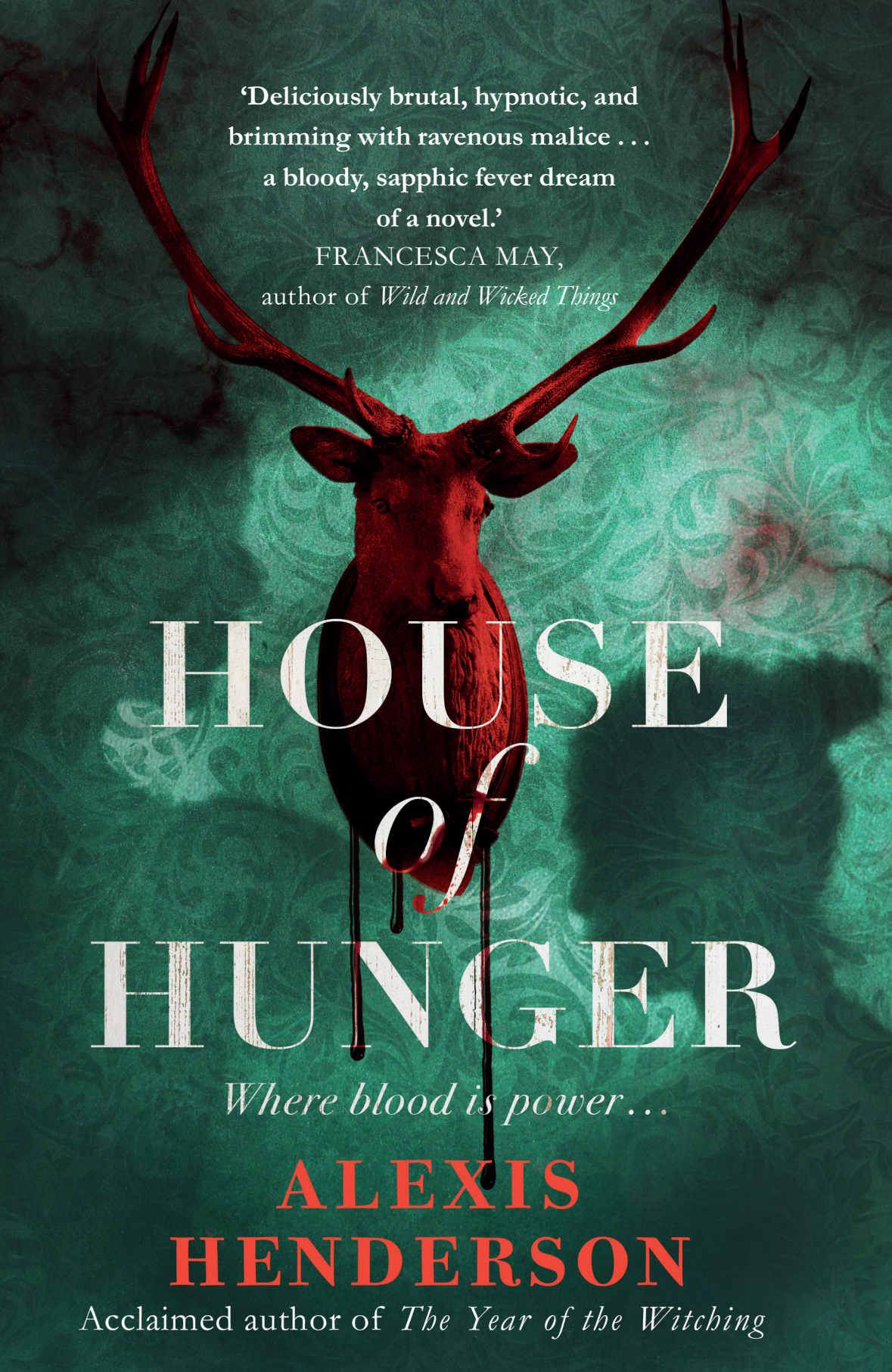

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TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
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First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Bantam
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs
9781787632509 (hb)
9781787632516 (tpb)

Book design by Daniel Brount.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

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1

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To those whose stories are often told in whispers

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HOUSE *of* HUNGER

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1

To bleed is to be.

—VANESSA, FIRST BLOODMAID OF THE HOUSE OF HUNGER

BEFORE SHE WAS FIRST bled, when she still had the name her parents gave her, Marion Shaw was a maid at a townhouse in the South of Prane. On that morning—the morning she would later come to identify as the beginning of her second life—she knelt on the hard wood floor of the parlor, sleeves rolled up to her bony elbows, a scrub brush in her hand.

Across the room, in an upholstered armchair, Lady Gertrude sat, watching her work. She was a shrewd woman, blue-eyed with silver hair and a pinched aristocratic nose, spattered with age spots and freckles. While other nobles preferred to leave their maids to their labor, Lady Gertrude preferred instead to preside over them, watching with a falcon's eye as if to ensure that her help earned every penny she paid them.

"You missed a spot," she sneered, seizing her cane to point at a minuscule stain on the floorboards.

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Marion batted a dark curl out of her eye. She did what little she could to mind her tone. "I'll be more careful, milady."

"You ought to be. There's girls more handsome and less sluggish than you who'd be happy to have your position," she said, and she bit down on a brittle tea cookie, spitting crumbs when she spoke again. "You've grown slow . . . and lazy. I can see it in your eyes. The little light there was in them has long gone out, and now you expect to drag yourself through my halls on your hands and knees like a common drunk. With your hair unkempt and your apron stained—"

"Rest assured this floor will be spotless by the time I'm through with it," said Marion, cutting her short. She could feel the rage pooling in the pit of her belly like bile. "You have my word."

At this, Lady Gertrude merely frowned, the slack skin of her brow wrinkling like fabric. Marion couldn't help but think that she was rather lonely. Long widowed, without children of her own, or companions or family to speak of, she had no means of social stimulation apart from Sunday mass. Thus, every day she followed Marion from room to room, watching her scrub the floors and polish the silver, sometimes (if her health allowed it) going so far as to trail after her into the kitchens, where she'd remain until her aching knees drove her back to the comfort of her parlor.

Marion polished the floor until she could see her own reflection in it—wide-set eyes gaping back at her, a firm nose and full lips slightly parted, tongue tucked behind her teeth, skin a deep tawny, hair a mess of curls. She frowned at herself just as the church bells rang twelve. With a ragged sigh, Marion peeled her gaze from her own reflection, dropped her scrub brush into the bucket with a splash, and pressed slowly to her feet.

In accordance with the new labor laws, all workers were promised an hour's rest at the top of their seventh hour of work, a precautionary measure enacted after no fewer than six girls worked themselves to

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death after twenty-hour shifts in a cotton mill. And while Lady Gertrude was not a particularly kind woman, she was a great adherent to order and strict regulation, regardless of whether it was a benefit to her. Thus, when the clock struck noon, she was quick to dismiss Marion.

Unlike many of her set, Lady Gertrude couldn't afford to buy herself a townhome more than a spitting distance from the more . . . *unsightly* corners of Prane, and it took Marion only a few minutes to reach the cusp of the slums. Here, Marion's pace quickened and she felt her spirits lift, if only slightly.

Gradually, the fine brick townhomes gave way to shanties and warehouses, cast in a pall of smog. Marion shouldered down the crowded streets of the stockyards and adjoining meat market, trudging through half-frozen manure and past the racks of cattle corpses that hung, swinging, by the hooves. Instinctively, she rounded her shoulders against the blast of the coming cold. Fall had only just begun, but it was unseasonably chilly that day and the streets were thick with snow and slush.

Outside, the crowds spread through the stockyards, rounding the corrals where the cattle huddled—shuddering from the cold or the fear of the coming butchery or both. Marion trained her eyes on her boots as she passed them by. Almost ten years of walking every day through the stockyards and she still couldn't bring herself to look those beasts in the eye.

Marion kept walking. The seething smog was low-slung, and so thick that the sun could barely shine through it. The streets were thronged, as they always were at midday. Crowds gathered around the vendor stalls, and if Marion had coin to spare on a bit of roast eel or herring, she might have joined them. But she didn't, so she went about her way, navigating the crowds and icy streets, snow slush leaking into her boots as she walked.

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A vicious wind circled down the alleys and ripped at her coat as she neared her favorite place to sit, a dark doorstep at the back of an abandoned warehouse, on the cusp of Prane, overlooking the trenches and the long scar of the northern railroad beyond them.

It began to rain, and Marion retreated into the shadow of the awning, fishing a pack of matches and her last cigarette from the back pocket of her coat. She lit the smoke and nursed it, cupping her hand to shield it from the wind. Between draws she wheezed and shivered, blowing smoke through her fingers to warm them.

The cigarettes did wonders to calm her hunger pangs, and at a halfpenny a pack they were far cheaper than the offerings of the roadside food vendors, who, as far as Marion was concerned, always overcharged.

"If it ain't the jewel of Prane."

Marion turned to see Agnes wading toward her through the thick of the crowds. She raised a hand and Marion greeted her with two raised middle fingers in turn. Agnes was a gaunt, jaundiced matchstick girl with pale brown eyes and thinning hair that she wore in a braid that hung, like a rat's tail, down her back. Like Marion, Agnes had spent the early years of her childhood pickpocketing on busy street corners. In fact, that was how they'd met, and they soon learned that thievery was a trade better suited to two. Agnes would act as the distraction—chatting nonsense with their targets, keeping them occupied—while Marion crept up from behind to nab a coin purse or slip a silk handkerchief from the breast coat of a passing lord. But at age ten, when the legal repercussions of thievery became too steep, Agnes had taken up honest work on the factory line where she made matches—dipping wooden sticks into sulfur—from dawn until dusk. Soon after, Marion secured a position as the scullery maid of Lady Gertrude.

Still, despite their new occupations, every day at noon the two

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girls made a point to converge at the same street corner where they'd first met. But Marion and Agnes weren't friends, because Marion didn't *have* friends. The way she saw it, friends were a luxury reserved for people who had the spare time to spend with them—like the girls who wandered Main Street with their parasols and bone-white gloves, retiring to their parlors in the afternoon to take a bit of tea and talk. No. Girls like Marion and Agnes had no use or time for companions. They were simply fixtures in each other's lives, a part of Prane's habitat, like the reeking miasma and the crows and the rats that roamed the streets in packs at night.

Marion passed Agnes the nub of her cigarette and slipped both hands into her skirt pockets, doing what little she could to keep herself warm. She had another five hours of work ahead of her, and it was hard to scrub floors with cold-stiff fingers.

Agnes pulled on her cigarette in silence, the smoke leaking through the gaps of her missing teeth. She looked haggard from the time she'd spent slaving away on the line, breathing the toxic phosphorous fumes day in and day out until the chemical stench filled her up like a second spirit. That was something Marion's mother used to say. That folks in Prane had two souls—one made of the stuff of the heavens, the other from miasma.

Agnes took a final pull on her cigarette and flicked the butt into the trenches. "Ugly day, isn't it?"

Marion shrugged. "No worse than the others."

"But it is. The days are shorter than they ever were before, the nights are longer. And the sun, it doesn't rise as high as it used to. I swear it. The summers aren't as warm. Fall is shorter. The winters are colder." Agnes shook her head. "I can feel the change."

"Prane doesn't change," said Marion, and it was true. Prane was the northernmost city of the South. It existed in the rift between the worlds—the arctic North and the punishing heat of the industrial

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South. And so, Prane was never one thing or another. In the night, the light of the city was such that it seemed the sun never fully set; in the day, the gray pall of smog made it seem like it never fully rose. Thus, the slums of Prane felt much like a realm caught between, in perpetual indecision, as if the skies couldn't decide what they wanted to be.

Never fully day. Never fully night.

Never anything at all.

And though she knew nothing else, Marion had come to hate that indistinction . . . and most everything else about Prane too. She sometimes wondered if there was a single person in the slums who found something, anything, to love about the place. Agnes, for her part, seemed resigned, even content. But begrudging contentment was not the same as happiness. At best it was familiarity, and at worst defeat. It certainly wasn't the same as true fondness.

Marion lowered herself to the stoop beside Agnes, wincing a little as the snowmelt seeped through her skirts. Her gaze drifted north. In the distance, she could just make out the night train's station on the cusp of Prane—a beautiful structure of glass and iron with its own clock tower that only ever called the hours of the night. Marion had visited the station only once, on her eighth birthday. She had begged her mother to let her see it, in lieu of a proper birthday gift. And so, that evening, they had ventured down to the station.

Marion's mother had lifted her up onto her hip to peer into the night train's windows, and she had caught the briefest glimpse of its cabin—its seats upholstered with red velvet, its windows draped with brocade and dyed silks. Each cabin was lit by the shimmering chandeliers that dangled from the ceilings. They didn't care that the men in the three-piece suits scowled at their presence, or that the women clutched their skirts and coin-fat purses closer at their approach.

Marion and her mother had merely laughed and smiled and watched in awe as the northerners (you could tell them apart from

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the touring southerners based on their fine clothes and the way they tilted their chins, just so) boarded the train and settled themselves for the journey north. There was a bloodmaid among them, a black-haired girl with a fine mink muff who smiled at Marion through the window. At seven past twelve, Marion and her mother watched from the platform as that great, black-iron beast roared to life and charged into the dark of the night.

Every time she heard the keen peal of the night train's horn, she felt the same stirring in the marrow of her bones that she had as a child, standing on the platform alongside her mother. She loved the sound and the feeling of the train's approach. Sometimes she imagined herself onboard—sitting among the northern nobles and men of Parliament—a gilded, one-way ticket in her pocket that cost more than ten times what a maid like Marion earned in a year.

Agnes eyed her through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Still looking north?"

"Nothing else to look at."

"Then I suppose you won't be wanting this." Agnes reached into the shadows of her coat and withdrew a folded newspaper. She stole one every day, in a kind of unspoken agreement, an important part of their ritual. Agnes brought the stolen paper, and Marion the cigarettes, and together they made the most of what little time they had to spare.

The wind tore at the edges of the newspaper as Agnes opened it and spread it flat across their thighs. They didn't bother with the headline stories—long articles about taxes and tariff wars and cholera outbreaks in the slums. Instead, they skipped to their favorite section, the matrimonial advertisements at the back of the paper.

It was the top of the week, so there was a large selection of adverts to comb through. One for a respectable physician seeking a maiden wife. Another for a widowed cleric with a parish in the country in want of a wife of "impeccable morals" and a mother for his

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nine children (he requested that the lucky woman be no older than two and twenty). At the bottom corner of the page, an advert for a self-described spinster, aged thirty-eight, seeking a bachelor of fortune to receive with "kindness and affection."

Marion and Agnes read each of these adverts in their best mockery of a posh accent, illustrating the postings with wild imaginings about the appearances of the subjects, their homes and lives and favorite proclivities.

"He might be a fit for you," said Agnes, with a sly smile. She tapped an ad for a navy officer in want of a "wholesome" maiden, and Marion laughed aloud. She was many things, but wholesome she was not. Virtue, in the conventional sense, had never become her. At twenty, she'd shared beds with several women, and she enjoyed indulging readily in the delights of the flesh. She and Agnes had had a brief tryst one summer, but there was no real feeling between them, and things had ended badly. They'd since decided they were better smoking companions than lovers.

Agnes squinted down at the paper. "At a salary of four hundred a year maybe he'd be a fit for me too. I could be a maiden."

"Somehow I have a hard time picturing that," said Marion, turning the newspaper's page. And it was then that she saw it, an advertisement in the midst of the matrimony column. Unlike the other postings, it was printed in the most peculiar shade of scarlet. And the letters were different, larger and filigreed, the dips and curves of each one sweeping into the next like cursive. It read:

> *WANTED: Bloodmaid of exceptional taste. No more than 19. Must have a keen proclivity for life's finer pleasures. No references required. Candidates will be received by mail at The Night Embassy, 727 Crooks Street, Prane, or personally from 10 to 12 in the evening hours. Girls of weak will need not apply.*

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Below the posting was a crest—the crude face of a frowning man with olive branches in his hair—the seal of the House of Hunger, one of the largest, and most feared, in the North.

Agnes hissed through her teeth at the sight of it.

In Prane, bloodmaids were regarded as symbols of opulence and depravity in almost equal measure. They were said to spend their days as the cosseted charges of their noble, northern masters—strumming harps, powdering their upturned noses, studying arts and languages, stuffing their cheeks with frosted tea cakes and chocolates and other delightful confections to sweeten their blood to the taste.

The worst of their job was the bleeding, which bloodmaids did frequently to satisfy the carnivorous appetites of the nobles, who relied on the healing properties of their blood as a lavish remedy for their varying ailments. According to the newspapers, blood was purported to cure a number of diseases including, but not limited to, tuberculosis, rubella, measles, syphilis, rickets, and arthritic pains. Some even believed that blood contained youth-preserving properties, especially when taken directly from the source and consumed while still warm.

But the way Marion saw it, work was work, and the work of a bloodmaid was far easier than that of the average factory hand in Prane. Besides, Marion had heard it rumored that upon the end of their tenure bloodmaids were rewarded with lavish pensions that ensured they'd live their remaining days in accordance to the same standard of luxury they'd been accustomed to during their time as bloodmaids. Marion had heard stories of retired bloodmaids being gifted seaside villas, even entire estates, in the Southern Isles, complete with full households—footmen, drivers, stable hands, and even bloodmaids of their own.

Agnes glowered down at the newspaper. "They've got some nerve

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to advertise a posting for a blood-whore in the matrimony column, of all places."

In the South, the prejudice against bloodmaids ran deep, and Agnes was far from the only person in Prane who harbored ill feelings toward the blood trade. Some girls, even beautiful ones, refused to consider the position of bloodmaid as a matter of principle. Such was the stigma against the profession. Marion had heard it said, many times over, that mothers would rather see their daughters become harlots on the streets of Prane than bloodmaids in the North. And many a southern priest had preached from the pulpit about the immortal dangers of bleeding, the toll that dark work took on the body and soul. There were ample rumors about girls drained of blood and spirit, returning to the South penniless and pale after years of bleeding with nothing but their scars to show for it.

"Where else would you have them place it? A bloodmaid could hardly be called a servant."

"Well, they're far from wives," said Agnes, and when she spewed the words, she flecked the newspaper with spit. "Whoring for a night lord is nothing like a marriage."

Marion saw little difference between the two. Both the act of becoming a bloodmaid and the act of becoming a wife were a kind of amalgamation of fealty and flesh, blood and fidelity. And why sell yourself to a penniless man when you could sell yourself to a lord of the North? "I don't see how the two are so different. I'd rather bleed to sate the appetite of a night lord than bleed on the birthing bed, bearing the children of a man I hardly love."

An ugly wind ripped down the alleyway, so violent it nearly snatched the newspaper from Marion's hand. But she held fast, folding it quickly and slipping it into the inner pocket of her coat for safekeeping.

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Agnes studied her with a furrowed brow, and Marion could see the silent accusation in her eyes: *traitor.* But before Agnes had the chance to open her mouth and say it, to warn Marion of the North and all its horrors, the dull toll of the church bells echoed down the alley, beckoning them back to their work.

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2

We are all alike in the fact that our great life's work is deciding who and what we are willing to bleed for.

—OLIVIA, BLOODMAID OF THE HOUSE OF FOG

AFTER A LONG DAY'S work, Marion limped home at half past six, her feet swollen in her boots, her arms aching. The slums of Prane welcomed her back with their normal fanfare—a chorus of catcalls and street hounds barking, hooves on cobbles, a baby's squall—the din of a long day finally at its end. She felt no comfort as she approached the crooked, slate-brick shack that she called home. It was an odd structure, crushed between a horse stable and the town poorhouse, with a twisted chimney that belched clouds of thick, black smoke when the stove fire was lit. But there was no smoke coming from the chimney that evening.

Marion shuffled through the courtyard to the threshold and stepped inside.

The space was sparsely furnished. There was an iron bed pushed against the far wall, the same one that Marion had been birthed in, and that her parents had died in just a decade later. By the fire, the cot where she slept every night. In the middle of the room was a table

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with two chairs; all of the other furniture had been chopped to bits and pieces and burned for tinder last winter in the height of a nasty cold snap.

Shivering at the chill in the room, Marion wondered what they'd burn to stave off the cold in the coming winter, now that most of the furniture was gone. The stove in the far corner was doing little to warm the room, and in the cold months, when tinder grew scarce, coal and wood went for a steep price. Which meant that they might have to make do with dried cow pies, and the reeking stink of them as they burned.

Marion shut the door gently behind her. The sickly perfume of maudlum hung on the air, the smoke moving in lazy tendrils about the room, riding some phantom wind. Marion cringed at the scent of it, squinting a bit as her eyes adjusted to the dimness.

Across the room, her older brother, Raul, sat where he always did, on the edge of the bed, before the fire—which in truth was less a fire and more a pile of ash with a few stubborn embers glowing dully from the shadows of the stove. She could tell he was high on maudlum, caught between dreams and reality. He was a sad figure—pale-skinned for his race, with bruise-dark bags beneath both of his eyes. He was thin to the point of being gaunt, and he wore his hair—dark and half-matted—in a thick braid at the back of his head.

But the most startling aspect of his appearance was the angry rashes that cropped up—all over his body—and left mottled scar patches behind when they healed. The doctors Marion consulted about his deteriorating condition offered few answers, and nothing more than grim, speculative prognoses when she pressed for more.

The last man she'd seen—a physician in a fine borough of Prane, who had claimed several weeks' worth of wages as payment for his care—claimed that Raul's symptoms were the result of an "illness caused by things done in darkness." When Marion demanded a

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formal diagnosis, he said that some things weren't fit for the ears of a young woman and were better left unsaid. But, in truth, Marion didn't need him to explain. She knew the name of Raul's affliction. Had known for some time, though she didn't dare admit it to herself. In the slums they called it the grippe. It was a disease most often transmitted through the passions of lovers.

There was no cure for it.

"Are you awake?" Marion asked, not knowing because Raul often dreamed with his eyes wide open. As a child, when he slept that way, his eyes were always wide with wonder. But now, as a grown man, his eyes seemed to be flung open in horror. As if he had gazed into the dark maw of a hungry god.

Raul stirred with a sudden start at the sound of her voice, then nodded and raised his pipe to his lips, his hand shaking so badly that some ash spilled from the bowl and scattered across the floor. He was smoking the cheap stuff that day; she could tell by the cloying stench on the air. "You're home late."

Marion kicked off her boots. "No later than usual."

Raul's eyes narrowed. He had been handsome before he fell ill. A tall boy with a firm jaw and fine features that looked almost noble. If he dressed the part and kept his mouth shut, he could easily pass for one of the businessmen from the southern boroughs.

But his sickness had remade him. His bones had begun to soften, eroding his posture, so that his shoulders bowed inward, his chest caving so severely he couldn't snatch a single breath without a struggle. Sores pockmarked his cheeks and arms, and he was always scratching at them.

But despite the severity of his illness, Raul managed to drag himself to the taverns in the northern boroughs or the smoke dens where he liked to spend his days squandering Marion's hard-earned money

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and dreaming himself into oblivion and out of the reality of his own impending demise.

But Raul bore his worst wounds on the inside. The sickness had gotten to his mind before it did anything else, and it was there that the true damage was done. He'd been ill for years, growing worse every day, and in that time he'd developed their father's temper, a kind of cruel, cagey way about him, like a hungry dog tethered. But as the sickness grew within him, he became worse and worse. Marion wouldn't call him dangerous—she refused to do that—but she knew full well that there had been little kindness in her brother to start with and the sickness had only made him worse. Still, as terrible as he was, he was all she had left in the world. And she loved him for it.

Marion took off her cap and hung it on a hook in the wall by the door. It was too cold to strip out of her coat, but she tore her gloves off with her teeth and shoved them into the pocket of her apron. She crossed the floor to the porcelain basin in the corner of the room. The water had frozen over, and Marion cracked the ice crust with the backs of her knuckles and scrubbed her hands clean, the water going dark as she rinsed the ash and grime away.

Drying her hands on her apron, Marion turned and set about the task of putting on a kettle of tea. It took her a few moments to coax the cold coals of the stove into a fire again. And once the task was done, she filled the kettle with water from the pitcher and waited for it to boil.

Save for the racket of the streets, the slum house was silent. Raul sat sprawled in front of the now crackling flames, legs thrown out in front of him, sucking on his pipe, one of the few things he'd inherited from their father. They'd sold the other bits and bobs for coin years before. Apart from a few small items—the threadbare quilt tossed over the bed, the maudlum pipe, the kettle, the bed frames,

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and the little portrait of their mother pinned above the stove—the slum house was devoid of all fixtures that would have made their rented shack seem like a proper home.

The kettle began to whistle, and Marion retrieved two tin cups and a wooden box of tea from the cupboard. She was measuring the leaves when she felt Raul materialize behind her, his long shadow stretching across the walls as he rose and crossed the room to her side. He hovered over her as she made the tea, swaying a bit on his feet, lurching forward then back again, steadying himself on the hot stove only to snatch his hand away with a barked curse.

Marion didn't turn to face him. Didn't look at him. He didn't like to be looked at, not in that state anyway. "Is there something you need?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he lurched forward a half step and sniffed, his nose wrinkling in disgust. Marion stiffened, her hand folding around the tin cup in a vise grip so firm its sides dented a little. The hot metal burned her palm and fingers, but she didn't let go.

"You reek of piss," Raul murmured. This was his regular refrain. The piss smell he referred to was the stench of the ammonia-laced solution that Lady Gertrude insisted they use to scrub the floors, claiming it would stop the spread of cholera or typhoid, which she greatly feared.

"I'll wash when I can."

Silence.

Marion reached for the butter knife.

Raul caught her by the wrist. "I need a favor."

Marion faltered, felt something close to anger stir within her. "What now?"

"A few coins, that's all."

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"I don't have any coins to spare. We've got rent to pay at the top of the month, and if we're late again we'll be thrown to the streets."

Raul exhaled hard. His breath stank of stale beer. His fingers—bony and cold—gripped her wrist. "You're lying. I know you keep coins squirreled away."

She turned on him then, with so much force he staggered back and crashed into the cupboard. A few tin plates clattered to the floor. "You spent every coin I gave you on dreams in the smoke dens. I have nothing left to offer you. Not if we want to keep a roof over our heads."

Raul's eye twitched. His hand didn't leave her wrist.

As children they had never really gotten along. They fought often, in a series of vicious, sometimes bloody brawls. But it had been years since they'd had a proper fight with their fists. Which was not to say they didn't have their scuffles—like the time when Raul shoved her into the wall so hard a protruding nail carved deep into the soft skin between her shoulder blades. Or the night when, in a drunken rage, Raul ripped her from bed by the ankles and dragged her halfway across the room and out of the shack, into the muck of the streets. Raul locked the door behind him, and Marion had been forced to spend the night out on the street, picking splinters from her hands and knees to pass the hours.

Marion knew she should've left him then. But the sad truth was that she was loyal to Raul, not as he was then, but as he was as a boy, before their parents' death. In the early years of their childhood, he had been softer, even close to kind sometimes, on the good days. But after their parents died—back-to-back after a grueling bout of tuberculosis—Raul took to the street corners in the dark of night, returning in the early morning with bruised lips and enough coin in his pocket to cover a loaf of bread to split between the two of them.

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Even then, he had been so pretty. Marion often thought, had he been born a girl and not a boy, he would've made the loveliest bloodmaid—with his wide and watery hazel eyes, his full lips and trim figure. But men were never chosen to bleed. The position was filled only by women.

Though he never spoke of it, what Raul did to earn them money began to rot his soul so thoroughly that every day he became a little less of himself and a little more . . . cruel. He began to drink, and rage, and break things. As his sickness worsened, he grew increasingly paranoid and blamed Marion for all of the ills that plagued him. But even when Raul was at his worst, Marion couldn't help but see that fifteen-year-old boy, limping through the darkened alley by the spare light of dawn, the boy who had done what he deemed unspeakable to keep food in their bellies and a roof over their heads, even though it was killing him.

"You know there's no point to it," said Marion, half-pitying, half-firm. "You can't just waste your days on dreams."

"They're my last days," said Raul. "Don't you think I should be able to do with them what I please?"

"Don't say that."

Raul narrowed his eyes. "The *money*, Marion."

"No."

Raul paused at that, cocking his head like a dog begging for scraps at the dinner table. But he wasn't looking at her. His eyes—bloodshot and glassy—came to focus on the pocket of her coat. He snatched the scrap of newspaper before she had the chance to stop him. A range of emotions passed over his face as he read through the advert requesting a bloodmaid—first fury, which was what Marion feared the most, and then, to her immense relief, amusement. "Is this what you dream of at night? Lifting your skirts and spilling your blood for some pitiful northern lord starving in the ruins of a House

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that was once great? Helping him cling to the vestige of his dignity, the ghost of his power, while the rest of the world moves on?"

"There's still power in the North," said Marion. "There's still money."

"And soon that, too, will be squandered." Raul was right.

The North, sparsely inhabited by nobles, had once been the world's bastion of power. Its Parliament, composed entirely of the reigning counts of the twenty-seven noble Houses, had single-handedly charted the course of the modern world. But in recent decades, the seat of power had shifted from the North to the industrial South and its democratically elected Parliaments, composed almost entirely of politicians and factory owners, oil barons, and their heirs.

Since then, the once great Houses of the North had fallen to vestige and ruin. There were few of them left now, and most were inhabited by wealthy southern heiresses (and their offspring) who married into northern families in want of a title. Their ample inheritances lined the empty coffers of the ancient estates of the North, keeping the Houses from falling into squalor.

Now, of the twenty-seven Houses, only four held any real power: the House of Hunger, the House of Fog, the House of Locusts, and the House of Mirrors. These Houses—established centuries ago by the North's founding and most formidable families—were the last relics of the North's golden age. And soon—to industry and modernity and the shifting sands of time—these, too, would fall.

Marion tried to snatch the paper back, but Raul didn't let go and the column ripped clean down the middle. He gave a drunken laugh that dissolved into a fit of coughing.

"Give it back," she said, the tattered shred of the newspaper column fluttering in her hand.

"Tell me why you want it," he said, and he edged a bit closer,

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