

THE QUARRY

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Bright Star

Before, the crowd hid us.

Amongst the swaying dancers, no one even noticed two girls kissing. But when Athena pulls me on the DJ's stage with her, we become the center of the universe. She puts her hands on my waist and the crowd slows. Suddenly everyone is looking at me. I stand on my tiptoes, slipping on the beer-polished floor as I try to make out the glowing exit light hiding behind the swarm of heads.

'Relax,' she whispers in my ear and the crowd growls in response. Athena just dances, head down, eyes squeezed tight, ignoring the attention we are drawing.

There's got to be an exit in here somewhere. But it's not near the bar, or at the back of the room. The crowd stares at me. They are a pride of growling lions, hungry, shoes scratching against the floor. It makes my skin crawl. We don't fit in here.

'We should leave,' I mutter, grabbing her hand.

They turn to watch a man with slicked back hair, a white shirt buttoned to the top and crocodile-skin shoes. He is front and centre, the king of the pride. His eyes undress me, picking out my weaknesses. He doesn't move, his chest neither rises nor falls. He is still, except for the mechanic movement of his wrist that swishes wine in his glass, around and around. My palms sweat and he watches me rub them down my thighs. His mouth twitches, smirking at my submission.

He takes a sip and nods. A path appears in the sea of footy shirts and flower crowns, revealing a door, light from the wharf outside seeping underneath. I grab Athena's wrist and pull her towards it, holding my breath in anticipation of a crushing wave that never comes. Just before we push out the exit, I look back. The man is still staring at us.

Who is he?

'Do you want to find another club?' she asks as we wander down Darling Harbour. She teeters along the edge of the wharf pretending it's a balance beam. She is so carefree, holding her arms out and wobbling.

'Didn't that bother you?' I ask as I count the shadows around us. None of them move.

'Just try not to think about it, yeah?' She runs to me and kisses my hand, leaving a ghost of lipstick on my knuckles. 'How about Scary? We've not gone for a while.'

I look around to see if anyone saw us. Only the shadows. There was a day, before the eggs cracked on my car, before the love letters spray-painted on my front door, when I didn't look behind me. I didn't care who noticed. I held her hand as we danced down the escalators to the harbour, greeting the flying whale on the way. We ran through fountains with the other kids and kissed in the back row of the Imax; 3D glasses discarded, eyes closed. Later, we sat on the wooden boardwalk, feet hanging

off the edge. Hands touching. Carefree. The world glared at us and we just watched the sunset. We told ourselves we could survive here. Belong here.

We don't.

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It's midnight. We stand in line in the 7-Eleven. Athena has grabbed a sausage roll from the pie warmer and the grease soaks through the paper bag.

'It's too early to go home,' she says, wiping her hands down her dress. 'Besides we have to wait 'til your mum falls asleep.' She rests her chin on my shoulder, waiting for an answer.

I stare at the wall of cigarettes as I hand money over, ignoring the cashier's eyes as he notices how close together we are standing us. He calculates each of the three atoms, nodding as though he has proven our sin.

Outside the shop, streetlamps yawn in a lazy flicker that barely illuminates the shadow-littered street. With only a pregnant moon watching us, I take Athena's hand. For a moment, quiet reigns.

A shadow stretches across the pavement. It is long and thin and peels away from the brick wall, forming the shape of a leg. A crocodile-skin shoe follows, bringing with it a man – no; The King. Yellow lips stretch into a plastic smile. I feel greasy, itchy. He balances a cigarette between his fingers. Tendrils of smoke reach out, filling the air between us.

'Ladies, you can't be going home so soon?'

I recoil, only to find Athena transfixed, breathing in the smoke. She smiles at him, leaning closer. I grab her wrist, attempting to pull her away.

'I can show you a new world. One where girls like you belong. A safe place.'

Athena tugs back, and I stumble closer to him.

'It could be fun,' she sings to me, her fingers dancing up and down my arm. They fiddle with the sleeve of my shirt. She looks back at him. 'Where is it? Oxford Street?'

'Somewhere new.'

I can smell the fruitiness coming from the cigarette smoke. Cherries. I am intrigued. ‘It could be fun,’ I repeat.

Athena giggles, taking a bite of her sausage roll before she skips off down the street.

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The moon is pinned between 12 and 1 as we climb the graffiti-covered staircase to the club. A shadow curves up the stairs with us. My stomach tightens as we follow a path of phone numbers and lewd advertisements. From the top, the King smiles at me with the same overstretched grimace as before, reaching a hand down. Shadows buzz around him. Maybe this was a bad idea. I take a breath and step inside this so-called paradise.

The walls are painted like rainforests. Ivy drips off a balcony outside. A fishpond lies sunken into the middle of the room. It paints the ceiling with the silvery glow of its water. Koi fish jet beneath the surface like shooting stars. Bouncers guard the edge of the room, roses tucked into their lapels. On the dance floor, girls dance with other girls, their lips too close and hands too wandering to just be friends.

We move to the bar where an ibis sings pop songs. The bartender, a lion-faced man with a mane pulled into a bun, serves us a shimmering drink in a coconut.

‘Ambrosia,’ he says. I take a sip. It is sweet. A pomegranate and strawberry blend. It tastes like summer, like immortality. My muscles instantly relax.

‘Dance?’ I ask, as I pull Athena onto the dance floor. The ibis sings Bohemian Rhapsody and we sing along. Athena’s eyes are closed, hips loose. Light dances across the glitter on her cheeks. Her hands run up my snakeskin tights and slip around my waist. I wrap my arms around her, letting our hips rub against each other. Her breath tickles my neck. My ponytail becomes looser with every song until my hair bounces on my shoulders. Athena wraps her hands in it. She is so beautiful. I draw her hair behind her ear and lean in. Just as I am about to kiss her, the King appears behind us.

‘Don’t you just love it here?’ he says, handing me another drink. As I sip it, I smile at him, slightly woozy, and take his hand.

‘It’s fantastic,’ I say.

He smells so sweet. Fruity. I pull him close to me. Athena is confused. She grabs my hand but I push her away. I take another sip as a bouncer taps her on the shoulder. The shadows swallow her, but I'm too busy staring into the endless galaxy of his eyes to notice.

We sip back the ambrosia, lining coconut after coconut along the bar while the ibis sings jazz tunes. It is just him and me now, everyone else has melted away. We laugh, heads thrown back, feet kicking. I kiss his cheek, his nose, his hands. The ambrosia has made me ravenous. The moon grows heavier as the song gets louder and I become drunker.

A slow dance plays, and his hand rests on the small of my back. We spin, dazzling and perfect, Cinderella and her king. 'You and me, we are the golden ratio. We can be so beautiful,' he says. 'Together.'

I want this to be beautiful. I want to believe in this safety. It is so much easier. So I kiss him. I tuck my hair behind my ear, place my hand on his chest and kiss him. And it is perfect.

Until it isn't. His mouth tastes of maraschino cherries. It is sour and artificial. My stomach turns. I push him away.

I'm going to be sick.

I find myself dry-heaving in the bathroom sink. A glass of pink liquor rests on the marble counter and I chuck it back, hoping it'll soothe my stomach.

Then, he appears behind me. 'Look how perfect we are. Together,' he says.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My body redefines itself to his desire as his hand caresses my cheek. Sharp cheekbones. Plump lips. Curls graze against my shoulders, bouncing in a kind of effortlessness that takes hours to perfect. He kisses my neck. My breasts grow plumper and my waist grows thinner. Am I really this pretty?

I reach out to touch my reflection. It smears, leaving grease on my fingers and revealing the truth. Smudged mascara. Cracked lips. My t-shirt hugs my collarbone and hangs loosely, hiding any curves. The bathroom smells of vomit and cherry air freshener. I push him away from me.

‘This isn’t me. This is just an illusion. Just the promise of emptiness,’ I cry.

He grabs my wrist and spins me to face him. His fingers dig into my skin, and I feel the bones move. I gasp. I try to pull away but his grip is too strong. He pushes me back against the bathroom counter. The impact of the marble flashes up my spine and I’m ripped out of his fantasy. My vision goes black.

I sit across from Athena. Steam from a coffee machine perfumes the room. The cafe is filled with small children weaving between tables. Athena flicks grains of sugar at me and I hold my spoon up like a shield, giggling. Her nose scrunches at the bridge from the faces she pulls. I brush my fingers along her hand. This is the perfect day, the perfect future. The coffee machine splutters. Children knock a table and cutlery clashes to the floor. I look up, only to see him. He can’t be here. This is my dream. He doesn’t belong here.

Our cups explode into shards of porcelain. In the blast, I am torn away from her. Ivy wraps itself around her arms and she struggles to reach me. I try to crawl to her but something grabs my ankle, stopping me.

‘Wasn’t it easier to be with me?’ he asks ‘Isn’t this world safer?’

I knee him in the groin, and push him off me with more force this time. I dart out of the bathroom, back into the club. The music has stopped and shadows lurk on the dance floor. She has to still be here. But where?

The bottles behind the bar are filled with murky liquors, and the bartender bares his teeth at me. His mane slips free of its bun, flaring wildly around his face. She’s not near the barstools. I spin around the room. Crocodiles crawl out of the pond, snapping their jaws. Above me, bats hang from flickering lights. Snaps of light pierce through their wings like makeshift strobe lighting. I see no trace of her. Flapping wings swarm towards me, biting my neck and clawing at my face. I grab a fire extinguisher off the wall, and hold it like a weapon.

Something moves outside. Athena? I push through the glass doors, and out onto the balcony. She’s there, collapsed at the edge of the balcony. Her hair spills across the ground like spilt milk. Her arm is trapped beneath her body but reaches out, as if

calling to me. Ivy from the balcony creeps towards her, twisting around her limbs-half-blanket, half-chains.

Oh God, be alive.

The King steps in front of her, appearing in a crack of thunder that buckles the concrete beneath us. He stands in the broad moonlight. Gnarled knuckles. Yellowing teeth. Skin stretched across his gaunt face. He is horrific. Why couldn't I see it before?

The bouncers pour out from the club, onto the terrace. Their arms are covered in thorns. Pink petals have replaced their heads in the form of a grotesque face. They circle me, standing side-by-side with interlinking arms. The thorns grow across their chests until I am trapped in a caged rose bush. I swing the base of the extinguisher at the wall, hoping to make a hole.

The cage barely even budes. Instead, the thorns grow around it, swallowing the tank. I punch the guarded wall. Kick it. Flail against it. The rose faces just blink at me. A leafy arm uncurls itself from the cage and wraps itself around my neck. Its grip is just tight enough to make me gulp for air. Thorns dig in and drops of blood seep out staining the neckline of my shirt.

'Come with me and you can save her,' the King says. 'I can protect you. Be the home you always wanted. You could be free from all of this pain.'

The cherry smell appears again, forcing me to imagine a life with him. The small suburb. The Toyota. The dog. The smiles shared with neighbours while taking out the bins. A peaceful life. Without Athena.

Athena.

I remember the way her breath tickled me on the dance floor. The way her hands, those soft hands, accept me, the way they always have. The way she felt like safety more than anything else in the world. More than anyone else.

Here I stand, a girl in front of a king.

Fuck him.

I shove my hand through the cage of thorns. They scrap up the length of my arms, but I reach through. I won't be paralysed by fear anymore. The petals flake

away. Pink turns to brown, then dust. Thorns fall apart. The tendrils release their grip on me. The extinguisher clanks to the ground and rolls near my feet.

I pick it up and turn to face the King.

‘You were never protection. Only decay.’

The metal extinguisher is cool in my hand. I raise it. Point it at his face. Something fills his eye, perhaps fear. I squeeze.

Snowflakes line his eyelashes. He blinks and frost grows across his skin. He crashes to the floor. Gone.

Athena wakes up in a gasp. The ivy withers, shrinking back onto the balcony. I run to her.

‘You are my family. My home. I want you. I will always want you,’ I tell her.

I kiss her.

The sky has sweetened since we entered the club. We walk up the black footpath to Wynyard station and slip onto a train just as the doors close. Something draws my glance back to the platform. A man stares at me, hair slicked back.

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I sneak Athena into my bed as the morning takes its first breath.

‘Tell me a story,’ I say.

She creates a constellation, pinning together the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. ‘In a great empire kissed by the gods, no one has to hide between moth-laced jumpers,’ she starts. ‘There, we are bright stars, luminescent, gorgeous.’

I close my eyes. ‘Where is this world?’

‘Far away,’ she sighs. She rolls over to me and rests her chin on my chest.

Here, we are still less than beautiful.

But, for now, it is enough.