran my fingers through my hair. “It’s been terrible, actually. I just wish it would end already.”

“Oh, Darling. Don’t worry. Now that we’re together, I guarantee you things will be different.” She shifted closer and began caressing my face. “You’ll see.”

“You know—.” I looked away.

“What?” She pulled my face towards her. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s just—.” I sighed. “This is the first time I’ve smiled all night.” I bit my lip. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Thank you. But I’m nowhere near as beautiful as you, Priella. You’re exquisite.” She lay down beside me, her limbs touching mine. I looked down at her. She lay stretched on the ground with one of her knees bent. Her arms, and her long flowy hair, lay on the grass above her head. She reached and began caressing my arm. “Come here. Let me show you.”

I let myself fall, I did not resist. After a night of suffering and confusion I allowed myself to feel the pleasure being offered to me.

She stared at me intently as she ran her fingers through my hair, her fingertips softly massaging my scalp. She then wrapped my hair around her fingers and gently tugged my waves, laying her hand against my cheek, bringing my face closer. She began kissing and sucking my neck, her breath hot against my skin. The sweet splendor of her lips made me smile, the tickling sensation causing goose bumps to form all over my body. Her fingertips then traveled down my neck through the center of my chest and around my breasts, her nails spiraling gently around them. I began to sweat from her touch. Heavy sighs escaped me.

“Mmm, I love the way you moan.” She whispered in my ear, “You really were made for loving.”

I closed my eyes as she then hovered over me and began to slink her body down. She traced her tongue down my body until she reached my lower abdomen, right beneath

my navel, licking and teasing one of my favorite spots. It was like she knew, like she'd touched me before and remembered precisely how to please me. I leaned over and looked down at her. All I could see was her long hair brushing against the deep arch of her back that led to her voluptuous posterior. I sighed and fell back against the ground, running my fingers through my hair.

She slid her body back up against me, her lips meeting my neck once more. Our eyes met as she then started to undulate her body, grinding her moist breasts and labia against me. The tease sent shocks of pleasure between my thighs. Her body was now flushed with fever and I had never wanted anything more. I wrapped my arms around her and brought her close, kissing her cheek, then her neck, right under her ear, pulling her hair. And soon the moans that vibrated from our throats echoed into one humming song.

She released from my grasp and rested her chin upon her hand, leaning over me. She began to trace her long pointed nail down my cheek. I closed my eyes. "No. Look at me." I opened them slowly. "There's something I want to show you." The moonlight caught the corner of her iris. Her black pupils then dilated as she grinned. The darkness of her eyes glazed over and I fell into a trance.

Suddenly I saw flashes of images: teeth crunching into a juicy red strawberry, lips kissing, a man groaning, a hand caressing a woman's chest and massaging her breasts, the sound of a woman moaning as a set of lips start kissing her neck.

The flashes were then clouded by a swirling fog.

The fog dissipated and the image of Gale holding a blueberry appeared. I heard my voice resound in my ear, "A blind submission that could provide the passion and romance I've been looking for." Quickly the image faded and Jonah's face emerged. "Be

with me,” he pleaded. I saw myself take a bite of the strawberry. He soon followed. And finally, there we were in a deep embrace kissing underneath the Cherry Tree.

How is this possible? How could she have known?

Then, I looked closer. My appearance in Priscella’s eyes suddenly resembled her own, as though she were the one living my memories. I quickly released from her gaze. Her eyes quickly returned to normal. But then, in an instant, she flipped her hair back and her strands began to lighten, like a wave of light flowing from her roots down to her ends. She then blinked her eyes and suddenly they were larger, brightened.

“What in the—?” I pushed and shoved, trying to get away, but her heavy body held me captive. “Who are you?”

She grinned and began to laugh. Suddenly, I felt a strong wave of heat roll up my body. I looked down. Her flesh was burning red. Her skin slowly ignited in flames from her feet up her legs, then her waist and her breasts, until finally the flames reached her neck. I watched in awe as she then moaned and flipped her hair once more and, suddenly, she was completely on fire. She had turned into a fiery demoness. Her bloodshot eyes with glowing black irises stared hard as he leaned into me. Her burnt orange and yellow skin burned against me.

“Ah! Get off me!”

She pierced her nails into my arms, keeping me immobile against the rigid ground. “Oh, Priella darling, don’t bother trying to run away. You’ll never escape me.” Her voice rasped in my ear, “You don’t have the strength.”

Her thick smoke whooshed into me. It filled my lungs, choking me. I shook my head trying to escape the smog, but it had enveloped me completely.

Suddenly, she separated herself and hovered above me. I thought I would have a chance to flee. But her transformation kept me petrified. I gasped in horror as a thick burning phallus protruded from her and, swooping downward, she abruptly thrust into me. “Ah!” I clenched my teeth and yelled. Her penetration was like a booming bolt of lightning surging inside of me. I was blinded by the excruciating sting of pain.

Over and over, she thrust into me. And with each crash, I felt myself begin to implode. I felt I would soon burst into a million pieces.

I didn’t know how much more I could take. I looked toward the sky in the hope that someone would save me. But there was no one in sight. All I saw was a dense dark cloud overwhelming the night, flashing thunder rolling through the sky.

“Stop it. Please.” I exhausted myself trying again to escape her grasp. But she held me down, captive. Tears ran down my face. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Oh, Priella, why do you try to fight me? Can’t you see this is who you are? What you’re meant for? Why do you think this is all you ever get? It’s because it’s meant to be that way. And the sooner you realize that, the happier you’ll be. Submit to it, Priella. Submit to me.”

“What?”

“Darling, why is this so hard for you? Just give in like you always do.”

“Excuse me?”

“Listen to me. All you have to do is say *yes*.” She hissed at me, her harsh words reverberating through my eardrums. “Be with me.”

I met her burning eyes and, in the glowing flames, I caught my reflection. Her pupils dilated once more. Repeatedly, ran those flashes of my past in her eyes, taunting

me. I took a long hard look at myself. I couldn't take it anymore. I could not, I would not, succumb.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened them, they were burning.
“No.”

“What did you just say to me?”

“You heard me.” She stared at me, furious. I kept her gaze as I scavenged the ground for something that would salvage me. Finally, I seized a sharp wooden branch. “I said no. That's enough.” I gripped the stake and shoved it deep into her thigh.

“Ah!” She released her grip, falling over to the ground.

I stood up. She looked up at me with furrowed brows and a harsh stare. My heart began to pound hard in my chest.

I inched closer to her. “How dare you try to make me a slave to my past or try to define who I am? You don't get to decide what's meant for me.” I paused. “Not anymore.”

She let out a deep sigh. And then, beginning from her feet all the way up to her head, her skin slowly returned to normal. There were no more flames. I watched in awe as her body became translucent, hollow. She then got up and stood close in front of me. I could feel her breath on my skin. Her eyes were glassy once more and I could see my reflection in her gaze. She then took a step forward and walked through me. I closed my eyes.

And just like that, Priscella was gone. But I could still feel her penetrating me, her essence filling my being. I sensed she would never truly leave.

The rain came down like a waterfall. And I couldn't help but sigh and smile as the cold wave poured over and washed me.

* * *

The rain slowly stopped. The clouds whisked away, and the night sky was suddenly cleared. And the stars were once again twinkling softly around the grand glowing moon.

And there he was. "Priella."

I had never jumped so quickly. "Oh, Michael." I fell into his arms and cried.

His wings opened and wrapped around us in a tight embrace. I perched my chin on his shoulder and rested my head against his. We stayed quiet for a while, just holding each other. My breathing slowed. My embrace deepened.

"I'm proud of you."

I pulled back and looked at him through tired eyes. His wings lowered. "Michael. That woman, Priscella, she—."

"You can feel her, can't you?"

"Yeah. I mean, she just walked right into me and disappeared. But. Yeah. I can still feel her."

"And you always will."

I sat down against the tree. "I had a feeling."

He sat beside me. "Priella, the reason you can feel her is because she's a part of you. Priscella is your darkest self realized."

“That’s why she knew so much about me.” I sighed. “But she was evil. She kept taunting me with visions of my past. Like she wanted me to stay there forever or something.”

“That’s because a part of you does. Or did, anyway. A part of you was comfortable there, and she knew that. She was just insisting on giving you what she thought you wanted, what she ultimately thought you needed.”

“But—.”

“But you knew better. And you chose to follow another path, despite what you were told. And with that path comes a new vision, one that will allow you to finally see yourself and the world as it was meant to be seen.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. I can finally move on.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, Michael was gone. The sun had risen and the bitten cherry lay in my hand. I took a deep breath as I stared at the ripening fruit.

I turned around and scanned the tree to where I first plucked that bright red entity that once called me from afar. And there, what was once a flashing cherry, then an emerald bud, now bore a large, plump, beautiful garnet fruit in its place.

And then, suddenly a grand and radiant yellow butterfly swiftly flew by me. I stared in awe as the butterfly slowed its flight, flapping its wings midair in a blissful moment suspended in time. The butterfly finally lowered and, ever so delicate and divinely, perched itself on my beloved ledge.