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Baby's Breath

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Baby's Breath

Brother blinked away the whiteness in his eyes and the field of white froth below came into focus. With his elbows pressing into the soil he examined the rolling meadow of Baby's-breath—how it might've looked like clouds of smoke, or perhaps sea foam settling on the shore. He tried to imagine these things as clearly as he could. He had only ever saw those words in a book, but they made him curious. And anxious. He wondered if there was sea foam and smoke where he had to go.

From atop the hill, Brother also took in the jagged fringe of the forest. Where the glorious Baby's-breath faded, towering dark trees stood in arms. Fog weaved itself between their branches, blurring the line between mist and cloud. These were familiar to Brother: Mist, clouds, trees, Baby's-breath. These words settled over him warmly. They were home; they were the world.

Then, strangely, he thought of the word “olive” and his skin speckled.

Olive.

Muted by the pinch of thorns in his skull, a little dumpling child had stood in a forest clearing with his hands clutching wet soil. He liked the feel of it. It was a wonder of the world—soil. Trees forty times his size had leaned over him, their leaves watching the little boy wonder below. The rustling of the wind held whispers of gossip. They would go and tell Bapham that Brother was there almost past sunset. None of the hundred thorn-headed children were to ever wander in the forest past sunset.

But Brother had glimpsed something that gave him a feeling he couldn't quite describe. If he had heard the word before Brother would have described it as “strange.”

It had been his turn to draw water from the well. A dragging hem

of an olive dress had caught his eyes between the clumps of foliage. Then, he had glimpsed pale skin like *snow*. Brother only thought of that word now.

It was Sister, hand in hand with two cloaked figures. She had craned her neck to look at him, old wounds made pink and puffy by a fresh thorn crown. Her lips had been twisted funny, and her eyes were wide with...with... something Brother could not conjure at the time. A sliver of instinct had ignited him, and he found himself tied to this olive hem. He would have compared it to rope if he had known how.

The thing had tugged him toward an aged oak. But there had been no olive hem dragging, nor pale skin, nor towering cloak figures. He felt a rush he couldn't name. It had squeezed his lungs, yet he still held onto his breath. The trunk, mossy and huge, had folded in on itself, as if hiding a secret.

He then understood the emotion that came with wide eyes and twisted lips. In the burning light of a dying sun, her white skin shone like diamonds. No flush of pink except in a ring around her neck where...

He still had not thought of the word "rope."
... a thing had suspended her in the air. The olive hem lied beneath her blistered feet with the rest of her dress, ripped and torn and ruined. Brother had not thought about nakedness either. He had no thought there was a word.

A stillness had thickened the air and condensed in Brother's throat, causing him to choke. The wind stopped its whispering and gossiping, yet Sister swayed lightly from a tree limb with a grim smile on her face.

"Sssssaaaad." Sister had dragged her cheeks and eyes downward dramatically then puckered her lips. She then laughed, nudging a confused Brother in his ribs.

"Well how do you know?" he had asked her.

"My mother said so." She shrugged.

Sister then lifted a piece of the damp earth, worms dangling from the sediment in her hand. Beneath had been strips of paper, gray and smudged, black things printed all over them.

Brother had watched her carefully, wondering if she was trying to show him “mother.”

“You can’t tell anyone you seen these.” Sister motioned to her pile of half mush.

“What are they?”

Sister had picked one up and handed it to Brother.

“Paper.”

In the corner of the shred, there had been a woman’s face—crumpled and damaged by weather and moisture. Brother examined it carefully, trying to imagine what the other half of her face might look like and why he had never seen her before.

“Who is this?”

Sister had shaken her head. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly, a hand touched Brother’s shoulder and he jolted, reality weighing as heavily on his head as the crown of thorns. Bapham clicked his tongue twice in greeting, then his eyes turned upward in what Brother could only guess to be a smile. He couldn’t be sure with the black veil that covered Bapham’s face.

Clicking his own tongue, Brother scrambled to his knees and bowed his head. The Baby’s breath still rolled in the meadow below, unbounded.

“Bapham,” he said reverently. The cloaked figure lightly ran his thumb across the boy’s pinkened cheek.

He had done the same thing when he found Brother staring at Sister’s deranged face. He was only six years old then. Bapham had kept him close ever since. Closer than all the other children. Instead of kneeling

down beside the other brothers and sisters for prayer time, Bapham escorted him to his personal chambers. Books with spines and hundreds of colors lined the wall from floor to ceiling. Every evening, Bapham read to him. Soon, Brother found himself sliding his finger across the first few pages of several books, trying to decide which one he would devour next. These books described a different world that Brother had secretly fallen in love with. He now knew things like terrified and dogs and coffee cups and a place named New York.

And when his voice began to change and hair began to sprout under his arms, Bapham encouraged him to read more deeply. Often, he would challenge the boy to point out errors in the books. Fallacies, as Bapham would call them. And often, the error lied within humanity.

Inherent evil.

Bapham nodded his head in acknowledgement at Brother, then patted him on the shoulder.

“When the sun sets, you’ll go that way.”

Brother turned toward the vast expanse of valley that lied on the other side of the hill. His brows twisted in confused, but Brother listened, remembering the years of training he had endured:

There is more to the world than forest. Than soil. Than meadows.
He is to go there.

And he is to retrieve a package.

He shouldn’t be afraid.

The books, they help. Remember the books. Trust only Bapham.

Trust only Bapham, Brother whispered to himself.

“There is a road. You stop at the road and follow it west,” Bapham said.

Brother nodded, pointing westward.

“You ask someone the directions to the hospital...”

“...But not someone too tall, too bulky. Not someone who can over

power me, or who looks around nervously. Preferably a woman.” Brother recited and the woman’s face from the newspaper shred came back to him. Bapham nodded, pleased.

“You know what to do from there, Brother.” Without another word, Bapham handed Brother a backpack with a change of clothes. A plain brown shirt and jeans. He thought it looked the color of coffee, which he wanted to try when he got to the world. He didn’t tell Bapham.

“Will I get to see a beach?”

The man’s low laughter rumbled in his throat, then he handed him another thing. It was a little square thing that opened. He saw his own face inside one of the pockets. Next to it, the name “John Fields” was printed in stark black letters.

“This is your ID. If anybody asks you who you are, you use this. Say nothing more. There’s danger in making yourself known to evil. But you are strong and above them all.”

Brother slipped the square thing in his backpack, silent.

Streaks of orange melted across the sky, casting a brilliant glow on them. Bapham held Brother by the shoulders rather passionately, as if he was his own son. Nothing else was said. Slinging the bag across his shoulders, Brother set off down the hill, letting the name John Fields roll off his tongue until he liked the sound.

Footsteps echoed against the cold, cream tile. Brother’s eyes darted around nervously, taking in everything at once. People sat in chairs, facing each other, solemn looks on their faces. Off to the other side of the room, people in blue fabric hastily walked, taking things, giving things, talking to each other. Their shoes squeaked on the floor. A buzzing white light in the corner of the room flickered so slightly, Brother dared not blink to make sure. This irritated Brother. Yet, he still walked, the consistent hum of chatter and distant wailing encircling his eardrums.

This was a hospital. His chest fell as he remembered to exhale.

A woman, not too tall, not too bulky, poked her head up from behind the desk and offered him a warm smile. Brother knew that this was a front for evil, as Bapham had said.

“Hi, how can I help you?” She blinked with concern.

“Hello. I’m here to visit the maternity ward.”

The woman leaned back in her chair and reached for an object attached to a spiral thing. A phone, Brother reminded himself.

A few seconds later, she pointed him to an open notebook on her desk.

“Sign your name here please. Then up to level three.”

Brother looked toward the sliding metal doors, unease settling in his stomach. But, he smiled, just as Bapham had told him to, and wrote his name, just as how he had practiced.

When the metal box stopped and opened again, Brother lifted his shoulders and walked confidently past the front desk. The people in blue fabric were laughing to themselves, oblivious. They held cups of something brown. Something that smelled. Brother licked his lips.

The only footsteps he heard were his own now.

Walk straight down the hall and make a right when you hit the wall.

He hit the wall. And he heard them before he saw them. Muffled high pitched crying, then deeper voices shushing them.

He came upon a wide window where a dozen tiny bodies lied swathed in blue or pink. He watched these tiny bodies in amazement; how they curled their toes and sucked on their fists. Most of their eyes were closed, flailing their tongues around in search of something. These were babies, Brother noted.

In the corner a woman wrapped a baby in a cloth of some sort while another woman watched, grinning.

Show interest, he reminded himself. Wait until they are gone.

This wasn't hard for Brother to do. He found himself naturally taken by the curious little things.

He didn't know how much time had passed until the room was empty.

You'll only have a few seconds. Grab one and cut their tag off.

With the fire of Bapham lit beneath his feet, Brother started toward the door, but was held back by the sound of another opening.

A woman waddled out of a room, a baby in her arms and a smile on her face. In the same moment, her eyes fell on Brother, who had been staring at her the entire time.

Though her face was not damp, nor crumpled, nor sad, Brother knew her to be the woman from the newspaper.

"How exciting! New sibling?" she said, her eyes ablaze with joy. Brother cleared his throat, realizing she was speaking to him.

Sibling.

Unsure, he followed the woman's gaze through the glass. Brother hadn't heard of the word "sibling," but she didn't notice his confusion.

"Which one?" she pried.

Brother pressed his finger to the glass, pointing at nothing in particular.

"A little sister! How precious." She squinted her eyes, landing on a baby dressed in pink. "My little girl would have absolutely adored a big brother like you..." Her voice trailed and her face fell into something Brother could recognize. Sadness.

Then she perked up again, remembering the baby in her arms. "Your mother must be so ecstatic. I know I am." She bounced her bundle.

Echoing her words, blood rushed to Brother's head as a nausea violently overcame him.

Sister. Mother.

"Sweetie, where's the rest of your family? Are you here alone?"

The woman persisted, but Brother had no answer for her. Family?

Sister. Mother. Family.

His head dizzied with new questions. He wished he could use the phone downstairs to call Bapham. He wished to know what a “Family” was.

Before Brother could generate a response, the two women returned to their stations in the room full of tiny bodies.

“I think I will go,” Brother managed to say. The woman eyed hm carefully.

“Okay, sweetie. Congratulations again on your sister.” She then started down the hall.

Sister. Sister. The image of her limp body hung in Brother’s mind and he found that he could no longer breathe. With his hands stuck to his sides, he watched as the woman grew smaller and smaller with distance. Before the metal doors slid open, she stopped abruptly and glanced at a thing on the wall. She reached out and caressed this thing, then the metal doors opened.

Brother, held in place by a weight in his mind, looked back at the baby girl named Sister. Her eyes were halfway open, a dopey smile on her face. She seemed to be looking right at him, with those olive eyes, telling him something he could not quite understand.

Did he really have a sister, a mother a family?

Brother zipped the empty bag closed then half jogged to the metal box. Would it take him up or down? He didn’t know. What else was there in a hospital besides a maternity ward? A terrible thing had befallen him. It punched at him and screamed in his ears, shattering a wall within his mind he did not know was there.

Sister. Mother.

But there were no mothers in the forests. Where were all the Mothers?

Brother stood in front of the metal box, waiting, fidgeting, bag empty. He saw now that the thing was a board with hundreds of babies' faces tacked to it. If he knew what the word meant, he would have seen that all of them were missing.

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