

THE QUARRY

Hollow Love

Brianna Sawyer

‘Love me,’ she begged.

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‘Please,’ she fell to her knees, unable to support her quaking bones.

12 hours earlier

Love knocked on the wooden door and twisted the handle. Stepping inside, the smell of stale bread and mouldy cheese made her scrunch her face. Her mother sat in bed, staring at the ceiling. The moth-bitten blanket engulfed her petite frame. Spider webs clung to the closed

curtain and tittering squeaks could be heard in the walls. Love swallowed, and lifted a tray of goat milk and crusty bread.

‘Mum, you have to eat something,’ Love said, glancing at her mother’s chest bones, which protruded against her veiny skin.

Hollow rolled away, tufts of brown-silvering hair spotting her head. Love straightened her spine and placed the tray on the side table. Breathing through her mouth, she pulled the ratty blanket up and tucked it under her mother’s chin. Turning away, Love walked to the door, but stopped to glance over her shoulder.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ she paused, looking at the flaking citrine wallpaper, once a vibrant yellow. She cleared a lump in her throat.

‘I love you, mum.’ Love held her breath, waiting.

Her mother’s body language gave no indication of hearing her, though Love knew her hearing was fine. Love squeezed her eyes shut then reopened them, nodding sadly as she let the door click softly behind her.

The breeze from the ocean slipped around the three huddled figures along the edge of the sandy cliff-face. They shivered in their black bearskin coats. The sun peeked over the horizon, bathing their bodies in an orange warmth which did nothing to rid the chill in their hearts. After all, today was another funeral.

‘Why would Cliff venture up onto the cliffs? His deathname was plain enough, why would he go anywhere near them? Doesn't make a lick of sense.’ Love questioned, shaking her head. Arrow’s pale blue gaze flitted over to her.

‘Why am I an archer’s apprentice, when my deathname is Arrow?’ Arrow quirked an eyebrow, combing her fingers through her wind-woven red tresses. ‘Old-man Cliff didn't want his deathname to control his life no more. Suppose he wandered up to the cliffs to see what he’d been missing during his cliff exile.’

‘Exile? Deathnames aren't punishment, Row. They’re precaution,’ Love said automatically, staring down at the funeral procession happening below them on the sand-bed.

Arrow scoffed. ‘What a load of mud. You’ve seen the self-barricaded town houses. That’s not precaution, Lo, that’s paranoia.’

Love mumbled noncommittally, her attention snagging on the gaping black mouth of the Calling Caves, where every newborn received their deathname from the oracle within. The villagers called him The Caller. As Love stared, the black hole seemed to widen, revealing a cloaked figure by the entrance. She shivered, the wind tearing through her coat and making her eyes stream.

‘This makes nine funerals in five days, don't it?’ Arrow clicked her tongue against her teeth. Love wiped at her watery eyes, fixing her attention back on the grey body atop the funeral pyre.

‘It’s unheard of,’ Love agreed.

‘What’s unheard of?’ Trip piped up, sweeping a tangled strand of black hair out of his preoccupied eyes. He was heavily involved with the making of a sandcastle. Conversations never excited Trip; they never shaped into anything with gritty substance.

‘Your complete and utter lack of attention,’ Arrow shot back, pointedly looking at his sand abomination. Trip shrugged and Arrow huffed out a breath of smoky air. Love sat between Arrow and Trip, and she felt her heart ache in response to their bickering.

Love knew there were different versions of love you could have for someone. She made a hobby out of identifying them in the people she encountered. The bakers’ cherub-faced daughter twirling on her toes so her baby brother stopped crying. Arrow’s mentor shooting her proud smiles when an arrow hit its mark. Trip stealing glances of Arrow when she was busy detangling her red mane. Seeing these gestures, Love had also become an expert in spotting a lack of love. After all, she dealt with the absence of it every day of her life. The wide berth the other villagers gave her. An ever-expanding detachment between herself and her friends. Including her own mother. But Love understood why.

No one wanted her to die.

It didn't stop Love, however, from craving that which would kill her.

‘I should get back, my mum...’ Love trailed off. Arrow’s frown softened considerably. Trip had even stopped moulding sand into a misshapen castle, which was then quickly conquered by the whistling wind.

‘My mum, she—she’s refusing to eat anything now. I try feeding her dense foods and warm liquids, but it’s not working. Her body is shutting down. She—she’s just giving up.’ *On me*, was the add-on both her friends knew lingered there, unspoken. Arrow squeezed her shoulder a moment, then let go.

‘Her deathname is Hollow,’ Arrow said quietly, and bit her tongue when she saw Love wince, ‘do you think an outer-region disease is emptying her out?’

Love breathed in the crisp cool wind, looking out to where the ocean caressed the sky. Love was half convinced she was the disease.

‘I’ve tried the medication we had in storage, but with no food in her stomach, the meds just make her sicker. I don’t know what else to do.’

‘Talk to her,’ Trip murmured, accompanied by a solemn head nod. Arrow’s mouth twitched.

‘This advice coming from the man-of-few-words himself. Surprise after surprise, it is with you,’ Arrow replied. Love laughed as Trip mimed an arrow plunging through his heart. Arrows twitching mouth stretched into a smile.

Then the pyre sparked a blaze and their smiles melted away. They all looked on as licking flames engulfed the lifeless body. Moisture gathered in the corner of Trip’s usually untroubled brown eyes. Arrow shuffled behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest. Love shut her eyelids but couldn’t shut out the images of her mother, bedridden and helpless, morphing into a pale corpse surrounded by hissing flames as her skin peeled off her bones. She kept shaking her head but the image kept searing her brain, like a branding iron. A shake to the shoulder made her eyes fly open. Love gulped down cold air to settle her laboured breathing.

‘Trip’s right, talk to your mum, Lo,’ Arrow whispered, her head resting against Trip’s shoulder blade.

‘If she can stand to look at me,’ Love snorted, tearing her attention away from the fire. The Caller was hovering by the entrance of the Calling Caves. She blinked—despite the roaring wind, his cloak remained completely still.

Hurrying through the main courtyard, Love could smell fresh garlic and sizzling meats in the brisk air. Drawn to the stand by the sweet fragrance, Love exchanged her pouch of four chicken eggs for a slab of caramelized lamb and rosemary sprigs. To her left, she saw the closed sign on the door of Cliff's Carrot Cakes. Now there was no one left to tend to the fireplace inside, allowing the front window to gather a thin skin of ice. Turning away, her eyes travelled to the boarded-up houses and businesses lining the cobbled courtyard. Wooden slats were secured over windows and doorways, dozens of nails sticking out haphazardly.

Every so often, Love caught flickers of light between the wooden beams when a person moved behind them. Collision, a mother of twin sons, Arti and Choke, had locked her family behind the walls of their home. A widower named Rod had closed his metalwork shop and disappeared when he lost his wife, Bee, to an unidentified infection. Taking a deep breath, Love could taste the salty ocean air and the tang of fear lingering along the skin of everyone she passed. Scratching at her arm, she looked up. Love stood before an unlit townhouse. Trudging forward, she pulled the key which hung around her neck and opened the front door. Letting it swing shut behind her, she was greeted by a wave of rotting flesh.

Rinsing her hands at the sink, Love reached for the ragged towel. Atop the tray, she tossed the caramelized lamb with rosemary sprigs and set a chipped limestone jug of water next to the platter. Walking down the dimly lit hallway, she paused before entering her mother's bedroom. Her hands were trembling, making the contents of the jug slop over the side. She needed to talk to her mother; Arrow and Trip were right. Without knocking, she turned the door handle and entered. Love kept her eyes on the tray, but could hear her mother's shallow breaths.

'It's lamb, your favourite,' she said, setting the tray on her mother's lap. Love picked up the jug of water and lifted it to her mother's lips. Tilting her head back, Love managed to get the water into her mouth without it pouring down her chin, unlike the times before. Setting the water down, she looked at her mother's sunken cheeks and the purple discolouring under her cloudy, brown eyes.

'You're killing yourself,' she said, moving the tray onto the side table. Her mother continued to stare upwards, her gaze unfocused. But her mouth tightened slightly, Love noticed.

‘Say something. *Talk to me.*’

The silence was a crushing weight.

Love sprung from her perch on the lumpy mattress and paced the room. Glancing at the corner, she watched a black beetle scuttle under the bed. Love couldn't even muster disgust at the sight, more revolted by the sickly creature lying on top.

‘I don't know what to do anymore, I don't know how to help,’ Love began, twisting her hands together. ‘I've fed you, bathed you, cared for you. All for nothing? Is that it? You're happy to waste away? I know death haunts us here, in this paranoid village. It lies on the end of every breath. But I'm haunted by *your* death every time I shut my eyes. The house is falling apart. I'm falling apart. Because you're giving up. You're giving *up*...’ Love bit her lip, hard. A metallic taste flooded her mouth.

‘You're my mother,’ her voice cracked, ‘why don't you love me?’

From the gloom, a scratchy voice spoke.

‘You know why.’

Love looked away.

‘Do you think I'm selfish because I want to be loved?’

‘I think you're foolish,’ her mother coughed, sputtering. Her unfocused gaze, however, remained fixated on the ceiling.

‘Because being loved is how I'm going to die?’

‘Yes,’ croaked Hollow.

‘You think I have a death wish?’

‘Yes.’

‘I get it from my mother, apparently,’ Love snapped.

Hollow's face seemed to cave inwards. Her eyes closed, then fluttered open and rested on Love's face. Love thought they resembled the eyes of funeral goers: pained and resigned.

‘I'm sorry,’ Love bowed her head. Her mother opened her mouth but no sound came out. She tried again.

‘Not loving you kills me,’ Hollow said, barely above a whisper. ‘It eats me up inside.’

The quaver in her mother's tone made something quaver inside Love. She dropped to her knees beside her mother, feeling the confession settle like a weight on her chest. Her mother's face broke apart, knowing Love had come to the realisation Hollow had known for some time. Tears began spilling down Love's cheeks and Hollow reached out a trembling hand to wipe them away. It made Love cry harder. She gathered her mother's hand in both of her own and pressed her lips to it. Love could feel the thin bones pushing against her mother's cold, rubbery skin. She thought back to Cliff's Carrot Cakes, cold, abandoned. Love couldn't help but feel as if her mother had lost her fire too.

Suddenly, the hand she held went limp.

Releasing a shaky breath, she placed the arm across her mother's stomach, then stood. Her knees wobbled. Looking down, Love saw her mother's gaunt face and half-open eyes, staring blankly. She backed up until she collided with the wall, flakes of teal raining down on her. Unable to support her weight, she collapsed on the carpet matted with stains.

Love, herself, felt like a stain for existing. For on the bed, her mother lay utterly still. Her chest did not rise, as her heart, devoid of love, could no longer beat.

In a daze, Love raced down the sandstone stairs. The ocean tides at the bottom were flooding the stretch of sand between the staircase and the Calling Caves. Plunging forward, Love waded through the freezing water which climbed to her waist. Hoisting herself free from the seawater, Love stood facing the black mouth of the Calling Caves. Inside, the cave walls were coated with moisture. A *ping ping ping* of falling water echoed throughout the chamber.

'Where are you?' she screamed, breathless.

'Where I've always been,' came the reply.

'Bring her back. You can save her. You have a direct connection to the Fates.'

The Caller didn't respond.

'Please, just bring her back.' A black-robed figure seemed to detach itself from the darkness. Love lurched back a step. The Caller tilted its mouth. The smile looked slightly unhinged. Love shook, her lips turning purple.

‘What’s dead, stays dead,’ said The Caller.

Love squeezed her eyes shut. Behind her eyelids, she saw her mother’s body, still and lifeless. *Hollow*.

‘Love me,’ she begged.

The figure encased in shadows stilled, eyes glistening. Above, stalactites dribbled sticky droplets which froze to ice pebbles as they fell through the frigid air.

‘Please,’ she fell to her knees, unable to support her quaking bones. Her breath turned to puffs of cloud in front of her.

‘You wish to die,’ The Caller stated. Love shook with silent tears, nodding. A hissing rose from The Caller. Love froze, realising the oracle was laughing. Something cold snaked down her spine. She heaved herself onto her shaking feet.

‘Are you my people’s oracle?’

The figure grinned, shifting into the dark recesses of the Calling Cave.

‘What are you?’ she breathed.

‘Impatient,’ it teased, a clicking reverberating against the cave walls. ‘Want to know a secret, Little Love?’ The voice twisted around the caves, coming from every direction. Love flipped around, certain the creature was behind her.

‘You were never going to die from love.’

Love flinched.

‘It was all for nothing?’ She saw her mother’s motionless body behind her eyelids, pale and cold. ‘You’re lying,’ she spat.

The creature bared its pointed teeth. ‘Insulting a God? Little Love, I could squash you into the Earth where you belong and watch you wriggle like all the other worms. Nothing but insectile, pink flesh rolling in your own filth.’ It hissed, spittle flying from its mouth. ‘But you do secrete tasty treats.’ The creature breathed in deeply, nostrils flaring as its eyelids fluttered closed.

‘Why are you *here*?’ she panted, her voice trembling. The creature opened its bulbous black eyes and smiled sharply.

‘To call and collect.’

‘Why?’

‘Why?’ the guttural voice mimicked, ‘Mmmm. I like to toy with my food, Little Love, before I feast. And your mother was my favourite. Playing with a second generation to manipulate the first. The sweet patience it took. The sweetest reward. There’s nothing more delicious than a sacrifice.’ The creature whetted its pale, flaky lips.

She faced the creature as it loomed closer. Her eyes welled with pain and resignation.

And the Death God welled with satisfaction. It bared needle-like teeth, saliva slipping down its jaw.

Love closed her eyes and let her guilt swallow her whole.