

Seven & Eva

In French's Forest

a supernatural lovefable

Rían Torr

CONTENTS

I

Other Woman From The Woods

- i. To French's Forest By Train In Love
- ii. We Can Fall Down On The Frozen Path
- iii. Tea Over Hearth With The Banes
- iv. The Undead Will Lust Without End

II

The Fawning Of Lady Faye

- v. The Lights Under His Darkling Irises
- vi. Before Stars Of A Higher Rarity
- vii. Young Devils Kissing Madly As One
- viii. All In On Seven's Lucky Hands

III

Siren From The Stream Of The Subconscious

- ix.. Irreversibly Cursed By Romance
- x. Dead Into The Beautiful Emptiness
- xi. Off The Beaten Path Of His Heart
- xii. Being Her Imagination's Plaything

IV

When She Shed Her Skin

- xiii. Long Way Down To The River Payne
- xiv. Heels Under Fire Before The Hellfawn
- xv. To Freedom Under Foam & Flotsam
- xvi. Last Chance On Earth To Be In Love

“The lady, with guile in heart,
Came early where he lay;
She was at him with all her art
To turn his mind her way.”

-Sir Gawain And The Green Knight.

Anonymous

“In speaking of his intelligence, my wife,
who at heart was not a little tinctured with
superstition, made frequent allusion to the
ancient popular notion, which regarded all
black cats as witches in disguise.”

-The Black Cat,

Edgar Allen Poe

“She is the most Egyptian of all ... for her
eyes are as green as the Nile, her hair as
feathery as papyrus, and her skin the pink
of a lotus flower.”

-from The Egyptian Cinderella

Undine

of a lotus flower."

for Sarah
R.I.P.

I
Other Woman
From The Woods

i To French's Forest By Train In Love

“Eva ...” Seven said, lightly touching his new love's porcelain knee.

She had been slipping in and out of consciousness for about an hour now, leaning into his shoulder—her drool smearing across his plaid sleeve.--and down the front of her silver blouse.

He delicately brushed some stray red locks from her face.

It made him nervous that she was sleeping so much. He was glad they would soon be arriving—and he could relax again.

He longed for her companionship in the deepest sense. Even when she only drifted off ever so lightly, he felt more alone—and more lost.

When she was gone into the oblivion of sleep—he was more exposed to the visions—left vulnerable and helpless.

The old fears would creep back in. The black clouds would roll overhead. He would once more grow paranoid and anxious.

Faye would fall into sight, on every strand of

wind and traffic—and he would hear her mad voice cackling at him:

“Come show me your Lucky Hands, Seven ... Show me those Lucky Hands!!! Ba-ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-eee-hee-hee-hee-ha-ha-!!!”

She would tell him that she was coming for him, and that he couldn't run for long.

She would tell him that she was the only one for him—and that he couldn't ignore the match that their fate had made in hell.

She would tell him that they belonged together forever—under the ghoulish moon, behind the bent boughs—of French's Forest.

A few months ago, when Eva was in chemo for cancer, Seven had his first encounter with Faye since he had moved to Old York two years prior.

It was a great disappointment to see the old witch again, as he had hoped that by leaving French's Forest behind, she would not be able to follow him.

But nevertheless, her presence here was notably weaker than back in the old trees she haunted—and so he was trying to make the best of it—and not ever let Eva find out.

So he was pacing about the hospital waiting area, waiting for Eva, when he began to feel nauseous.

He retired to the restrooms to splash some water on his face. He looked in the mirror—and

there was Faye staring back at him.

Her pet anaconda Ax coiled about her molten silver curves in sinewy spasms—as she hissed and huffed heavily—as if in heat. Her long red dreadlocks tipped in diamonds danced upon her head like snakes.

Ax hissed--and forked tongue flicked out electric sparks.

Faye's eyes were orbs ablaze in a hellish fire.

“*Bring the bitch to me,*” she hissed, her forked black tongue also sparking electric currents—as it ran hungrily over her jagged black fangs.

She pointed one long nail at Seven.

Ax tensed up to strike.

Seven snapped about, throwing his arms up—but they were gone.

Relief cascaded over him.

His heart abated from its pounding—but her dark spirit still lingered all around.

She was Sylverskin, a wood nymph from French's Forest myth. She was of a deadlier seduction—inclined to prettier forms, when hidden traps of mischief and sadism were highest on her mind.

With trepidation, he looked into the mirror again, but she was still not there—and he sighed.

He gradually calmed.

He finished washing his face, wiped his brow with a paper towel—and turned to leave—when he

bumped into someone walking in.

He retreated to the waiting room.

He had just switched to an earlier shift at work—and he was waking up while Eva slept in. From that day forward, Faye's presence in his life had returned—and begun to grow.

He next spotted her in the hot shower steam, coming through the bathroom door.

“Who's that?” he had said trembling.

The shower door flung open.

Faye shimmered in the steam.

But he stubbornly closed the door again--and she disappeared. Her strength was truly diminutive here next to all the years he had lived with her in French's Forest. He could be thankful that she was not a constant menace to his safety—but more of an annoyance and threat to Eva's innocence.

But she continued to haunt him each morning while Eva slept.

One time, he was doing laundry in the basement of their apartment building, when he heard Faye's voice from the darkness under the stairs.

*'Show me your Lucky Hands, Seven ... Hee-
hee-hee ... Show me those Lucky, Lucky Hands!*

*'Ah-HA-HA-HA-HA ... AH-HA-HA-HA-HA!!!
HA!!!'*

He had backed away, steadily up the stairs.

'You never told me you loved me, Seven! You

never told me you loved me—you coward!

He had left his laundry down there that night.

Another time, on his walk to work, he saw her standing in traffic.

Drivers were slowing down as they approached her, some of them honking. At first he thought it was a woman in trouble—or a suicide—so he ran to the edge of the road—only to see that it was Faye, beckoning him.

'Come to me, Seven. Let us leave from this concrete jungle. I know you miss me, Seven. I know you miss the country.'

For a moment, Seven knew she was right. He was not cut out for the big city—but he was trapped here now. He could never return to French's Forest, now that he was with Eva.

Staring him down, Faye stepped in front of a bus—causing it to swerve and smash a car, causing a pile-up as she crossed over toward him.

He jogged back from the shoulder of the road, afraid of getting hit—and when he looked again, she was gone—replaced by the carnage she left behind.

Over time, encounters with Faye became more frequent—and she became more dangerous--as her power over the streets grew.

It got so bad, that Seven ended up switching shifts again, just to avoid her.

He started sleeping by Eva's clock once more—and he found that it was working. Faye appeared less and less—and he grew more confident again.

It was a life on constant watch, always shaking Eva went she drifted off—or keeping himself awake, when she was still up—but it was the little peace Seven could find in an otherwise horrific predicament.

ii. We Can Fall Down On The Frozen Path

Eva never asked why Seven insisted on sleeping in sync with her—for in form with her typical grace, she shrugged it off as simply another one of his idiosyncrasies.

She was never the type to care about love's funny little things like that. As long as he wanted her, then that was all that really mattered to her. As long as he cared, then she would whole-heartedly love him right back, no questions asked.

All she ever asked was that he stayed fond.

Seven's neediness got so bad, however, that even if Eva passed out in the middle of a movie, he nudged her awake—bugging her to stay alert, just to dash his fears Faye was on the hunt again.

But Eva didn't mind. It made her feel important—and she often gave him blanket reassurances.

“It's okay, babe. It'll be okay,” she would say--without even knowing what was wrong.

In fact, she almost preferred having him sleep when she slept. It made her feel closer to him—and it was not many months after they had started sleeping in sync again, that she began inquiring about his family.

Seven had told her they were out-of-towners, but not much more than that. He had avoided the subject like a virus.

“Did you say they lived off Highway 9? How far is the drive? We could make a trip up there any weekend you know.”

“It's at least an hour ... I might just get them to come down sometime.”

“Aw—no ... we can make the effort ... I really think that we should.”

“Eva—French's Forest is in the middle of nowhere—it's really not very fun at all.”

“French's Forest?” she had said, her face growing long--and dreadfully bloodless.

“Have you ever heard of it?”

“No!”

“Eva—my family's crazy—we don't want--”

“--nonsense. Every family's crazy, Seven.”

“But you don't understand.”

“Trust me, Seven—I do. Come on, I'm the one always complaining to you about my mother.”

“Yes, but—I mean—I'm talking about insane

asylum crazy,” Seven said, looking Eva dead in the eyes—expressionless.

Eva giggled. “I know, I feel that way about my brother sometimes.”

“My brother can be evil.”

“Me too! Mine too,” Eva said.

Seven shook his head. “You don't get it,” he said—but then he backed down. “Nevermind--let's talk about it some other time, okay?”

“No, I want to talk about it now. I want to meet your family, Seven. I want to see where you come from.”

Seven's heart sank. The longer that he denied Eva family visitations, she would begin to think that he was hiding something. But if he took her to French's Forest, there would be a great risk involved.

The train started pulling in past more familiar factories at the city outskirts—and Seven knew that they would soon be arriving at New London station.

“Eva ...”.

“Yes babe?” she murmured, half-dreaming.

She casually brushed a red bang back from her ivory forehead. Her freckles were more pronounced today—and the line of her jaw seemed especially feline.

He felt better already now, just having heard her voice. “Welcome back to New London, sweetheart,” he said, taking a moment to admire her

heaven-sent features.

From the first second that they had ever met, he had swooned for her slinky ways—mesmerized by her big cat eyes—and whiny put-on sighs.

A loose eyelash dashed across her cheek.

The folding shadows of passing poles and lines complicated the planes of her face.

She slipped the window shade up all the way to see the big, glittering, wet city sliding slickly by them. “Oh, I’m sooo excited,” she cooed. “I haven’t even been back since we met. Can you believe it?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to get a room in town first?” he said, checking out his watch.

He wanted to put off the family reunion for as long as possible—for he knew full well that the moment they crossed the county line, their fate would lie fully in Faye’s merciless hands.

Deep down, he knew that, if Faye were jealous enough, she would set French’s Forest ablaze.

But it was too late to worry about that now.

He sighed heavily.

He was trying to stay positive.

“No, I want to stay at your parent’s place, like we said ... I think it’ll be fun, and a good way for us all to get to know each other better. I can’t believe it’s been this long and I haven’t even met them yet ...”

He had stalled as long as he could, but now Eva would find out the truth—and he would lose her forever. He felt like he was drifting helplessly down

the Payne—hurtling unstoppably toward Evyl falls.

By the time they had their bags and were ready to go, dusk had crept upon them. They cabbed around Victoria Park to see the evergreens glittering, all dressed down in shimmering gowns of a thousand colored lights.

Beyond the trees, over the gloomy uptown buildings, a rose moon dawned, dropping a warm aura over the evening.

“Ooo ... ooo ... It feels like magic tonight, and the trees are so pretty ... Look, it's the rink where we met ...

“Ooo ... Oh babe, do you want to stop before we go?” she pleaded—batting her best lover lashes.

“Maybe we should come back tomorrow.”

“Okay ... but only as long as we *really* go back ... Okay?”

“I promise.”

“Remember how I almost fell, turning on the ice and you caught me?”

“We both went down ...”

She giggled. “You broke my fall ... Remember how I asked you the time ... I still remember—”

“Me too ...”

“You didn't have a watch. You looked at your wrist and guessed: 'Seven.'”

“I didn't want to break the moment.”

“I remember ... Then later on, I said, 'Silly me, I haven't even asked you your name yet ..'”

Seven nodded. “Then when I told you my name, you looked like you saw a ghost.”

“*Is that your answer for everything?*” I said.”

“I was embarrassed,” Seven said.

“Then whenever you asked me any question, I automatically said: *'Seven.'*”

He snickered. “I just got so frustrated.”

“You loved the attention, just like when I fawned all over your delicate hands—and you got so embarrassed—but you secretly liked it ... Remember how you said they were your *Lucky Hands*, because they had caught *me* ...?”

“It's still true.”

“Aww, well ... It was hard not to fall for that one. I made you tell all my friends why you had *Lucky Hands*.”

“I told them—gladly.”

She grinned. “Promise we go back? Please, please, please ...? You know I always *love* going back.”

“Yes babe, we can even pretend we're strangers again, you know ... We can pretend to bump into each other for the first time ... We can fall down on the frozen path like we did ...

“Remember how you said that the walkways were like rivers streaming together and apart—like people in life?”

“Yes I remember ... We should go skating Seven, don't you want to?” she said, squirming in her seat. She cuddled up next to him—and he wrapped his arm around her.

Their pinky fingers curled together in an unsaid bond of trust. It was their silences that sealed their purest sweetheart exchanges—saving words for less honest days.

She leaned against him, and he could hear her heart beat on his, as they listened to the drone of traffic—and wallowed in fresh memories of their earlier romance.

It was love in the eye of the storm.

They rolled along under the downtown lights and signs for a time—and then out into the white and black countryside toward French's Forest and Seven's old family home.

Idle chat continued to linger on a spell, before dissolving into contemplation and country stars.

Seven cast back to when he was four--and his family still lived in the old house on Lake Heron.

In those days, every hour was an eternity—and every little life was a wonder.

He was an explorer entrenched in sylvan stomping grounds—engaged with the mystical and the mundane alike—and the beautiful and the deadly too. He had been as happy as a kid could have conceivably been—given the circumstances.

But then, by a sick twist of fate, they had moved inland, to French's Forest—where his adventures turned dangerous, before the storm that was Faye.

But after meeting Eva in New London—and traveling to see her in Old York, where he eventually moved in with her--he remembered what it was like to be happy in love.

She made him feel special again—and he saw the joy of living once more. He became desperately loyal to her, like he had not felt since Faye.

Occasionally, Eva acted jealously, leaving him loathing her for a time—soured by her control games—but for the most part, they got along like fireworks.

Put in a room without windows, they went at it dawn-to-dawn—lost to the day or month. Their flame was plenty alive—and their mutual rapture was evident in their eyes locking in the mirror as they made love.

Eventually the highway carved itself into mystical woodland. The moon was full overhead, bright and fat upon the tree-line crown.

The cab hugged the inner curve of the road for many long moments—and only when it seemed as if the snaking lane would never straighten—it did—and they were upon the house.

The dark soldier trunks of French's Forest fell back to reveal sprawling water gardens and a sparkling back-set mansion.

Innumerable stringed lights slithered along the roof and trim—setting the abode ablaze in a brilliance that shouldered the night.

Gravel popped under their tires as they rolled up the drive-lane toward the front door.

“Ooo ... It's so beautiful!”

They pulled up to the entrance. Seven grabbed their bags from the back and tipped the driver a twenty.

Growing impatient, Eva skipped up the steps toward the house.

Mid-way up, she twirled about on her tippy-toes, letting her long red hair fan about her square shoulders.

Silhouetted by the porch lights, she giggled. “Your folks really live here?”

Seven nodded and picked up after her.

They embraced.

“I hope they like me.”

“What on earth is not to like?” he said, offering his hand.

She took it—and they mounted the remaining steps together.

iii. Tea Over Hearth With The Banes

Seven hammered the ugly gargoyle knocker seven times—then paused on the eighth, when he heard footsteps shuffling up.

For a moment, Eva thought she saw her own face in the gargoyle knocker.

A bolt snapped—and the door swung in.

Godwin leaned out.

His trademark silver crow's peak still sprouted strong, out of an old furrowed brow, above heavily potted, pronounced cheeks that remained fallen—as his thin, jagged lips pursed together in a permanent wince of devilish delight.

“Well hello, strangers!” he rasped, his complexion waxing ashen.

He gingerly pinched a tumbler brimming with a crimson brew.

“So you must be Eva?” he said, in a tone of mischief. “How nice to meet my boy's new fawn.”

His ears twitched in a restlessness. A perceptible grin pierced his lips. His fangs were bared—but just tiny tips glistening in the porch-light.

Seven cleared his throat.

Eva put out a trembling hand.

Godwin's eyes throbbed. His brow bounced in a brightening of expectation.

“Easy,” Seven growled.

Godwin grabbed Eva's hand and pulled her uncomfortably close. She accommodated him with an awkward smile—and a token hug.

But then he tightened his grip—and she squirmed to politely extract herself from his embrace.

Godwin's tongue curled thoughtfully over his grey lips.

“Godwin! Could you please let the poor girl in the door, honestly ...” Seven said. “We've been on the rails all day, so could you just give me a break for once?.”

“Of course,” Godwin grumbled, letting Eva go.

Eva slipped past him.

“Marvelous, my boy,” he whispered in Seven's ear, accent dripping in a sick sub-text.

Seven stiff-armed his way past his old man, sick of the head games.

Eva eyed them both over her shoulder warily.

Godwin filed their coats into the front closet.

“Please, allow me ...” he said.

Gently, he led Eva into the next room—where he promptly spilled his drink on her blouse.

“Damn Hades!”

Seven wedged himself between them. “Waste of a good drink, Godwin ...”

“Marietta...!” Godwin shouted, face blushing. “Marietta ...! Napkins! Bring napkins! By Jupiter, they jumped from my hand!”

Eva sat down and sighed. Her best laid plans for good familial first impressions were quickly being dashed.

“I heard my name!” Seven's mother Marietta called out from upstairs.

Footsteps shuffled overhead—and a moment later—Marietta glided into the room, terracotta nightgown billowing behind.

She was a slender and fit woman of her fifties, with her hair up in a bun—and jowls just beginning to show at the cheeks. The essence of a prior beauty still lingered there, in her younger terrains.

Godwin retired behind the bar into the shadows of glass and bottles—so that they could not see his face well, and he was out of reach of casual conversation.

Eva sat stiffly on the couch. She was already thinking about going, as shivers spiraled up her spine. She felt like she had been in this house before.

She remembered sitting on this couch once.

She had looked through this picture window—but usually from the other side.

Her breathing became troubled as her gaze relaxed into the distance beyond the pane, into the rich foliage of French's Forest.

She recognized the trees.

Seven sat down beside her and patted her knee reassuringly.

Outside, the wind shrieked, forcing open a side-window. Drapery blew about—revealing the moon in whipping lashes.

In the distance, from the fathoms of French's

Forest, a feral choir of coyotes howled ominously. They air grew heavy. The floor felt electric. “Do you want me to put your blouse in the dryer?” Marietta offered.

“It's just a spot,” Eva said—biting her nails.

Marietta closed the windows. “These darned things always blowing open ...” she said. The energy in the room returned to normal.

She sat down, folding her hands in her lap. “So here you are ...! It is nice to meet the girl of my boy's dreams ...”

Eva blushed. “More like I'm a fan of him.”

Marietta frowned. “But you must tell me,” she said. “Are you educated?”

Eva swallowed wrong and choked and coughed.

Seven rubbed her back. “Mother, please ... Eva has a Master's in Psych.”

“Oh dear, did I say something wrong? I'm so, so sorry ... I just don't want you to get your heart broken again, Seven ... You know how foolish you have been with woman.”

Seven put his face in his hands, massaging his eyes and temples—embarrassed to be in the room.

Now it was Eva's turn to reassure him. She rubbed his back, to show him that she was not yet irreversibly offended by his mother's dig.

He began to feel better and relaxed.

“Could I fix you some tea, dear?”

“No, please ... I'm fine,” Eva said. “Just swallowed down the wrong way.”

“So did you two get a chance to go by Victoria Park when you were in town?”

“Yes! It was so beautiful,” Eva said, glowing at the chance to turn the talk.

“That's nice. Godwin and I try to make it once a year, on a full moon ...”

“Just because it's prettier,” Godwin added, flashing his fangs from the shadows of the bar.

Eva nodded. “We met at the rink, so it's kind of meaningful.”

“Oh well, isn't that sweet?” Marietta said. “Aren't you just a sweet young dear?”

Eva shook her head and blushed, trying to decide whether she was being mocked or mollified.

“So tell me, Eva ... Are you sure that you want to get involved with someone like my son Seven? I mean, honestly—we know he is not the best catch ever ...

“Mother!” Seven said. “Must you do this?”

“Hush now, Seven. As your mother, I have the right to ask Eva ... What on earth is someone like you doing with someone like Seven?”

Eva's jaw fell slack. She squirmed in her seat.

Seven flushed and fumed.

“I mean, just between us,” Marietta continued. She leaned in toward Eva—and under her breath said: “Isn't he a little nuts?”

Eva shook her head in dismay. She was confused by the open cruelty. She glared at Seven in horror.

“Slow it down mother ... We just got here ... Eva doesn't need to be smothered like that ...”

“Ok, fine ... I guess I just get a little too protective of my cub ...” she said.

She got up and petted Seven on the head.

He growled—but then quickly reigned in his temper. He often had to remind himself that mothers were allowed to annoy their sons this way.

He retreated to the bar, where Godwin poured him a shot of a sweet and dark.

Eva looked freshly discomfited by her sudden abandonment on the couch.

Just then, Seven's step-brother Olin sauntered into the room. “Well, well, well ... Who have we here?” he oozed.

His wintry eyes deftly netted Eva's attention. He took her hand in his own—and promptly licked its full back length.

She pulled away in horror and disgust—but looking up into his eyes, she quickly became consumed by his mesmerism.

He smirked wickedly, revealing a mob of blood-stained incisors.

She fainted, flopping against the back of the sofa.

“Easy bro,” Seven growled, bending over her

protectively. He brushed her cheek. “This is Eva.”

She shortly revived. Seven held her as she readjusted to the light of consciousness.

Olin picked up his guitar from where it leaned against the glass table. “Very well then, dear brother—but at least let me play Eva an *apologia*, for my rudeness,” he said, light flecks sparkling in his eyes.

Eva moaned, cupping her forehead. “What happened?” she said grogily.

“You passed out.”

“My head is killing me.”

“I might have something for that,” Marietta said. She fetched a pill and tumbler of water, which Eva took right away.

Olin eventually strummed a chord—let it die—but got lost again in Eva's fleshy young lines. Seven often wondered at how his brother's attention span was shorter than the coyotes.

She looked away, but felt violated.

He finally started to play, interchanging between chords and finger-picking—building momentum toward an orgasmic bridge, that lead into cathartic flurry of scales at the end.

The entire time, he kept eyes closed. It was too late at night for him to pretend to be human.

Eva tried to affect airs of being bored rigid by the melody—but she could still faintly feel the force that had caused her to fall under—only it was masked

now. It pulsed in veiled waves, undulating outward from Olin's dexterous fingers.

Seven growled lowly from his diaphragm—and shortly after, Olin opened his eyes, slipping into a lighter, more whimsical picking pattern, to brighten everybody's mood.

Marietta cooed.

Godwin fixed himself another.

Eva felt like she wanted to go home and cry.

Seven was abysmally embarrassed.

Olin finished. Setting his guitar down again, he casually leaned over Eva, taking in her scent.

“*Olin!*” Marietta hissed.

Olin backed off at his mother's tone.

Eva rolled her eyes at Seven.

“I'll be right back with tea,” Marietta said.

“Olin, come with me, for your own good ... Olin—”

“Just a few more minutes,” Seven whispered in Eva's ear.

“Sooo” Olin began, which for him, usually led to no good. “Any sign of Faye yet, dear brother ...?”

“No,” Seven said shortly.

“Who?” Eva said frowning.

“Brother's ex, *Faye*,” Olin said emphatically—grinning evilly.

A faint recognition of the name skipped across Eva's consciousness, like a flat stone over water—until upon the seventh skip, sinking down

and out of sight for good.

“So play us a song Olin?” Seven said, trying to change the subject.

“Faye ...?” Eva rumbled.

“Don't worry, she's just a ghost,” Seven said. “He's talking about some dumb phantom.”

“Okay Seven, please explain ... because I am totally confused now, I must admit.”

“Sure,” Seven said, clearing his throat.

“Hhhh ... Well ... I should say, technically, she's real—but she doesn't appear much anymore.”

“Appear?” Eva's lower lip trembled.

Olin interjected: “Lady Faye haunts the wood here.”

“Oh,” Eva said, cupping her mouth. She felt light-headed—as well as overwhelmed by the sensation that someone else was in her skin.

A hush fell on them all.

Seven nodded gravely—glad to have avoided actually saying Her name himself.

He patted Eva's knee. “I'll explain it all later.”

“Say, Seven,” Olin said. “Whatever happened to your ex Ruby? We never saw her again, after that day, when Faye—

Eva gasped. “I swear on my grave, you two ... If this is some kind of sick joke—I'm going to hit both of you,” she said, suddenly unsteady—unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“Ruby was fine,” Seven said, shaking his

head.

Olin nodded, grinning wildly.

Seven sighed, remembering the feelings of familial frustration.

“Well, we’ve had a long day,” he found himself saying. “Eva and I had better pass on tea and just get some rest—or we’ll be big grouches in the morning ...

“We can catch up over breakfast ...”

“Booo-ooo-ooo!” Marietta cried from the kitchen. She marched back into the room, balancing a gilded tray of cups and saucers in one hand. “I was just starting to like having a human being around, for a change.”

Eva chuckled nervously.

“Cutting out so soon?” Godwin prodded from the corner. “People,” he said, shaking his head.

He took another shot and flipped the page on his magazine.

“I’m sorry, we don’t mean to be rude,” Eva said. “We’re just tired.”

“My bedroom’s at the end of the hall,” Olin called out after them. “In case you get bored with him,” he said, snickering.

“Go to hell, brother” Seven shouted back.

“Already there, Seven! We’re already there!” Olin retorted.

Seven let him have the last words.

Once they were out of earshot, Eva squeezed

Seven's hand as hard as she could. "Okay, who is Olin talking about?"

"Nobody. I'll tell you everything in the morning ..."

"But who is Faye? She's not really a ghost, is she? She's your ex, isn't she?"

"Let's just leave it alone, okay?" he said, tensing up.

"Okay, okay, Mr. Grumpy—sheee-eeesh," she grumbled. "But you do realize your brother is really sketchy, right?"

"Just my brother?"

She poked him in the side.

When they reached the first landing, she swung him about. "Piggy-back?" she pleaded.

Seven sighed and bent over for her—but he secretly loved their little games, even when she acted like a bossy princess. It made him feel loved.

She jumped on his back and they mounted the remaining steps together, adrift in the eddies of romance all fawns in love enjoy.

They rolled onto the guest bed, legs under a heavy-knit duvet—bare chests between cool covers, as their limbs entangled and lips crushed in petal-soft passions.

Their hearts roared in their bond's innocence.

Their fire had yet to falter.

If their world ended that night, they would have left it in peace with each other.

Afterward, they cuddled.

“They were all so crazy ...” she whispered in his ear. “Yet, somehow they think you're the crazy one,” she said.

“I know, I know.”

“Difference with me is,” she purred. “I *know* you're the crazy one,” she said, pinching him ticklishly.

“Hey now!” Seven said, lightly slapping her hand away. He couldn't remember ever being happier.

She made him feel loved and wanted—and he couldn't imagine ever being with another woman again.

“You are so beautiful,” he said. “I could kiss you and never stop.”

“Awww, really? I think you're pretty cool too.”

“Hey!”

“I'm just kidding,” she said. “You're the world to me, Seven.”

They fell quiet for a little time.

“Seven ...”

“Yes?”

“Did you notice Olin's teeth were all *red*?”

“Oh, he loves his red wine. They all do.”

“But, don't you think that he looks kind of like a ... like a—”

“—a *vampire*?”

“Um, no ... I was going to say like a *goth*.”

“Oh right. You got it. Like a goth. Well Olin can be an ass, but he's also my brother ... I guess you just get used to your brother's faults, sort of live and let live ...”

“So how did you turn out so well?”

“I don't know. Sometimes I think I was adopted—or some kind of half-breed. Godwin is not my natural father, so there could be some truth to that, I guess ...”

“Really? You never told me that ...”

“I guess it just never came up.”

“Well, you better keep your inner Olin away from me, Mister Happy, because I wouldn't sleep a wink,” she whispered in his ear.

“Haha ... not tonight, babe. Not in this house.”

“Why not? What, is the house haunted?”

“Just ... *no* ...”

“Oh, ok ... Mr. Spoil-sport ... You're just scared of getting caught, aren't you? You don't want your folks to hear us? Awww, isn't that cute ...”

“No, that's not it,” Seven said. He could not bring himself to tell her that they would be making themselves a naked target. Faye would be able to smell them all the way from Eylv Falls.

“Okay, okay ... hold on,” he said, turning on the radio.

Silken jazz filled the room.

Eva laughed and slapped him lightly on the cheek.

He acted shocked and unamused. But then he kissed her back hard, snaking his tongue down her neck.

She arched back gasping.

He felt the urge to bite her—but it passed—and the subconscious sense of danger only served to stoke Eva's attraction.

iv. The Undead Will Lust Without End

Sometime after their post-knocking romp, just as Orion was slipping through the star-shaped skylight—Seven heard a shrill call rise up from the wood.

Eva had drifted off, so she could not corroborate his witness to it—but he was sure it was Faye.

He heard her heartbeat in his head.

He bolted upright in bed, soaked in sweat.

Memories of Faye flooded back to him.

For years, she had mercilessly tortured him, by some stretches as an evil wraith—and others as a seductive siren goddess.

He had fallen for her, for the better or worse—despite her evil accents and supernatural flourishes. Perhaps even, she had cast some sort of love-spell over him at first--but through time, he felt

his own feelings emerge.

But ultimately, his fate was torn, for she was destroying him, while putting him back together. He was caught between letting go—or letting her go. He was in deep enough to see her faults—yet too deep to see her deceptions.

So he had gone on, harboring both dread and longing for her as he did. He had obeyed a carnal lust for her, that he could not shed—even while he knew it all started with her mischievous magic.

But the petals of mortal rapture hang on, while the undead are employed by wanderlust—so ultimately, Faye was destined to leave Seven for new prey, tiring of his singular attentions. But she would come to regret it.

Seven inevitably ended up succumbing to the knee-jerk reflex that befalls so many heavens-crossed crushes: he gave her every opportunity to reject him—to test her—sabotaging her love by acting jealous.

So, being already half-gone anyway, Faye seized the opportunities he presented her with to stray--and crushed on other boys of French's Forest.

They were each as much monster as saint—equally destined to tear the other apart.

He longed for her, yet cut her off when she got too close. He dreaded her, yet thought of her fondly in the mirror. He became intimate with her, yet intimidated by her. He thought of her often, but

he could often not bear to see her.

He never stopped looking for her—yet never wanted to go back to that dark place where their love had flown.

Similarly, Faye also fought for a balance between love and hate of Seven. She never thought she could fall so hard for a mortal, before she met him. But in the end, she ended up taking him for granted, returning to her usual cruelty—until he became her loss.

Their hearts were inextricably entangled—yet now permanently divergent.

He wiped his brow on the wide lip of the bed-sheet and sighed desperately.

Anxiety fed his system.

Tension suspended all hope for sleep.

He stepped into an adjoining alcove, to a night-table and rocking chair, where he lit a smoke—wholly unsatisfied with the promise of consciousness.

He stalked about in the darkness, plotting his counter-measures in the event of every possible encounter with his Ex.

II

The Fawning Of Lady Faye

v. The Lights Under His Darkling Irises

The clock read 11:11 pm.

He rested in the rocker another spell—and then checked it again.

It read 3:33 am.

The night had finally been swallowed up.

He marveled at the slippery nature of the hours. He got up and paced about in a modest contemplation of time and space.

He lit another smoke under his dancing irises—and between ember-blossom drags, slipped figure-eights around the old bear-skin rug.

The skin had been in the family since the Dark Ages, back when the Bane boys were all vampire rangers—and the girls were sorceresses.

He had danced upon the skin many a sleepless moonlit night, throughout the years. Marietta told him once, when he was very small, that it would ward off inner evils.

He started considering the dilemma with Faye again. His understanding of everything deepened into epiphany, as he realized he might just have to tell her the truth.

He would have to admit that he had once loved Faye—but not any longer. It would be better just getting it out of his heart.

Relief flooded into him. He felt half-human again. The slow-grinding guilt abated.

If Eva could not stand the truth, then he would

have to move on. He would just go home to New London—and live happily on alone.

He finally understood that, above all, he just needed to be truthful with himself

His thoughts trailed off into stillness, as he stared at the twinkling stars fanning out before him in the window.

Wrapped up in a sparkling white gown of snow, French's Forest seemed uncommonly serene—and eternally familiar.

The leafless crown of the black fall boughs made a bed of thorns for heaven's angels to sit upon—skewering the sky with so many dark and crooked limbs.

They clawed up at the cosmic lights like a mob of fanatic worshipers beneath the altar of a sentient canopy.

The glittering membrane of the universe expanded across the big sky before him—never emanating such majesty to him in his life before.

The mantle glimmered in sandstone and ruby waves, seemingly communicating to him in an alien morse code. The heavens spoke in patterns beyond terran—light-years past natural.

But below the stars stood trunks no less fantastical. Evergreen yet bent, perennial yet ever-present—the many trees of French's Forest represented nothing less than the ethereal boundaries of the enchanted weald itself.

The magic of the wood did have some influence beyond its borders, into New London and up to the big sky—but the overall reach of the timberland's bewitching aura wore off the further out you got.

To stroll through the heart of the place, however, on any moonlit midnight—was enough to entice every form of strange life from the madness, beyond the earthly edges.

Many saw visions in the shadows, of their future selves sending warnings back to them. Those that did not die of fright from the experience—found much catharsis in hindsight.

Encounters with spirits and oneness were so normal in French's Forest, in fact, that it became the region's number one claim to fame. Tourists came from all around to try to catch a glimpse of the goblins in the brush.

Whether while hitting the rapids of the Payne—or meditating upon the Blacktree Delta—from gnarled trunk, to ravine devil dancing wild—from wish-granting well, to blind mage in the hole—the trails of French's Forest teemed with the beautiful and grotesque. Otherworldly and beautifully mundane existed here alike—at the fringes of reality and illusion.

Every walk of magic and mystery could be found among the blue leaves of that wild wood—but only if you had eyes open to see—and either way, it

was risky trekking trails near night's nadir, no matter the strength of your natural senses for receiving reality's spectrum.

In the mornings, however, the wood was more peaceful and serene. Nature paths criss-crossed through pleasant clearings—up and down the mountain.

There were restrooms and laundry available for campers who sometimes stayed the night before portaging around Evyl falls.

The birds sung happy refrains under blazing blue skies and billowing white clouds. No normal passer-through would ever suspect the trees were alive. No average highwayman would ever stop for a bite at Muriel's Grill—and believe all the tall tales he overheard locals yarning about—whether it be the Sylverkin or reports of flying snakes—most of it was beyond the scope of the average human periphery.

But for those who stayed at Maddie's B&B a night or two—or for some of those canoeists passing through—the magical world often unveiled itself, revealing the real fantasmagoria that was French's Forest.

Moreover, for the locals, the mystery of the land was never in doubt. No one ventured out after-twilight, without companionship and flashlights. Everyone watched out for each other—and there was a bell-tower at the Church of the Martyr, which was sometimes used for missing person alerts.

Organized groups would scour French's Forest. Often, people were found unconscious, curled up naked against a tree somewhere. They would not remember how they got there. There were now dozens of such cases.

Three people had never been found.

But Seven never let the rumors frighten him. Instead, he preferred to see the Forest it for himself. He explored every corner equally, from humble jaunts beneath bare fall boughs, to sublime summits under celestial clouds on summer mountain peaks.

He was equally apt hiking unexplored chambers underground—as climbing innumerable heights into the clouds, looking for universal peeks into parallel planes high and low, for some kind of answer to why he was here.

He had spent much of his youth on the hunt—but also in the mind, meditating in the Stonefields—or in the Emerald Cavern under Evyl Falls. He was as much apt to conquer his inner chakras—as to conquer a new climb on the mountain.

Somedays, while sitting still, catching the wood's wind-song--he would see the unity in the grass and stone. The membrane of everything became clear to him.

But other times, it was just as easy to spend an afternoon in the boughs of the trees with his bow and a quiver of blunted arrows, shooting down flying squirrels into the dusk.

He found it easier to clear his mind when doing something monotonous like that.

In the fullness of his adolescence in French's Forest, it was a wild life—and Faye was just another facet of his deeply fecund bildungsroman.

As he aged, he grew more reclusive, preferring to hide out in his room, rather than risk further forest encounters—but still some evenings, despite all the dangers, he just had to get out and explore.

There was always more to uncover. Some full moons could never be ignored.

Sometimes, the call of the wild ruled all

He would climb out of his bedroom window late at night, snake down the latticework--and chase frights about.

He would track sylvan ghouls over endless fields of ankle-cobbling stone, under full starlight and moonshine. He followed the halos they left behind when they moved.

He would pursue them everyplace, down through reedy streams, where three-headed beasts stalked upon the shores.

He would train his ears to listen for their spirits vibration.

In hindsight, he was surprised to still be alive at all. At the height of his escapades, he could have been found in any place imaginable, from thickest

thickets and side-trails—to the dankest caves and chamber ruins from the Middle Ages.

He was a Master Archer, Equestrian—and Falconer by seventeen. His intimacy with the flora and fauna of French's Forest was encyclopedic. His penchant for hiking fit the hardest forester to a tee.

He lit a new smoke with his dying one--more easily given to thinking long in the wee hours.

He randomly recalled catching a blue darner once, with a net in the shade, back when they lived near Lake Heron, just south of French's Forest.

Pastoral nostalgia always got him at the oddest times whenever he went back to the Forest.

He tucked a tear away from the corner of his eye into a fist—wishing he could be that strong young twig again.

He never liked letting go. It was what always inevitably led him into pushing everybody away.

But that was ages ago--and French's Forest was not all peaceful leaves all the time. It was just as much a nightmare ripped from a Poe dream—so he was better off with Eva in Old York now anyway.

Life was better without French's Forest.

But there was always some lingering amour for the trees in his bones. Some echo of fondness for the River Payne always back-lit his heavy mind-frame.

It was easier said than done, to leave the leaves behind, especially being just back from exodus. Buried away in Old York at least, he was more liberated from the influence of the nightmarish trees.

He sat down again, running his fingers over his old carvings in the table. He used to sit here and write until his head hurt.

He used to chronicle his adventures in here—or up on the roof, by the old gargoyle weather-vane—in case one day became his last. He penned his pastiches in longhand—and re-worked them in countless drafts.

One day, his creative writing professor at N.L.U. surmised his ideas made great fables. Seven stormed, out frustrated at her close-mindedness.

His stories of a young ghost hunter who lived in an enchanted wood may have seemed outlandish to people, but he was determined to present them as recounts faithful to fact. He even included apologies, explaining the great lengths he went, in order to ensure the accuracy of the record.

Looking back, it was all a logical progression, from witness to novelist—he was just trying to make an honest account of what actually happened. He knew firsthand what strangeness lurked beyond the dark veil—and he wanted to tell about it. The ghosts of French's Forest were the quintessential outcasts—and he empathized with them intensely.

He had spent many midnights off the trodden shoulder, deep in the dense foliage of French's Forest's outer reaches. He knew how it felt to sleep alone under the universe at night. He knew how connected you became to nature—wherein, suddenly, loneliness no longer applied anymore, being so absolutely accompanied by the outdoors.

He knew what it meant to be an outcast—and if nothing else, his journals helped him come to grips with his subhuman past—and underlying hopes for a more mortal future.

Looking back on those days now, he saw that he had sought blood ties in the pitch of the wood, with the wind and the frogs.

He was the black lamb of his pack—more at peace with the owl and loon, than with his own flesh and bone. He found solace in the undiscovered elements of rock and water—where his family only ever saw the old river and the crumbling stone.

Although never as feral or primal as the raven or fox that played alongside him, in his time in French's Forest, Seven honed his ranging instincts to a heightened confidence.

He found peace and tranquility in the wood, on some adventure lost—instead of cooped up indoors.

One day, in his seventeenth year, he awoke more aware than ever before. It was more than a

second sight or a sixth sense. It was a seventh level--parallel and everpresent.

It was an innate knowledge of a dragonfly beating its wings from half-way across the world. It was a kinetic connection to French's Forest's deepest roots growing relentlessly downward.

For the first time in his life, he knew he belonged, as a string in the membrane of the multiverse.

When he heard the birds chirping in the skies, he could interpret their language. When he saw the fawn fleeing, he felt its primitive emotions racing, as if they were his own. When everyday folks complained about the weather—he would predict it for them—and be accurate everytime.

But then, one rainy night of infamy, under enchanted moonlight, at his eighteenth birthday, while tracking past a babbling brook, he ran upon a dark figure of a woman in the brush.

He saw her stalking furtively, from cover to cover.

When she stepped across a shaft of light, he saw her face flash, in a gaunt silver slip, under red dreadlocks like diamond-tipped wicks afire.

She waded into a rainbow-bed of water—casting ripples out around her--while the boughs of willows bowed to her beauty. She wore nothing—and her body shimmered in a sinewy

molten silver.

Climbing upon a rock, she lounged there—and sung like a choir of angels—yet her lips did not move.

She was a banshee—and she could seduce or destroy the human mind at will—with the same black tongue and magic-filled lungs.

She could sing softly—or she could wail down the trees. She could warble so the birds would perch in her hair—or croak so the frogs would infest Bane Manor.

She shaped French's Forest with her songs—and although she mostly considered just legend, that night, she was more real to Seven than rock and water.

He had lucked out and stumbled upon the Sylverkin. *She* was Lady Faye of French's Forest. He was witnessing the Woman from the Woods, in the living flesh.

She was said to normally come out after midnight, down from the hills, where she and Ax haunted the Old Castle Miramar—that was rumored to be built upon a diamond deposit, from back in the days when the werewolves were at war with the vampires.

The Castle was previously haunted by King Evan the First. The King would stalk about the halls and passageways, painting abstract art over all the walls.

Tourists who came for the tours were told if they stayed long enough, the Ghost of a Mad Artist would appear—but most of them left before that ever happened.

One day, however, the King and his bear were summoned by an unknown reason, to go down into the wood and wade into the Payne.

His bear sat upon the shore and watched as Master Evan waded into the Payne. He floated on his back down the river, grinning madly up at the big sky.

“Leaning-tree lead me to the River Payne, so that my Soul may return again,” he said to himself, before plunging off Evyl Falls.

The story was spread around by a hitch-hiker who claimed to have witnessed the Ghost of King Evan going over Evyl Falls—but no one believed it until sightings of Evan proved to have stopped entirely.

Even more strangely, a few months on, a new ghost began haunting Castle Miramar—and she would come to be known as Lady Faye, although Seven would not see her in person until now.

Her skin rippled in chrome maelstroms as she sang. She brightened when she pierced the higher octaves—then settled into duller shades, breaking down the melodies on easier bridges, lulling him into raw mesmerisms.

She was akin to a mellifluous

intoxicant—with curves that curled his lips—and a frame so dynamic it sent him spilling over himself.

She shone over him in lush golden light—drawing him in toward her.

With one hand, she beckoned him in.

Her mouth fell agape—where a galaxy came spiraling outward. *'Come to me ...'*

He stomped over the clearing, an automaton fully entranced. The sticks and long-grass crunched underfoot as he crossed.

Cackling maniacally, she pulled at the air, as if drawing him in by an unseen tether.

Long black fangs snaked down from her mouth. Twisted dark horns spiraled out from her temples.

Her body teemed in whirlpools of molten silver.

'Call me Lady Faye, pitiful creature ... I am the Lost One from the Eleventh Level of Animalia. I am the idol of your dreams. I am the keeper of your wishes. As much as you are of this world ... This world is of me,' she said.

'You are nothing but a caricature in my eyes. You are nothing but a puppet strung up by my delights and whims.

'Today is the last day of your life as an individual, Seven. Now, I am all you know. Our minds are one in symbiosis. Your every thought is my wish—and you will live on with me in French's

Forest forever, for as long as I am fond of you, you will be immortal.

“Why me?”

'Because you were born, Seven. There is no use in trying to change. There is an order to things.'

“But I do not believe in fate.

'So? Does that exclude Fate from believing in you? How stubborn-headed of you, Seven. Do you really believe that this is all just by accident?

'The stars are randomly scattered across the sky? The trees grow wherever, no matter the elements? The clouds gather without the wind blowing?

'The sun shines without the weather changing?

'Everything has a cause, Seven—and you are predestined to be with me.

'I am Faye, who you will follow.

'Walk in my prints, Seven, so that our passage here is as one. Forget yourself—remembering only me.'

Seven nodded. “I dreamed of you,” he said.

'Indeed. I have been an audience to your dreams for years, Seven. How fascinating your mind has become, over time. I have delighted in influencing you to explore French's Forest. I led you to this stream. You are here because I imagined it would happen.'

“I have to go.”

'You cannot,' she hissed.

"I will come back," he said, backing away slowly. "I have to check in at home ..."

'No ...' She waved her hand at him. *'Stay.'* He turned to run..

'STOP!' she commanded.

He scrambled up the bank for the cover of the brush. He broke through the thicket—peering back through the branches.

She pointed at him with a flourish—and Az broke out of the black depths behind her, swimming through the air as if he were hunting in the Payne—heading dead in Seven's direction.

She cackled. 'Meet my alterdaemon Ax ... From the shadows of my mind—he knows what I am thinking even while I am still finding out—but he also possesses a mischievous, bloodthirsty side. He has a devilish spirit all his own.

'I am him—and he is me—but he is also a water demon—while I am a wood banshee. The Payne is his playground, where I cannot go.'

Ax darted across the river in a heartbeat, as Faye paced back and forth on the far shore.

Seven turned to run, but suddenly felt Ax coil around his ankle—and loop about his leg—dragging him back down the embankment and toward the water.

The snake was supernaturally fast—leaving Seven scrambling just to orientate himself—before

getting yanked further along again.

Ax was also incomparably strong, cutting the blood off to Seven's leg in its death-lock grip.

'There is no use in resistance, Seven—since you would already be dead, if I really wanted you that way. Giver over your life to my hands, Seven—especially if you distrust me—especially then.

'Admittedly, Ax is highly unpredictable—and he has a special taste for humans—but only I know what is best for you, Seven. You must learn to trust me before you trust yourself.'

Seven grasped desperately at roots and vines, as Ax pulled him across the rocky shore.

'Now ... this will also serve as a test, to determine just what you are Seven ... If you do not get washed away, then you must be real. But you are not quite real, are you, Seven?'

'What are you?'

He disappeared into the dark eddies with the snake. Light sank away as they descended into the fathoms. He knew the Payne was only meters deep here, but nevertheless, the snake kept dragging him down, down, down ...

The sun was doused to a prick of light upon the river's dark underbelly. He watched the bubbles leave his mouth--as his mind drifted off into nothingness.

Then, just when he had all but faded

away—he heard Faye say: *'I want him alive.'*

Then Ax uncoiled—letting him free to float back up to the surface--where he clambered onto the stony bank--and collapsed in the long grass, gasping for life.

Faye cackled wildly—eyes rolling back into her head.. *'Welcome to the rest of your life, Seven Bane!'*

In his fleeting consciousness, Seven saw a green-eyed panther emerge from the trees. It paced like the wind's loyal shadow through the shallows toward Faye.

Faye hissed, raised a fist—and Ax fired out of the Payne—intercepting the panther at the foaming breakers, where the river stepped down—hovering in a serpentine coil before the black cat.

vi. Before Stars Of A Higher Rarity

The next thing Seven knew, he was lying in bed the next morning with the smell of breakfast on the rise.

His head throbbed sorely.

A lone knock fell at the door—and Godwin stepped into the room. “We found you sleep-walking in the brook,” he said. “With that gash on your head--and that on your arm.”

Seven looked down. VII was carved into the inside of his right forearm.

Godwin stopped by the foot of the bed.

“Seven, what the hell is going on?”

He moved around to the bedside, where he dropped down in the chair.

“It's nothing.”

“Nothing? You can talk to me, right son?”

“Yes Godwin.”

“What the hell is it then? What has got you out all night--every night? Your mother is worried to death. You must know French's Forest better than I do by now. I built this house out of these trees, you know. I know what the wood holds.”

“It's about a girl, Godwin.”

“God damn it!” Godwin said. “I should have known ... I'm so sorry, Seven, I had no idea. Well that cuts it then, I'll tell Marietta it's a guy thing and she can just forget about it,” he said, getting up to go.

“I think I love her ...”

Godwin froze--his ears cocking backward.

“Does she feel the same?”

“I don't know.”

“Find out—and if she does—hold on to that, Seven ... Hold on to that, boy ...”

“Your mother and I were once childhood sweethearts, believe it or not—many, many centuries ago ...”

“She was a beautiful young girl—and I was such a lucky, dumb kid ... Young love—nothing more precious in the universe, Seven. Cherish it

while you have it—because it will vanish without warning.”

“I've never heard you talk like this, Godwin.”

“I have a soft spot for real love--but don't tell your mother that—or I'll be finding her flowers every morning—and then where will it end.”

Seven laughed.

“Just be yourself, Seven. You have enough edge in you to turn her on, if you give yourself a chance. It's the confidence that gets them, really—in the end,” he said--and turned to leave.

“Godwin ...”

“Yes Seven.”

“Is Marietta your soul mate?”

Godwin sighed, sitting on the end of the bed.

“Marietta and I met at Whitehaven Beach.

We were both passing through French's Forest on the long weekend. She had a breakdown—and I was using the restrooms. I offered assistance—but she had already called for a tow.

“I offered her a lift into town—and that was history. Whether or not it was fate, we made the best of it, my boy—which gave us some great memories.

“That's the thing about life, Seven, that gets you every-time: the second you hesitate, she puts up her guard. So if you're ready to jump—just jump. You will be guided by her eyes--and she will let you know when to make a move.

“When she does, don't blink. Don't even look

back. Don't waste another breath. Dive in, Seven. Dive in my boy--before your life passes you by.

"It's a wild ride, my boy. It stops for nothing—but you are allowed to enjoy it. We should all be so lucky as to be young and in love again."

"But what if it becomes too much?"

Godwin laughed heartily. "Eventually, everything becomes too much, Seven," he said, with a wink and a nod.

Seven took Godwin's advice and gave Faye the benefit of the doubt—even though encounters with her were becoming increasingly alarming.

Of course, Godwin had no idea that the object of Seven's affections were none other than Lady Faye of French's Forest herself.

From then on, Seven could not cross the wood without wondering if he would encounter Faye. Despite her attack on him, he was still divided about her. She had commanded Ax to release him in the end, so he felt obliged to give her the slimmest benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, he started staying in, reading books—trying to avoid her altogether. But one night, before stars of a higher rarity, a knock came at the door—and he heard Marietta speaking with someone.

Then in the doorway stood Marietta and a girl in red overalls—the spitting image of Faye--only human in the flesh and blood.

He marveled at the similarities between this

girl and his Forest Mistress, but decided his mind must be playing tricks on him.

“Seven, this is Shea, one of our new neighbours, will you come say hello please.”

Seven crossed the room and took her hand.

“She-ah?”

“Shea,” she said, smiling demurely.

“That's a nice name,” he said. He could feel her pulse quicken.

“Thank-you, I'm used to it.”

“How long have you been in French's Forest?”

“Just since yesterday.”

“Do you like it so far.”

She shrugged. “Pretty lame.”

“Well, I'm sure Seven could show you around a bit my dear, couldn't you Seven?”

“Maybe tomorrow?” Shea said. “I should get going, my mother's making dinner.”

Seven retired to his room, reeling at the bizarreness of life. He found himself thinking about Faye and Shea all night long. Faye's danger attracted him as much as Shea's innocence—and he could not reconcile which one he preferred.

On stars of a higher rarity, when his need for adventure overwhelmed his resistance to the risks--he invited Faye back into his life, into his room at night. But he adamantly refused to go into the woods with her after sunset.

But Shea was able to coax him outdoors in the evening, for small stretches—although even those walks did not last very long.

He remembered one time, the sun had set ahead of them—and they were caught crossing stones at dusk, in the shallows under a full moon—when Shea slipped, planting one foot in the current—and Seven watched it catch fire underwater.

He helped her over to the embankment—where he ripped off his shirt and beat the fire off her leg, as it licked up her calf.

“Are you okay?”

She blushed. “I should not have slipped,” she said. She lowered her brow shyly.

“It's okay,” he said, instinctively embracing her.

“Just promise you'll never use it against me,” she said in his ear.

“Of course not--I love you, Shea. You should not have tried to hide it from me. You should have known that I would understand.”

“I love you Seven.”

She was the second romance of his lifetime after Faye—or first mortal crush—but he was still just learning how to be in love. He did not know anything about it yet.

“We never have to go near the Payne again.

“I thought you would think less of me.”

“You will always be the world to me, Shea.

Nothing could ever come between us.”

“Do you really mean that Seven?”

“Yes. I will love you until death parts us.”

Unfortunately, Faye overheard this promise—and a month later, they were making love on the Mound of the Moribund—when fifty human-faced crows descended all around them.

The faces of a boy ranged from young to old—each visage imbued with a grotesque unnaturalness.

One of the birds flew over to them: *'Leave the boy alone, Faye ... or we'll seal you off from French's Forest forever!!!'*

'Never!' Faye cried. 'He is mine--MINE!!! Do not fool yourself, Evan ... I am more powerful asleep, than you ever were alive.'

'Then you leave us no choice, Faye.'

'Damn you, Evan,' Faye cursed.

She evaporated into the mist--and the birds departed—leaving Seven alone in the woods, wondering how he would ever explain it all to the family.

They broke up the next year—got back together—and split once more, just for good measure.

He did not take it well at first—but then he got over it, which was when she first realized that she was the one that made the mistake.

Ultimately, it was Shea trying to win Seven back, pushing him further away—when he decided to

leave French's Forest altogether.

So he started anew in the city of humans. At first, urban life was good to him. His plan was working--as Shea and Faye faded from his thoughts—and he began to find harmony again.

Later on, however, while adjusting to his life in New London, he experienced pangs of regret over never taking Shea back. Grace came to him later in life—but early on affairs were full of drama and strife.

Another time, with a different ex--Abigail--she had snuck in on him showering.

She stealthily disrobed herself and was about to surprise him—when she yanked the curtain across, and Faye's sinewy silver lines materialized.

Her mouth went wide with shock.

“Seven! How *could* you?” she cried, voice curdling in hurt.

She marched out—and Seven followed her, in only a towel.

“Abby, I can explain everything,” he had said. “She's just a ghost to me, Abby.”

But that had not helped him win his case in Abby's eyes--and she had left him like all the rest.

Faye had learned how to sabotage Seven's relationships with efficient precision.

She always donned her pretty skin for his girlfriends, taking every opportunity to show them

that she was the other woman from the woods.

Her other favourite ploy was to seduce Seven into compromising situations, appealing to his nostalgia for their love—only to get him caught red-handed by his girlfriends, cheating on them with a ghost.

It got so bad in fact, that when he was on dates, he started to say that his family was all dead, so that they never became an issue.

With Eva, however, he could not bring himself to lie to her—and so, when she asked of his relations—he felt inclined to admit that he did have some who lived by in a little hamlet called French's Forest.

He remembered how upon hearing those words, she looked like she had seen a ghost.

vii. Young Devils Kissing Madly As One

He started feeling tired again. He mashed out his smoke and rolled back into bed, leaving the curtains wide open—submitting to a star-swollen slumber.

He dreamed he and Eva were angels skipping along the backs of iridescent clouds—skating figure-eights around the rings of Saturn—and long jumping from star to shining star.

“Seven ...”

“Yes Eva?”

“How long have we been here?”

“I don’t know ... Seems like forever.”

“Are we dreaming?”

“Does it matter?”

“Pinch me ...”

“No you pinch me.”

“Okay, okay ... Let's pinch each other at the same time ...”

“Alright--on the count of three ...”

“One, two—”

“THREE!!!” she squealed.

They pinched each other.

The clouds beneath them parted.

They plummeted toward the blue earth far below.

They grasped for each other in the rip and roar of a long, jagged downward spiral.

A protective halo of light surrounded them when their hands met—stabilizing them their descent—so that they could hold each other—and hear each other—and kiss even.

They could still hear the wind—but it was muted. They could still see land growing beneath them—and the horizon swallowing them up—but those last moments were peaceful.

They were a moribund set of spirits-elect—hell-bent on the after-world—kissing madly as one for the last time.

iv. All In On Seven's Lucky Hands

Seven awoke in glistening skin and heated thoughts. He ripped aside the covers and sat up in bed calming down.

He snuck off softly to the bathroom, where he started a shower.

He looked at himself in the mirror and splashed water in his face.

He began to worry that Eva was not safe here. He was not even sure if he himself was safe to be around. He knew very well from experience that French's Forest brought out the animal in him.

The longer that they remained there, his instincts would grow increasingly uncontrollable.

He might bite her in his sleep if he was not careful.

He shut the shower off—dried, dressed—and squeaked about the hard-wood floor, checking on the others to see if everyone was still asleep.

He brushed passed Olin's guitar, knocking it over--but catching it before it crashed into the glass coffee table.

He froze, waiting for someone to wake.

From the bedrooms, there was only snoring.

He crept into the kitchen and opened the door.

He lifted the window on the screen and fresh air rolled in, clearing his head. He stared outside into the breaking night for a good time, airing out the

house—breathing in the approaching morning.

He studied the shadow-torn edges of French's Forest. Some stubborn darkness still clung there, to the branches at the fringes—but when the day finally turned, it would be fast and bright upon them.

He began to grow uncomfortable with the incarnate presence of the wood and shut the door again—locking it.

He heard her in his mind: '*Come on now, boy ... Come back to me ... Come show me your Lucky Hands, Seven ... Show me those Lucky Hands!!!*'

He closed his eyes and unlocked the door once more.

He stepped out into the night.

Her presence enveloped him immediately.

Beyond the strident cricket-song, he heard her familiar heartbeat. Her jealousy raged as an ocean storm across the top of his mind.

He spun on his heels and and darted for the open door.

He slipped inside and swiftly shut himself away—sliding the bolt-lock across.

Returning to the kitchen, he bumped directly into Eva.

“Yah-how!!! Woah-ho-hah! Eva, you scared the *shit* out of me,” he said--suddenly steeped in jitters.

“I was here the whole time ... Just *watching* you ...” she said.

“Don't freak me out like that ...”

“I'm sorry,” she said. “What's going on? Are you okay?”

“Yes ...” he said, glancing toward the back-door.

“Did you see something?”

“No ...”

“Did you sleep?”

He shook his head.

“You had a nightmare, didn't you?” she said. She didn't even need to ask. She could just tell.

He bowed his head.

“Oh babe, I'm so sorry ...” she said, taking his arm. “Just remember—at least *you* can remember your dreams.”

He smirked. “I envy you, never having to remember anything.”

She shrugged cutely.

“Don't worry, this one doesn't count,” she said. “You know how you're always late, right? Because you refuse to wear a watch, well ...” She pulled out a small silver-papered box, tied up by a thin crimson ribbon. “Don't worry, it's nothing big.”

“Oh babe ... I didn't get you anything ... I thought we agreed ...??” he said. He took the box anyway, stuck a finger in one loose fold--and tore the silver wrapping off.

He lifted the lid.

Inside nestled an ebony pocket-watch on a silver chain.

He dangled it before his reflective eyes, letting it swing back-and-forth like a pendulum.

“This is wonderful.”

“Now you have no excuse not to know the time ...” she said cutely—and blushed, as if she had been practicing the line.

“No excuse ...” he said and smiled. *How could he ever tell her the truth?* he wondered to himself.

He was only too sure, that someday soon, he would lose her forever.

“It's engraved too ...” she said.

She flipped it over for him.

It read: *Seven's Lucky Hands.*

His lids brimmed in light. “I love you more than myself.”

“Thank you,” she said smiling wide-eyed.

“Now you're supposed to say you love me too ...” he said.

They laughed together.

“Oooh, but I *dooo ... sooo* much, Seven,” she said. “Much more than you'll ever know,” she said, winking while wiping away his tears for him.

viii. Being Her Imagination's Plaything

Ungodly thunder broke outside, shaking the walls like paper flags.

“What the hell was that ...?” she said, her voice tremulous. “The skies were clear a minute ago, out the bathroom window ...”

“Storms blow in fast ... Some nights you think the whole house is lifting off.” He sighed. “I’m sorry I brought you here.”

“Why?”

“It’s not safe, Eva.”

Her face fell. “What’s going on? I want to know everything, Seven. No secrets, babe—remember?”

Lightning flashed—and a branch broke outside, at a stirring proximity.

They cast their gazes toward the door.

Thunder rolled overhead.

They were in the heart of the system.

Eva ran into the drawing room to look out the picture window.

Seven followed.

Clouds blotted out the dawn—rolling back the day to night.

The house lights fell short on the long, dark lawn.

“Oh my god, did you see that?” she hissed.

“Where,” he began—but then he saw it too.

In a flash of lightning, just beyond the wood fringe, in the shadow-depths, Faye and Ax swam

between the trees, as if the very forest wind were their river.

They rose and bowed in their sweeps and arcs; dipped and swayed side-to-side, and at counter angles to each other; they were synchronized spirit-swimmers, of the sylvan bent, slipping and sliding through the leafy shine and shadow of French's Forest.

Ax took the low side, sliding along on oscillating currents, a sylvan snake on invisible quicksilver—as Faye hovered a stretch above him, swinging to the left and right, gliding swiftly between the sharp, grasping limbs of the wood.

They were synchronized swimmers from the ether world, surreal enough to render the meak-minded insane—and of such a supernatural otherness, as to expand the very realm of consciousness in any passerby or onlooker.

“Is that her?”

Thunder shook the roof.

Lightning flashed--and Faye and Ax were half as far as the moment before.

Light radiated from Faye's eyes, illuminating the fields with an unnatural brilliance--swallowing up every last shred and tendril of darkness.

“Look away,” Seven warned, but it was too late—and Eva was blinded.

“Seven—Seven, I can't see--oh my god, oh my god--I can't see Seven! ... Seven?”

Seven pulled her tight. “It'll be alright ...”

Then suddenly—finally—the light died—and the color of vision and sound returned to her.

Faye stood yards yonder the picture window—cackling wildly—Ax snaking through the grass about her feet.

Eva screamed.

Seven dashed to the window and drew the big curtains together.

“Put her out of your mind. Do not think of her, and she cannot approach the stoop. It's our belief in her that she feeds off of.”

Eva blinked expressionless.

He checked that the door was locked.

Pulling aside the tiny curtain, he saw Faye mounting the front porch.

“What do you see?” Eva pleaded.

“Nothing.”

He dragged Eva into the kitchen, where they found Marietta at the sink.

She had her hands deep in sink-water, looking over her shoulder at them.

“What are you two doing up?” she said. “I was going to start breakfast,” she said.

All Seven had to say, was “It's Faye ...”—and Marietta's eyes grew grim—as her face blanched.

“Both of you upstairs, let's go ...” Seven urged.

A tremendous humming arose at the front

door, as if a river of electricity was rushing the house.

Every window blushed with Faye's white light. The songbirds warbled tremulous dismay from the trees.

Marietta shrieked. "Oh god, oh god ... Oh god ... It's *her* again ..."

"Calm down, we can handle this," Seven said. "Just clear your mind of her. Forget her name ... Forget her face ... She can smell your thoughts ... She feeds off of our attention ..."

Godwin and Olin came stumbling down the stairs, scratching their heads and rubbing their eyes.

"What in the blazes is going on?"

The kitchen door started to rattle, as if the wind would smash it open at any second.

The humming elevated to a deafening pitch—before flat-lining into silence.

They covered their ears as their ear-drums popped.

"What does she want?"

"Nothing, I swear!" Seven yelled.

"There's got to be a reason, you must have led her on somehow ..."

"No, I swear ... She means nothing to me, Eva ... !"

"*Please* you two," Godwin pleaded. "There is no time for this. You've got to go ... She only wants you," he said, looking Seven dead in the eye.

"She's after the girl," Olin put in.

A white mist was forming around their ankles now—and Olin's eyes rolled back into his head. He started for the front door.

“Olin!” Godwin barked after him. “What on earth are you doing?” He dashed after after Olin, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck--and pulled him back against the wall.

Olin struggled against him—but Godwin bulled in on his son—forcing him to listen.

“Snap out of it, Olin ... I may have made you undead—but you will always be mortal to these hands--and never forget that--”

Olin growled in protest—and Godwin struck him across the face.

Blood sprung from Olin's lip—and he sulked. He bowed his head.

He did understand that he had been hypnotized.

“Now keep an eye out and stay close,” Godwin said.

“Yes Sir,” Olin said dryly.

“We have to get up on the roof,” Seven said. “Up above the trees, where she loses strength.”

At the apex of the house, where the iron gargoyle weather-vane perched, carving up the four winds with its wings, he had spent much of his boyhood, in respite from Faye—and even Bane family life.

It was calmer up there where the grip of the

woodland's mystical field first broke and weakened.

He would write in his journal and forget about the rest of the world for awhile. Up there, it was just him and the weather-vane—and the horizon.

He could write for as long as he liked—clear skies permitting—and he did not have to worry about Faye finding him.

But he had never been up there in a lightning storm before.

“It's our only chance,” he said. “She's out of control.”

The five of them mounted the steps together. When they reached the first landing, Eva spun Seven about and faced him square on.

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“You promised me you weren't hiding anything,” she hissed. “We had a *deal!*”

“Eva--we did, we did--”

“--there's no time for this,” Olin interjected.

“All history on the table,” Eva said. “What happened to that, Seven? I thought 'honesty was our best policy' ...”

“I know, I know,” Seven said.

An electric mist rolled up the stairwell. Olin signaled to Godwin and Marietta to continue up the stairs. Godwin nodded gravely and led Marietta up to the next landing.

“Eva ... Please, let's go ... We have to keep moving,” Seven said, lightly touching her elbow.

She pulled away, glaring at him.

Olin stepped away. "Let's go, both of you, don't be stupid," he said, fanning his hands at them, waving them after him.

Eva wiped her tears, sobs breaking into bittersweet laughter. "What an idiot I've been, thinking that you were somehow different from all the rest."

"But I *am* different Eva ... I never meant to hurt you."

"No, you're not, you are just another cheating, lying *bastard*. I've seen it in your eyes, Seven. You've been hiding this from me the entire time, haven't you? I'm right aren't I? I've listened to you in your sleep, Seven. I've heard you say other girl's names. You don't think I saw the look in your eyes when Olin said her name last night?

"Goddamn you, Seven ... Just ... *Goddamn You.*"

III

Siren From The Stream Of The Subconscious

ix. Irreversibly Cursed In Romance

Faye's essence swirled around Eva's ankles—electric tentacles licking greedily at her thighs.

Eva's breathing grew troubled. She locked gazes with Seven—backing further away from him, farther down the stairs.

“Eva, please ... What the hell are you doing?”

“I feel like ... I don't even know who you are anymore, Seven,” she said, eyes brimming with tears.

She waded in up to her waist—when she hesitated, coming to her senses for a moment.

She gazed into the maelstrom surrounding her and grew faint.

“Do you love her?” she said weakly.

“No, *Eva* ... *please* ...” Seven said, his voice cracking. “It's not like that, at all ... I *hate* her, in fact ... I *hate* her ...”

Eva winced. Faye roared from beneath the swirling mist.

“*What* does she want from you?”

“She won't stop until I'm hers ... Eva, I'm so

sorry ... I love you Eva. I love *you*.”

Behind Eva, Ax's silhouette surfaced, rippling into sight—circling just beneath the electric breakers, in the shallows of colorlessness. She did not know the snake was there.

Seven sensed she would panic if he warned her—only quickening an attack.

“I love you, Eva ... Please come back to me *now*,” he said, struggling to calm his voice.

“More than her?”

“Yes!!! More than her—*more than myself* ... Just please, come back ...” he said, verging on tears, unready to lose her—and about to yell for her to '*Run for it!!!*'—when she suddenly changed her mind and turned back.

She climbed back up the stairs, out of the abyss, into Seven's embrace.

“Oh, Eva,” he said, hugging her tight. “I love you so much.”

“You're such a coward,” she said. “You even lie to yourself, Seven,” she said. “To make the guilt go away,” she whispered in his ear.

He nodded, sore beyond expression.

“What are you afraid of, Seven? Saying sorry? Is that it ...? Are you just afraid of saying sorry?”

“But I *am* saying sorry, Eva ... *even right now*,” he said. “I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say, except that that I'm *sorry* ... Maybe ... maybe I

don't deserve you.”

“What?” she said. She crossed her arms in a pouty defiance.

“Nevermind—we have to go ...” He tugged her up the stairs behind him.

“Why don't you deserve me, Seven?” she said as he dragged her along.

“I'm cursed, Eva. I'm *cursed*.”

“*Damn you*, liar,” she growled.

They regrouped with Olin, Godwin and Marietta on the third floor, where the Bane family heirlooms hung on display down the ten-foot walls.

From the family crest, to old scrolls written by long-dead ancestors—to suits of armor once worn by elder-knight relations—every heirloom imaginable had a home here.

Even the silver swords and spears once used for battle against the New London Werewolves were hanging down an east corridor.

“I hurt my ankle,” Eva said. “You were pulling me too fast.”

“Will she ever stop,” Marietta said. “Why must she plague my family so.”

“I'm so tired of this bitch,” Godwin grumbled. He got a mad look in his eye. “I'll show her,” he growled.

“Please, Godwin, no,” Marietta cried. “It's not worth it,” she begged. “She'll break off before long, I bet. I need you in this world, Godwin.”

Please, Godwin. Godwin!”

But Godwin's eyes had snapped into black daggers—and his breathing had hastened into a raging

“Don't do it, old man,” Olin warned. “She'll *destroy* you. She's *too* powerful. Remember those thieves from Darklingtown? They underestimated Faye and lost their lives for it ...”

“Bah! I've forgotten more blood-works she'll ever see,” Godwin boasted.

“You saved my life, old man, I'm just returning the favour,” Olin said—and offered his hand.

Godwin grabbed it. “Good on you, Olin. Watch your mother for me.”

“I will,” Olin said, nodding grimly—smirking in a bitter pride. He did not like watching his father go. He disliked experiencing emotion.

Marietta bit Godwin once on the cheek. A thin line of blood ran down to his lip—where he licked it.

She looked away, tearing up.

Seven shook Godwin's hand—and Eva hugged him once.

“You've got a good one here, boy ... She's got nerve for a human.”

Seven nodded.

Godwin took down a mace from the wall—gave up one last side-long glance to

Marietta—and then turned back down the stairs.

Faye emerged from the mist to meet him, with a sword of lightning in one hand—and a shield of blood in the other.

She swung at him—and he caught her blade with his hand.

It burned through his flesh to his finger bones, where it etched a painful passage.

He cried out in agony—smashing her shield with his mace.

She buckled under the force of his blow, falling backward into her own whirling mist—and he jumped in after her.

x. Dead Into The Beautiful Emptiness

When they reached the fifth level, Seven and Olin dragged a long-table under the skylight.

One-by-one, as light up oozed through the floorboards, they climbed out onto the slate mansion roof.

Olin was the last to be pulled up—but just as he was about to take Seven's hand reaching down for him, Faye emerged from a plume of black clouds.

She stood 7ft tall before him, in full black body armour, that was thorny and blood-spattered from head to foot.

'Olin ...' she said.

“Olin,” Seven said. “Hurry, let's go.”

'You have dreamed of me ...'

“Olin, she's evil, Olin ... It's a trap.”

“Leave us alone,” Olin said, sneering. He spat at her.

'No, Olin ... I am here for you. That is why I have come, not for them. But for you. You Olin ...'

“Why me now?”

'Have you not felt my presence Olin? Have you not secretly longed for me?'

Olin closed his eyes, trying to shake her words from his mind. “No, leave us alone,” he shouted—but some part of him knew she was right. He had always been jealous of Seven's relationship with her. He had always wondered why Lady Faye picked Seven over him. He had always thought that he was the pure bred—and so why would she not pick him first. But he had never voiced his true feelings to Seven—nor acted on them.

'There is no use in denying the truth, Olin. You must embrace what you are—and who you love. You love me, Olin—as I know you always have—and now is your chance to be with me. I have come for you Olin.'

“She's come for all of us, Olin—and not in peace. Olin! Olin!”

But Olin opened his eyes again—and they had gone black as the night. He was now under Faye's trance.

'Come to me now, Olin ...'

He bowed before her.

“Olin!” Seven cried down at his brother.

“Dammit, I'll meet you at the top,” he said to Marietta and Eva. “Go on without me.”

“What? No!” Eva objected. She grabbed him, but he set her back.

“Please, Seven,” Marietta begged. “Don't make me lose *all* of my boys tonight.”

Seven sat down in the skylight frame, feet dangling down.

“Seven!” Eva said, then cupped her mouth.

“Don't leave poor Eva like this.”

“I have no choice, Marietta. I will meet you at the top,” he said, nodded once at each of them—and then jumped back down into the house.

Eva dropped to her knees at the skylight. She cried in her hands.

Marietta dragged her back. “It's too late, fawn ... He's gone ... We have to save ourselves now.”

Marietta helped her find her feet again—and together they scaled the slate shingles to the gargoyle weather-vane, where they could see to the distant edges of the French's Forest in every direction.

They clung to the gargoyle--and to each other—and they began to pray.

“I don't think she can come this high,” Marietta said.

Eva trembled, still in shock, staring blankly off into the stormy skies, as the lightning crashed

across the forest crown—from mouth to falls of the River Payne.

She was unable any longer to feign confidence or bravery. She just wanted to get as far away from Lady Faye and French's Forest as possible.

Meanwhile inside, Faye strode across the room toward Olin, who kneeled in surrender—when Seven dropped onto the long-table--and jumped down behind his brother, pulling him back.

Faye hissed. *'How dare you, Seven. Olin and I will finally be happy together.'*

“Let me go, brother,” Olin hissed and spat. Seven held him in an arm-lock around the neck. “You are just jealous of us.”

“How dare you,” Seven retorted, redoubling his grip on his brother. “I'm saving your life.”

'Let him go,' Faye commanded. 'Why must Olin suffer for your loss, Seven. Why must you ruin our love, just to satisfy your greedy heart.'

“Spare us your control games, Faye,” Seven growled. *“I see through you now. I do not believe a word you say any longer.”*

“Let me go, brother,” Olin said once more, through gritted teeth. “I know what I'm doing.”

“Snap out of it Olin! You're under her spell!”

The mist encircled them—and Faye unsheathed her sword of lightning.

'This is your last warning, Seven.'

"Leave me, brother. You have Eva already."

"No--"

Olin elbowed Seven and broke free.

Seven grabbed a sword off of the wall.

Olin ran into Faye's arms. She pushed him down to his knees. He clung to her leg.

She leveled her crackling sword in Seven's direction.

Seven raised his sword to meet hers.

"Olin—snap out of it! This is between Faye and I ... This has nothing to do with you."

"On the contrary, dear brother ... This has *everything* to do with me," Olin said. "I always loved her more than you, brother ..." he said, with a sneer. "But you had to have her, just because. She was just some game to you--but she was my moonlight, Seven," he said. "She was my light."

Seven tensed to strike.

Faye hissed—sensing engagement.

Seven closed his eyes. He steadied his heart—and felt the tip of his sword twitch.

His spirit possessed the blade—and he opened his eyes again, to thrust the tip into Faye--only to find Olin charging him.

"She is *mine* now," he Olin growled, lunging onto Seven—and before he could pull back, Seven's sword met Olin's gut—and slid in.

The darkness left Olin's eyes as he skewered

himself on Seven's sword. Blood gushed from his mouth--as his body went limp.

“Oh god!” Seven shouted, letting go of the sword. The sword started twisting in Olin's gut—and it spun him around to face Faye, who was controlling it with gestures of her hand.

Olin screamed in agony as she continued to twist it in his stomach, by flicking two fingers together.

Olin clutched the hilt of the sword himself to try to stop it from twisting—but all strength was quickly leaving his arms.

His eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped over—just as Seven crouched behind him, pulling him away from Faye—but it was too late.

Olin's last words were: “Sorry, brother.”

“Good-bye brother,” Seven said. “I will see you soon.”

Faye cackled—and the sword pulled from Olin's gut—bringing forth a flood of blood upon the floor.

Seven recoiled gasping.

She pointed to the side--and the sword flew across the room, into the fireplace—sending up a plume of ash and ember.

Seven scrambled up onto the long-table again.

Faye sliced two of table's end-legs with her lightning sword—just as Seven jumped for the skylight. The table collapsed beneath him as he

pulled himself up into the frame.

Faye moved in to swing at his legs, but he was quick enough to get up before she did.

When he was on the roof again, he looked back down through the skylight—only to have a great bolt of lightning come firing back up at him, from Faye's upraised sword—knocking him back, singed across his chest and chin—to where he nearly lost his balance on the roof, but the brunt of the bolt fired off harmlessly toward the moon—and he managed to keep his footing.

He shut the skylight—but another blast of lightning smashed it out again—sending glass showering all over him.

He started climbing up the roof, as bolts of lightning shot up through the shingles at his feet. He busted for the top to save his life—fearless of slipping and falling, when his feet were on fire.

The bolts stopped coming before he made it to the top—suggesting to him that her powers were finally reaching their limits.

He reunited with Eva and Marietta at the weather-vane.

Eva embraced him in an iron grip. “I'm sorry I yelled at you.”

“No, I'm sorry, Eva. I'm so sorry for everything.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Eva.”

Marietta saw in them what she had once had with Godwin, when they were young lovers..

The humming beneath them began growing once more. The shingles grew hot under their feet.

“Why must she destroy us thus,” Marietta growled. “What did we ever do to her?”

They huddled around the gargoyle—bracing themselves for the worst.

The humming hit a crescendo pitch, rattling the slate shingles. Light seeped through the cracks of the roof, lapping at their soles.

“I thought we were safe up here,” Eva cried.

“It's the storm ... She feeds off the storm.”

“She is not going to get away with this,” Marietta growled. “I will not let her take my last child from me.”

“*No* mother ... She cannot be killed.”

“Take care of this one, Seven,” Marietta said, nodding at Eva. “She may be human, but she has the heart of a monster.”

“Please, Marietta—what will you do?” Eva begged.

“You and Eva jump for it ...” she said, giving him the keys to the pickup.

Seven shook his head in disapproval. He deserved to die next, if any of them did.

“It's up to you now, Seven ... to carry on the Bane blood-line,” Marietta said. She closed her eyes briefly, breathing in deeply—and after a slight

repose, prophesied: “Your seventh child shall be one of our blood—but none the rest.”

Seven bowed his head—acquiescing in the finality of her words—nodding shallowly in the grim moment.

Marietta skinned her kitchen knife from her apron belt—and cut her own wrist open. She sucked her own blood—and glowed from the ritual fix.

Her fangs grew long from her mouth—and her muscles rippled in sinewy undulations. She became a hulking beast, ravenous for the taste of blood.

“We better jump for it,” Seven said, turning to Eva.

“I don't think I can,” Eva cried. “I'm scared.”

Marietta hissed and howled. “I cannot hold myself much longer,” she growled. “Jump while you still can, kids ...” she said, huffing heavily.

The wind turned, swinging the gargoyle about. Their scents fell to Marietta's whiff, driving her into a mad blood-lust.

The roof was now glowing in light up to the crown.

“I don't even know where to jump,” Eva gasped, as the glow blinded them.

“Don't worry, I'll jump for us ... Just trust me--and take my hand,” he said.

The light was up to their waists now.

Marietta's breathing suddenly stopped, as a

mindlessness washed over her face—and she zeroed in on them.

“Seven I'm scared,” Eva cried.

“Just trust me.”

The glow was now at their necks.

“Take my hand!” Seven yelled, feeling about for Eva before she disappeared completely.

“Where are you?” Eva said, panicking.

Seven found her fingers—then the light ebbed and rose again—and they were finally submerged in the abyss of light.

All they had was each other.

Their fingers intertwined.

She tightened her little one on his.

He slid his old school ring onto her finger.

xi. Off The Beaten Path Of His Heart

When the ring set into place, its circumference flared with a darkness that balanced out Faye's light—and allowed them to see again, in a halo that surrounded them, but not a foot beyond.

They kissed and embraced.

Tears cascaded down Eva's cheeks.

Seven wiped them, looking in her eyes.

“Why is she stalking us like this, Seven?”

“It was a long time ago ... I fell out of love with her ... and she wouldn't let me go ...”

“How could you love a monster?”

Seven could only shake his head.

Eva studied his face for a connection. She stuck up her little finger. “Well then, Mr. Wolf—is it time for us to get off of this bloody roof then?”

He nodded, grinning distantly.

They climbed across to the peak, prepared to jump, but found that the protective aura followed them--and they were able to escape down the front-side latticework.

It was a thorny vine, with plenty of growth to grapple and get caught in. They got cut up quite a bit before getting to the bottom.

They ran out into the drive-lane in time to see the entire house aglow like a giant firefly in the night.

Eva fell to her knees, pressing at her temples.

“What is it?”

In a flash of pure remembrance, all of her childhood memories flooded back to her.

Seven tugged at her wrist—but she remained caught in her flashback.

“Eva are you okay?”

Her eyes rolled up into her head—and she slumped to the ground. Seven kneeled behind her, just as he had done with Olin.

“Eva, come back to me, please ... Not you too, Eva ... I can't lose you too ... Eva, please, Eva, please ... You're the only good thing to ever happen to me, Eva ... please, Eva ... *please* ...” he said—beginning to sob.

He did not notice Faye stalking in from the woods—feasting on his pain. She motioned for Ax to swing around toward the pick-up truck, where she knew they were headed.

She kept quiet, silently absorbing the agony emanating from Seven's heart. Feeling his pain was her greatest pleasure. Annihilation of his soul was her sole amusement in this plane of existence.

xii. Being Her Imagination's Plaything

When Eva was a little girl, about the age of seven, she began having strange dreams at night.

The mural painted on her bedroom wall came alive.

In the foreground, upon a precipice—a panther paced about, restless—overlooking misty woods across a lush valley.

In the valley, a murder of fifty crows perched upon the many crooked limbs of an old oak. They cawed and ruffled their feathers in a murmur.

In the distance, into the vanishing point, where field turned to forest—the limbs of the trees swayed as if with life.

Their trunks ran over a sea of rambling hillocks—up a mountain, to a darkly crowned ridge, where clouds parted for jagged boughs—revealing an old wooden sign, atop the highest peak, that read: 'French's Forest'.

*To the zenith, the sun shone bright and full.
She had always taken the painting for
quaint—but after she turned seven, it started
haunting her.*

*Some nights, the trees went bare of their
leaves—and grew crooked and wraith-like.
Occasionally, the panther growled tensely—eyes full
of embers. Other times, the crow faces transformed
into that of her own—at fifty stages of life, from
cradle to dirt.*

*In her dreams, of course, it all seemed
natural. But come morning, in reflection, she grew
more properly disturbed by it all.*

*Whenever the lights went out, the cawing
would begin again, without fail. Then coyotes would
howl later on, from deeper inland. Finally, the owls
would hoot in ominous anonymity.*

*The moon would come out—and it was
always full. The stars would appear—in
constellations of magical luminosities.*

*Despite these nightmarish attributes,
however, Eva always felt safe that the panther was
there to protect her.*

*The mural was signed E. J.—but she knew
nothing else of its origins.*

*She curled up undercover in her four-post
bed, perhaps where the mural painter might have
once slept—and looked on over the panther's
shoulder, past the creepy human-faced crows in the*

oak tree crying: 'Leave now—never return! Leave now—never return!'

But despite the warnings, her eyes always wandered further in—to where the dark forest lurked—and the mountain carried the tree-tips up to the sky.

Her curiosity always took her as far as the forest edge—and then plunged her right in.

From first sight, she could never take her, mind far from the woodland's incarnate mysteries.

She knew in her bones, she had to go after whatever adventure that may await her there.

This was the one escape that she longed for more than anything else in her life before.

Occasionally, she would close her eyes and pretend to sleep, only to sneak a quick peak--and catch the panther casting back at her—as a mother might, overlooking sleeping offspring.

This game with the panther actually carried on for some weeks, until finally, Eva found the courage to say: “Are you real?”

The panther looked surprised—and furrowed its brow.

It paced about a bit, then responded in a gentle woman's voice: 'Yes child, I am real.'

“You're not in my imagination?” Eva asked.

'No child, I am not.'

“Then why do you only come out at night?”

The panther shook her head slowly. 'It is you,

dear child, that only comes out at night ...'

Eva frowned in confusion.

'Dear child ... During the daylight hours, humans are merely dreaming.'

"What is your name?" Eva asked.

'I haven't one.'

"Then I will give you one ... Hmmm, let me see," Eva said, tapping her lips. Her gaze trailed along the bookshelf on the far wall.

"I know!" she said. "I'm going to call you Cinderella! Or ... or ... Ella for short ..."

It became habit then, that when Eva could not sleep, Ella would keep her up, telling her endless stories about a distant, mystical wood called French's Forest.

Ella told her that French's Forest was where dead people went to sleep—and where the living came to dream. She told her that beautiful fantasies bloomed there—alongside fearsome nightmares.

She called it the 'Wood of the Unconscious'. Humans could even meet there, she said, simply by divining it in their dreams, if they were so spiritually inclined.

Needless to say, Little Eva was terribly impressed by all of this—and she found herself growing increasingly curious about the mysterious wood known as French's Forest.

After all, she was the only child of a single mother who worked days, nights—weekends—and

most Christmases—so she was always left alone to carve out her own adventures, craving the wild things over the mild.

“Will you take me, Ella?” she pleaded. “Please?!” she begged—fronting her most pitiful eye-set.

Ella shook her head. “I think it is a bad idea for a little girl to go fooling around in French's Forest,” she said.

“Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw!” the crows cawed in unison, chiming in on the conversation—supporting Ella's doubts.

“You can't escape from your problems, Eva ... Your mom needs you here. You know she loves you like her own daughter.”

Eva began to cry.

'Ok, ok ... Please, don't cry, dear child ... It is not the end of the world ... You are better off here—facing your fears, instead of erasing ...'

Eva nodded, tears stemming off. “But will I never get out of here even just once?” she said, blubbing.

'Poor angel.'

“Please, Ella—just take me to French's Forest! Just one peek, I promise! I swear I'll never go back there again ... ”

Ella looked doubtful. 'Well, I guess I cannot really stop you, child. You may very well be safer knowing the truth about your powers, after all—else

you may just stumble cross-planes on your own someday ... and go getting yourself killed ...

'Listen, Little Eva, French's Forest is a dangerous place. You have to stick to the paths—and always, always ... wear a watch. Without a watch, you will lose track of time entirely—and become forever lost to the crooked trees.'

Eva nodded gravely. She recognized the tone of key advice.

'It happened before, my dear child, to the little boy, Evan Jackman, who lived here, before you ... The boy who painted this mural ... He was a savant artist, you see—a magician, a natural mystic seer ...

'He painted a path into French's Forest on his bedroom wall ... We are what remains of his dreams, little Eva,' Cindy said.

The crows beat their wings. They spoke as one: 'Caw! Caw! Caw! We found his ebony pocket-watch on the end-table one day ... Caw! Caw! Caw! We knew he had ventured into French's Forest for the last time ... Caw! Caw! Caw!'

Cindy resumed: 'I went in looking for him, on the long-shot he was not altogether lost to us—but we would never find him again. His father was so heartbroken, especially not knowing what had happened to his boy, thinking him kidnapped—that he eventually committed suicide.

'He hung himself in his closet.'

'Caw! Caw! Caw We were so disillusioned by losing him, that ever since you moved in, we've been considering convincing you to paint over us, to seal us off from this world for good—with one heavy wash—and let it be done.'

'Let it be done!' the murder sang. 'CAW! CAW! CAW!!! LET IT BE DONE! LET IT BE DONE! CAW! LET IT BE DONE!!!'

'HUSH!' Ella snapped. 'That would mean our end.' But then she looked guilty—and a heartbeat later, she shook her head—saying: “But they are right, child ... It is the truth.

'We are responsible for what happens to you ... If we let you use us as a medium to access French's Forest, then we ourselves will become responsible for you, as the instruments of your transmission to that world.'

'If you paint over us, however, we'll close the two planes off from each other, altogether for good—and spare you Evan's fate.’

'Please, no, Ella ... I could never ...'

'Easy child, not to worry,’ Ella said.

'Travelers to the other side need to find their own way there, anyway. Even with our help, you would need to follow your own steps there.'

“Ok, just tell me how then ... How do I get there?” Eva persisted. “WHERE IS FRENCH'S FOREST?” she commanded, turning an inch angry.

Ella sighed.

After a long silence, when even the murder had discontinued its racket—she revealed the secret to finding French's Forest:

'All you must do, Little Eva, to find French's Forest, is to just close your eyes, and let your thoughts drift back to a sleepy place—then rise up high, to the zenith of clarity, over the crown of the trees in your mind—and you will see a light there, that is the sun of eternity—which will drown you out in a white energy—until you become supercharged with phosphorescence.

'Now, simply say the words seven times:

'French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest form for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ...' Ella chanted—and Eva gradually joined in.

They finished together: 'French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ...'

Eva opened her eyes—and she was walking on a slate-cropped path that led to a plain, where French's Forest began.

She spotted some colorful birds at the fringe, but also some prowling eyes. She heard some

beautiful sylvan songs, but also some blood-curdling wails of strident pitch.

She would get so close, then retreat to her waking life, until the next night, when her eyes closed again, and she repeated the words seven more times.

Gradually, she began to explore the wood a little more each day, until at last it came to be like her second home.

Her would ask her why she spent so much time in her room, and she would always say she was just reading—but really, she was living in an alternate reality.

She first met Seven in the stream, on the summer solstice—under a majestic canopy of constellations.

She remembered marveling at his peculiar, adventurous ways—and how he was so lost in himself, that he was consumed by French's Forest.

He was a loner, yet his imagination was rich—and she loved him for that.

More characters occupied his mind than his outward life, much like her—leaving him content enough with his thin social existence, to live happily ever after alone.

Indeed, it was this purity of heart that she grew to adore in him from the first.

But her passion became obsessive--and she started to stalk him. She caught him in a web of cruelty to fill the hollowness of her real life. Their

bond swiftly devolved into something unhealthy.

He became her imagination's plaything, whom she taunted and teased, romanced and ridiculed—seduced and tormented—all as she saw fit—and to what ends she deemed were merited.

III

When She Shed Her Skin

vi. To The River Payne

“Eva, wake up ... Eva ...”

She slowly opened her eyes—and her past remained in the forefront of her mind—in a cataclysmic montage of bruising revelations.

Everything in her life made much more sense now—and she realized how stages were not merely accidentally attained—but that her subconscious had led her there on purpose.

For instance, in hindsight, meeting Seven in New London was predestined—as she was bound to recognize him from her dreams on some level.

She felt her former self resurfacing, as if from a deep sleep—toward the sunlight of truth rippling above.

She was Seven's evil ex, Lady Faye of French's Forest. *She* was the other woman from the woods—from Seven's troubled past.

Seven cradled her, brushing her hair from her face. “We have to go, Eva ...”

“What is happening to me, Seven?”

“Nothing, you'll be alright. Everything will be alright.”

“I'm ... so ... tired ...” she said—and her eyes fluttered shut again

Seven heard a branch snap in the woods and spotted Faye between the trees.

He hoisted Eva over his shoulder and made a break for the pick-up.

'You cannot run from me, Seven ...' Faye cried. The howling wind carried her venomous voice to the four ends of French's Forest. *'It is only drawing out the inevitable for you to try ...'*

Thunderheads spit black, driving black rain across the clearing. Faye's face appeared on the moon—cackling wildly.

“Can't you see that I love her?” Seven cried. “Can't you see that she loves me?”

Faye growled down from the clouds. *'Oh ... I am so HAPPY for you ... BUT WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF LOVE?'* she boomed from above.

'You are half-mortal ... you know that you will die someday ... So you settle in affairs of the heart—while we true immortals do not care for your hollow tricks of the tongue—like love.'

'You use the semantic devices of a weak mind to crutch your insecurities—because you know your

days are numbered.'

Seven stopped half-way across to the pickup, readjusting Eva over his shoulder. "But you said you loved me!" he cried, arguing to stay Faye's ire.

"You said we were different!"

'What a simple thing. Why do I even bother with you ...' Faye boomed.

But despite her complaint, the black rains let up somewhat—and Seven sensed that on some level her warmth for him had not entirely waned.

'Why oh why do I put up with your cheating ways, Seven ... ?' she said in blood-curdling modulations that echoed off of the trees.

"I never meant to hurt you," Seven said, kicking open the pickup's trick door.

He loaded Eva inside—and then circled back around. "But you never loved me!!! You owe me this!!!"

The black rain intensified—and Faye's face vanished from the moon.

'You will never lose me, Seven. You will die before I leave your side. If you leave French's Forest today, I will haunt you for the rest of your life, wherever you go ... be assured of that, if nothing else, Seven. Be sure that I will follow you. Be sure that you yourself bring me with you everywhere that you go ...'

Seven slipped in behind the wheel. He twisted the ignition—and carved out of the lot in a

plume of dust and stone.

Flying down the road, he tried to clear his mind of all thoughts of Faye—but as Eva tossed and turned, drifting in-and-out—he noticed something blinking in-and-out, in the rear-view mirror.

At first it was just a dot on the hill behind them, but it kept appearing closer—and he could see that it was Faye and Ax flying down the highway after them.

But then they would fall further back again, as if the farther on they drove—the weaker were Faye's powers to chase them.

The highway followed the river out—and so, like rats from a flood, they fled French's Forest.

After a spell, he started losing focus on the dotted line. He had not seen Faye behind them in some time—but his thoughts kept drifting back to Her.

He cast around for happier memories from his past—in order to distract himself from Her.

He tried to picture the most innocent period of his childhood that he could. He recalled life as a young boy, hopping over rapids downstream. He remembered swinging over the Payne, on long vines—letting go and cannon-balling into sparkling pools of froth and azure.

He shifted into fifth and put the pedal flush with the mat, sailing at full tilt down the highway.

He cast back even further, to the days his

family once lived at Lake Heron—before he knew what evil existed in the world.

He remembered a dream he once had—in which he awoke to find a bat hanging in his window-pane.

There were voices at play outside in the night—and he covered his face with his sheet, quick as a ghost—trembling in a primal fright.

Minutes later, after much torturous back-and-forth in his mind, about whether or not to look—he found the courage to rip the sheet aside and see what was there--when he found that the bat was gone.

The voices continued, however, and he could make out some of them as his family. They were squealing and hollering, having a grand time—but he could not guess at what, so late on a cold wintry night.

He slipped from under his covers, off the bed, onto to the floor, where he crawled across to the window.

Standing on tiptoes, he took a peek out, where he saw scores skating about the rink in the yard—lit up by torches all around the circumference.

Drum beats bled out from the darkness.

He spotted his brother and folk in the mix.

It was his first inkling that his family was different from others. It was his first hint that he was not all human.

He kept the wheel straight. The gas was flickering on empty—but he knew that meant they were good for the county line—as long as Earl's Gas Bar was open at this time.

They were almost out of French's Forest—but he held his breath every second of the way, expecting Faye to reappear in the rear-view mirror at any time.

vii. From Faye To Lady Fawn

Eventually, his thoughts got the better of him.

How long would she hunt him? he wondered.

Would she haunt him forever? Was that his true fate?

Eva groaned and shifted in her seat, gradually regaining lucidity. As she resurfaced—she remembered the gravity of their situation.

“Where is she?”

“She's back there somewhere ...”

“What happened?”

“She was behind us, but I haven't seen her now for miles.”

“Did I faint?”

“You went down like a stone.”

“My head hurts like hell.”

She remembered some great epiphany had been upon her, but no good neuron could bring it back—and she soon gave up trying.

“Please don't stop,” she said, squeezing his

knee. “Don't stop, Seven—for anything ...”

“Wasn't planning on it.”

“Pinky swear ...”

Their little fingers locked up.

“Everything will be fine, I promise babe ...

I'm so sorry I put you through all that.”

A silence fell heavy over them.

Finally, Eva said: “No more lies?”

“Never again.”

She felt sleepy. “I think those painkillers your mom gave me are starting to kick in ...”

“Try to stay alert.”

They drove on at a reckless clip.

He turned to Eva, but she was passed out again.

Thunder clapped overhead.

Lightning cracked a tree in the brush.

He jerked the wheel—and they skidded across the shoulder.

Eva remained asleep—tossing about like a rag-doll behind her seat-belt.

Rubber burned. In the side mirror, Seven spotted a tire in shreds. Its tendrils thrashed about, as the bare rim seared across asphalt—sparks streaming.

The sky overhead waxed to black.

Bolts of lightning started raining down.

“*Seven, staw-op ...*” Eva drawled in her sleep.

“*Staw-op, Seven,*” she said.

“Eva, wake up!” Seven said, shaking her.

Then suddenly, she sat bolt-upright—wide-eyed—screaming: “STAAA-AAAW-OP!!!”

She put her hands out in front of her to punctuate the command.

A deer dashed out from the trees.

Seven stomped on the brakes.

They struck the fawn and spun about once before pitching into the ditch.

viii. To Freedom By Foam & Flotsam

He tried driving out, but the ground was too wet. They just dug in deeper.

He got out, went about, pulled Eva free—hoisted her over his shoulder—and marched off into the wood, toward the Payne.

French's Forest was his territory, as much as it was ever Faye's. He knew its trails like the veins of the leaf—or the face of the moon.

He knew, if they could make it to the Payne, then they could hide their scent. Then they could float downstream to the falls—where they could jump from beneath the Blacktree—cascade over the jagged talus that guarded the hidden cavern—plunging into the frothing pool below Eviol Falls.

He had made the jump a hundred times.

Then they would float downriver with the flotsam—hiding their scent underwater—far out to

the forest limits.

He thought of poor, innocent Eva--and kept his mind on the finish--one foot planted firmly ahead of the other.

He did not make it a hundred yards before hearing snapping sounds from behind them.

He stopped dead in his tracks, under a cloud of dread. He looked back slowly, heart hammering on all sides.

There was only a fawn in the brush—and he sighed in relief, recollecting his presence—laughing at himself for getting so worked up..

But then he looked again—and the fawn was already a dozen yards closer to him.

He started on a little ways, then looked back.

The fawn was bearing down on him. Its head and neck were silver—and its deer face resembled Faye.

'Come back to me, Seven ... Come back and show me those Lucky Hands that I've been hearing sooo much about.'

Seven readjusted Eva over his shoulder—and started running the final yards--full tilt.

Faye the Hellfawn was almost upon him, licking at his heels with bolts of lightning shot from her antlers.

The Payne was their only chance. He broke through the last line of bushes onto the riverbank.

Wading up to his waist--when Eva awoke.

“What is going on?”

He looked back—but Hellfawn was gone. She had not come out of the trees onto the embankment. She was not beyond the bush.

“She was just there,” he whispered. He slid her off his shoulder so she could feel the riverbed with her feet. He held her while she found her balance in the currents.

“Where--” she began—when Seven put his finger to his lips.

He thought he saw something in the shadows, but it was nothing.

He pulled her down into the water, up to their necks. The floated under foam and flotsam downstream.

A ways on, they heard Faye's voice in the clouds: *'I've had enough of playing this game with you, Seven ...'* But he knew she could not see them in the Payne.

It started to rain.

Eva said: “Where--” but he covered her mouth before she could finish just in time—so it only came out muffled:

“Clear your mind,” he reminded Eva. “Of everything.”

Eva nodded.

'Those Lucky Hands were never meant for anyone else but ME, Seven,' Faye went on. *'And yet you always ended up chasing every little tail that*

crossed your nose ...

'How badly you've treated me, Seven ... when I was always so devoted to you. How easily I could have simply squeezed the life from your lying, cheating throat, anytime that I chose ...'

The Payne carried them on like a protective father. It shielded their wavelengths from Faye's detection, drowning them out with the rivers own unique force.

They twisted with the river for a time, tensely anticipating every turn--before finally hitting upon the final run for the brink of Evyl Falls.

Eva was shivering uncontrollably by now—and Seven had put one arm around her.

She closed her eyes, wishing she was far from French's Forest. .

“Don't worry, babe, we're almost there,” he said. He started humming a lullaby Marietta used to use to put him to sleep.

Eva felt better, pretending she was somewhere else—anywhere else—but up to her neck in the River Payne, floating toward Evyl Falls, with a Hellfawn on the hunt for them.

They were almost at the watershed—the Delta that turned into Witchling Isle, splitting Evyl falls into twin streams—and twin falls that fanned across each other as they cascaded into the Emerald Pool below.

In French's Forest legend, witches were once

brought to Evyl Falls by the New London Ripjoys—city vampires from a distant blood-line.

The witches were hung from the Old Blacktree. If the witch survived her broken neck, then she must be a witch. If she died, then she was human after all.

Seven had often come to Witchling Isle, to hide out from Faye under the Old Blacktree--because the Sylverkin did not dare go under there, where the Payne crashed all over.

As they approached the sandy tip of the Isle—Eva still had her eyes closed—when Seven spotted the Hellfawn upon the far shore.

It's silver antlers grew long--and lightning cracked and crashed upon her--channeling into the Hellfawn, as she screamed up at the moon.

“What was that?” Eva said, opening her eyes.

Seven looked again—but the Hellfawn was gone. Only a smouldering tree-stump remained where she was—smoking from the lightning strike.

For a moment, Seven wondered if he was not just seeing things.

“Lightning ... out of the water! Now!”

They climbed up the sandy shore of the Isle—and spied through the long-grass.

He did not see the Hellfawn anywhere.

“Where is she?”

“Nevermind—we are almost there.”

The made their way down the west bank of

Witchling Isle, every once in awhile checking behind them for the Hellfawn.

When they reached the small trail that led around to the face of Twin Falls—beneath the Old Blacktree—Seven looked back and spotted Ax in the Payne, his rippled shadow snaking toward them.

His heart danced in alarm.

“What's the matter?”

“Nothing,” he said. “But it's now or never, babe ... Down the trail ...”

He led her through the vines, around the cliff-face—where the Payne raged on their right side—and the mossy Ilse rock swept up along on their left, as they came around onto a narrow ledge, where Twin Falls crashed on either side, criss-crossing before them—before plunging below.

The Old Blacktree lorded over them, hanging out over Twin Falls. Seven had climbed out on its limbs on many a night in his youth. It was a gnarled, anomalous element of French's Forest, torn from legend—yet rooted in the real world.

It was myth, that if one could find true clarity of spirit here. But many a foolhardy tourist had also been washed from the ledge by surging falls during the rain season.

They heard a hiss—and looking up, saw Ax coiled in the Old Blacktree—arching down toward them.

Eva fainted. Seven barely caught her before

she plunged over the edge.

He draped her over his shoulder—closed his eyes—and prayed for help as he jumped.

He had made the jump a hundred times before, but never with someone over his shoulder. He just tried to err on the far side, where there were fewer rocks.

ix. Last Chance On Earth To Be In Love

They plunged into the foaming pool below Twin Falls. Eva awoke mid-fall—only to be knocked unconscious again upon impact with the water.

Seven dragged her onto the nearest slip of mossy bank—where he gave her mouth-to-mouth. As he did, between breaths, he saw Faye's facing forming in the storm-clouds—while the falls raged on beside them.

'No one escapes French's Forest, Seven ... How far will you run? How long will you go, before you admit to yourself, that you belong to me only. Come back to me Seven, while you still can. I will be waiting for you here, in French's Forest ...'

Eva coughed up blood and water, rolling onto her side.

Faye's face disappeared again from the clouds.

Over Eva's shoulder, Seven saw Ax launch from the Old Blacktree, arching out over Twin Falls—diving in a serpentine line toward the pool.

“What is it?” Eva said, seeing the horror in his face.

“Ax ...” he managed to say, mind racing. “On your feet, we have to move it.”

He helped her up. They turned inland, where Ax was not so much in his element.

These were the Lost Swamps—where Seven had ventured less, due to the large number of water-snakes. One summer, he had built a small raft and done some reconnaissance into the lagoon and jungle-terrain—but not enough to know where they were going once they got too far in.

They stuck to the higher ground, avoiding water at every turn—but Seven knew lack of water would not stop Ax. There only hope was to out-distance his powers—and so he urged Eva on ever faster.

She tripped and severely twisted her ankle—but kept up with Seven nevertheless, not even grimacing in the agony of a cracked shin.

They made it as far as where the Payne would begin to force them farther away from the highway—and they decided to cross the old wooden bridge.

Half-way across, despite making Eva swear not to look down into the Payne—and risk putting something there that was not there before she looked—he did so himself anyway—and he saw Ax swimming under the bridge.

He gasped.

Eva cried out, under restraint: “What did you see?”

“Nothing, keep moving.”

“No, Seven ... I can't,” Eva said, strangling the bridge-ropes in panic.

“Eva, no time for sight-seeing keep moving those feet.”

He looked back to see the fear in her eyes.

She could barely speak. “Is ... it ... Ax?”

He nodded slowly, finger to lips.

He waved her on.

She summoned all of her concentration to put one foot ahead of the other—and like a dam bursting, she quickly caught up to Seven.

Together, they made it to the other side.

“Did he sense us? Is he bound by the water now?”

“I don't know, he shouldn't even be able to swim out this far. Maybe our disbelief in his powers is keeping him to the Payne ...

“Or maybe we're making him with our minds.”

“I'm not making him with my mind, that is for sure.”

Eva closed her eyes—and suddenly, Ax struck out from the river edge—coiling around Seven's leg—dragging him into the Payne.

Eva opened her eyes, but he was gone.

“Seven?”

All that remained of Seven and Ax were rings on the surface.

“Seven!” she cried.

Meanwhile, beneath the waters, Seven's mortal struggle with Ax ended as quickly as it began, as the snake suddenly stiffened, loosening its grip—releasing Seven back to the surface.

Ax drifted off into the murky depths—remerging with Eva's unconscious—while Seven clawed his way back toward daylight.

He broke the surface, choking and gasping for air. Eva jumped in and helped him swim out.

They both crawled back onto the shore.

“What happened?” she said.

“I don't know, he just let me go ...”

“I thought you were gone ...”

“I was gone.”

He held up his pinky finger—still catching his breath—still trying to remain calm.

She grimly curled her finger into his.

They followed the highway into the countryside, far from French's Forest—out of the power of Faye's influence.

They walked on the shoulder of the road, talking about mundane things they would enjoy once they got back to Old York

“French's Forest will seem like a bad dream,” Eva cooed.

Finally, they climbed a steep, thorny

embankment—up to Highway 9, where they hitchhiked into New London in the back of a pick-up.

When they reached the city, they rented a room for the night.

Long after they were settled into bed, Eva found that she could not sleep.

Seven had almost drifted off, when she said: “Seven ... I just had the craziest idea ...”

“What?”

“We should go skating ...”

“Hm, okay—sounds good ...”

“No, I mean ... tonight, we should go tonight!”

“What?”

“Listen to me, just hear me out ... Instead of closing our eyes, let's get back up and finish this day off right. Let's just be crazy for once, Seven—and seize the moment.

“Let's go back to the beginning, Seven ... Let's start it all over again.”

Seven laughed. This was the old Eva returning to him now.

“It's safe right?” she said.

“As long as we never go back to French's Forest,” he said. “It's all behind us now, babe.”

“We can go wherever else in the world you want, okay?” she said.

“Don't worry, I'm okay with it all. I really am, for once in my life. I'm looking forward to

spending the rest of my days without ever seeing Her again,” he said.

Eva frowned. “But we have no skates ...”

“Hmmm ... We'll find a couple, I'm sure,” he said. “We'll offer them cash for their skates ...”

He got a devilish grin on him, and without needing to exchange further words—Eva uncurled his plot, nodding in concurrence.

They dressed up and scuttled themselves down to the Victory Park rink, where they approached the first pair they found—who turned them down.

They tried a few other sets, before finding a match for their bargain.

Seven happily paid six bills for four skates.

“I can't believe you did that!” Eva squealed afterward, scrambling to put the faded pink ones on.

Seven's pair were old and tight, and he struggled for a time to get a foot in.

Eva circled the rink twice, waiting for him.

“C'mon slow poke.”

“Hold up, I'm coming.”

“Seven ...”

“Yes Eva?”

“Were we dreaming? Did it all really happen? Did it really?”

“Yes.”

He was finally up and skating.

They fell into a rhythm together.

“Seven ...”

“Yes Eva?”

“Will you always love me—even when we are old and gray?”

“Yes Eva. I will always love you—no matter what.”

“Seven ...”

“Yes Eva?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes Eva.”

“Seven ...”

“Yes Eva?”

“Are you sure we're not dreaming right now?”

“I'm sure,” he said. “But wait ... if you really want proof—there's only one way to find out ...”

“What?”

“Just one ... little ... pinch!” he said mischievously.

“Eeeiii!!!” she squealed. “Don't you dare!”

“Aww, c'mon, babe--just once, and then we'll know for sure if we are dreaming or not--okay ...?”

“Wait ...” she said, now skating backward in front of him—holding him off. “Why don't you just pinch yourself?” she objected.

“Sorry ... it doesn't work that way,” he said, grinning. “You won't know if you're dreaming by pinching me, silly!”

“Eeeiii!!!” Eva skated away.

Seven chased her, swerving and threading

through the other skaters.

He managed to pinch her right butt cheek once—and she squealed and skated off even faster. The Christmas lights in the park swirled all around them, until it felt as if they were on a carousel—just Eva and him—and all the other skaters were merely standing still.

“Okay, okay!” he called after her through laughter. “I'm getting dizzy!!! Let's just pinch each other at the same time--okay ...?”

“Better idea--let's just pretend it was all a dream ...” Eva said--turning and skating backward in front of him again.

A shooting star speared the diamond-studded night sky overhead.

They stopped and gawked up at the sublime evidence of cosmic eternity.

Touching each other gingerly for balance, neither of them really thinking anything at all—just happily existing in the moment as one—they knew deep down that none of it would last.

“Oh, I wish it was all a dream!” she said. “Promise we never go back?”

“Never again, Eva. It's just you and I now. You and I ... and the rest of the universe is ours to explore,” he said, smiling. “Anywhere, but French's Forest.”

Overhead, a shooting star illuminated Orion's sword—as Sirius growled in the heavens.

They spun together as one, eventually coming to a stop in the crisp, calm heart of the night.

Embracing under the cosmos, they grew oblivious to the other skaters circling around them—neither willing to let the other go—out of body, sight—or mind.

Now they were the ones standing still.

They kissed once more—and their trembling lips remained virtually unbroken for the balance of the night—as if it were their last chance on earth to be in love.