

# THE QUARRY

Chloe Louis

## The Playground Shadow

None of the other children ever wanted to play with her.

They pretended she wasn't even there as they shrieked in delight, running as fast as they could to win the game of tag. Kids visited the playground every day, but no one ever offered to push her on the swings. On cold days, she would watch them build snow people dressed in the fluffiest scarves and fanciest hats, while the flakes swirled around like a scene from a shaken snow globe. They all existed in a happy bubble, and she watched from the outside, unable to pop it and join them.

The playground was empty today. It had been raining softly all afternoon, so no children would come to play. She didn't mind the rain. It made the grass shiny and cleaned the abandoned toys. Maybe it could wash away her invisibility, then the children would see her and let her join their games. She trudged towards the swings, her favourite spot, and dodged the obstacle course of puddles while the drops continued to tap tap tap her on the head. Today she was the ruler of the playground.

The triumphant feeling faded when she spotted the seesaw. On her early days in the playground, a little girl with the prettiest sunflower dress had been playing there with an

older boy. He pushed harder against the ground, his strong legs sending them higher and higher each time. Sunflower girl's giggles turned to whimpers. She pleaded with the boy, why couldn't he see that Sunflower was so small, so afraid? No matter how loud she cried, the boy never looked her way. The little girl slipped and landed on her arm with a sickeningly loud crack.

Shaking her head to shoo the dark thought cloud, she dug her heels in the mud and pushed herself off the ground. Perhaps if the swing went high enough, she could land on a cloud, safe and solitary, and watch the teeny tiny kids from far away. But that wouldn't be so different from now.

The swing slowed to a creaky halt. A gentle breeze eased the old rainbow merry-go-round merrily round and round. It danced between the red, orange, yellow leaves of the trees and nudged her tattered dress. She frowned, trying to remember how her dress was ruined. Or how she had gotten to the playground. Or her name. Everything before the playground was . . . empty. Just an ocean of nothingness.

Softly sighing, her gaze dropped from her clothes to her muddy shoes. The rain was still falling, but she could no longer feel it. Where was the tap tap tap? Was she invisible to the sky too? She glanced up.

Someone was holding an umbrella over her head. Or rather, *something* was a more fitting description. It was more shadow than person, dark amidst the muted colours of the playground, with eyes that glowed like candlelight.

But somehow, she did not feel afraid.

'At last, I have found you.' The shadow's whisper sent chills down her spine. 'You have drifted far, little one.'

As the shadow spoke, its dark cloak had slightly fallen back, exposing a hint of smooth bone where a face should have been. The candlelit eyes seemed to float where normal eyes should have been.

She felt glued to her seat, frozen by the cool wind and the colder voice. 'I don't think I'm supposed to talk to strangers.'

The flames glowed pleasantly as they continued to watch the child, thawing the chill that had seeped under her skin. 'But I am no stranger. I am a friend who has come to collect you.'

Her craning neck became sore. She hung her head and studied the shadow's feet, but instead there was a cloak made of strange smoke. It wasn't blown away by the breeze. The black tendrils lazily swirled in place like the darkest storm cloud.

'Why?' she asked, her small voice echoing in the silent playground as she raised her head again.

The flames dimmed, almost like they were sad. ‘Little one . . . do you not know what happened to you?’

The little girl shook her head, tiny fists tightly gripping the metal chains of the swing. The brief warmth was gone and in its place cold cold *cold* settled into her skin. Maybe she stole it from the swing’s chains. How could she give it back?

The shadow reached into its cloak, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper, and offered it to her. The sleeve slipped back, revealing a skeletal hand. She shakily took the paper, fingers brushing against the bone. *Cold*. Her body seemed to know what was coming, even though her mind was still racing to catch up. Finally, a game of tag. But now was not the time.

The paper was as blank as her memory, but came alive with her touch. Smoke as dark as the shadow’s cloak swirled around, settling to create a picture of a car that had been flipped upside down. The wheels shouldn’t be up there. How was the car supposed to work? The smoke rearranged itself, and words swam around like confusing alphabet soup, all mismatched, until it settled to create another image. Two adults stood near the car, shaking like the trees’ leaves in the wind. The shadow approached them, seemingly speaking quiet words and reaching out a bony hand. They stopped shaking, serene as they accepted the offered hand. A little figure appeared at the other side of the car, far from the adults.

Her hands stopped shaking. She could no longer hear the pitter patter of the rain. The quiet was way too loud. The figure was a little girl with wild hair, with the same face she would always see reflected back at her in the puddles of rainwater. She watched, unable to tear her eyes away as the little girl slipped away, drifting past the tree that had squished the car like a bug. The smoke rearranged itself again, but the alphabet soup cleared to form a real word: Leila.

‘I am Leila?’

*She had a name.*

‘Yes.’

Leila balled up the paper in her fist. She still did not understand . . .

‘Why can’t I remember?’

Leila looked up at the shadow. It had not moved this entire time, as still as the trees surrounding the playground.

‘Memories fade away once you are dead.’

She loosened her grip on the paper. *Dead*. It sounded so final. But the word felt familiar. The children used it in their games, shrieking that the imaginary monster was

*dead*. But they made it sound so bad. Hearing the shadow say it, was a different feeling. Something finally made sense.

‘Is that why the other children can’t see me?’

The shadow nodded. ‘The living cannot see us.’

Leila tilted her head. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am the Reaper. I am a friend who is here to collect you.’

Leila let the newspaper clipping float to the ground. The mud greedily swallowed it up. She oddly felt at peace.

‘Are you lonely, Mr. Reaper?’

The Reaper seemed to be at a loss for words. It silently eased the umbrella closed. The rain had stopped, but the world was still grey. Leila glanced at her skin. She never noticed that it was grey too.

‘I always collect souls once it is their time,’ the Reaper rasped, startling Leila back to attention. ‘But I could not find you. It . . . worried me, that you were somewhere alone, and I have been searching for you ever since.’ The candlelit eyes looked around the playground. ‘Somehow you turned up here.’

Leila followed the eyes. While the children had never seen her, the playground had been her safe place. ‘How long have you been searching?’

The Reaper’s quiet sigh washed over her, cold like the winter breeze. ‘Far too long.’ The candlelit eyes dimmed again as they turned to her. ‘I am sorry, little one.’

The cold reminded her of the winter days watching the children and their snow people. Leila blinked away the memory. ‘The swings kept me company.’

‘They must have made fine companions,’ the Reaper touched a single bony finger to the metal chain.

Leila hummed in agreement. Her blank memory replayed the paper over and over, pausing on the image of the two adults. All the adults in her playground always looked the same, but these two were different. The woman had hair even wilder than Leila’s, and the man had a face similar to her own. They were beautiful.

‘Mr. Reaper . . . were they my parents?’ Leila whispered.

The light glowed warmer than ever before as the Reaper offered a skeletal hand. ‘Yes. They have been waiting for you.’

Leila’s lips curled upwards. She let go of the familiar metal chain of the swing, her pale palm accepting the offered bone.

