

The Reach

by Elly Haitch

One

The twins' father pulls into the dirt patch at the side of Gran's house at 2:17pm on a Saturday, sturdy Goodyears kicking up plumes of dust and scattering the chickens in a mad panic. Hade is waiting for him. The truck may have arrived at the height of the afternoon, but he had heard it coming for half an hour prior, the high whine of the Mack's engine as it climbed hills, the vicious rumble it loosed on the straightaways. Well. At least they always had some forewarning that their patriarch was on his way.

Gran has joined Hade on the porch by the time their visitor's climbing down from the rig, and Alex is emerging from the woods at the far end of the property. She must have heard the truck while she was doing whatever it was she did out there, too. It seems to Hade that his sister spends every spare moment out in the Reach these days. He doesn't understand the draw of the dark wood, and he isn't a fan of his sister's moods when she returns, either. They never used to fight, and now it seems that arguing is all they ever do.

Hade watches her come, scaling the low stone wall that marks the edge of Gran's property, and imagines for a moment that the woods reach out after her, branches trailing rotting moss trying to cling to her worn chambray shirt, pilfered from their mother's abandoned closet.

The truck door closes with a thud, snapping Hade's attention back to the yard, and then Father's hugging Gran while Alex makes her way across the dirt patch, no trace of lingering rot from the woods clinging to her clothes. Aaron Evanston is as large as Hade remembers, wide in the chest and expansive in the stomach, with a deep, booming voice and a shock of messy, straight black hair. Alex, far slighter than their father and with their mother's Russian curls, gets a smile and a lingering squeeze on her arrival by the truck; Hade, their father's doppelganger—minus the gut—gets a nod and a clap of the shoulder.

"You've grown!" Aaron says, turning to Alex. It's true, of course. It's been nearly a year since he was last home, and in that time, they've grown a head taller each. Hade, especially, has

put on muscle. At sixteen, both twins were taking on what would resolve someday to their adult features, though they were both still adjusting to the sudden new space their bodies were taking up.

They all stomp inside, Hade ducking under the door frame so not to hit the low header, while Gran chides Father good-naturedly about how he should have called before he came so she could have bought meat and something sweet for after supper. He just shakes his head and smiles. “Tell me about school,” he says to Alex.

And so, Aaron, Alex, and Hade settle on the couch. Alex talks while Gran bustles behind them in her kitchen, wrapping apron strings around her rail-thin waist, pulling out potatoes and their last block of cheese, pierogis on her mind. Hade, itchy and pressed against the furthest corner of their saggy couch, wishes that he could join her, help roll the dough and mash the potatoes and leave the other two to it.

“Geometry,” Alex says, and Hade reluctantly turns his attention back to the conversation, hunching his shoulders, old habits returning along with his father’s rig. Alex’s voice carries an unfamiliar sharpness, too, and she seems intent to needle their father tonight, talking of *Hade’s* history presentation, *Hade’s* success with the shot-put, *Hade’s* enjoyment of their lit class-assigned reading. Their father frowns and take a sip from a sliver flask he keeps strapped to his belt. Hade stares at the ground and tries to sink into the couch.

“Enough. About Hadeon,” Aaron says finally, interrupting Alex’s talk about pretty Charlotte McGee, who has been shooting Hade looks across the cafeteria. “Enough.” A red growl curls through his voice and he tips up the rest of the flask. Alex falls silent, a fleeting expression that Hade can’t read passing over her face.

“Dinner.” Gran, there for the rescue. “Time for food.”

Two

“I’m so excited to meet you both,” Mama says in the scratchy VHS video she recorded before they were born. Her hands frame her belly, huge and round and ready to burst. “My twin

angels.” Her expression is beatific, her long, corkscrew hair draped over her shoulders like a shroud. She is palely pure, her arms thin, her face sharp with too-prominent cheekbones.

She met Alexandria for one brief moment. Hadeon, cut from his mother’s already-cooling belly, had no such luck.

Three

Alex wakes Hade before dawn. “Quiet,” she says, perched on the side of Hade’s narrow bed. “He’s still sleeping it off in the front room.” Hade nods, sleepy, and tries to roll over to go back to sleep. No such luck – Alex holds his shoulder tight and leans down. “I told Gran we’d go hunting today. Get some rabbits from the Reach for supper so we don’t have to buy meat or kill one of the chickens.”

Hade sits up, startled, and looks at his twin, whose face is shadowed in the pre-dawn light of their room. “I don’t hunt,” Hade tells her. “The hell, Alex, you know I don’t like guns.” This isn’t like his sister. Alex has never asked him to go into the Reach before.

Alex shrugs, unrepentant, distant, already standing to get dressed. “Maybe it’s time you finally learn. Besides, there’s something I want to show you out in the Reach now that Dad’s here.”

Something icy settles low in Hade’s stomach at those words, but he dismisses it as lingering unease with their father. He sits up and starts to pull on his Levi’s, no longer sleepy in the slightest.

Four

Father comes home for their eleventh birthday and brings two rifles with him.

“My children,” their father says, for once clear-eyed, serious, interested in their lives, “should know how to use a gun.” He’s set up some empty beer cans on the stone wall along the Reach. “Watch,” he says, and so they do; they watch as he sets his feet apart, raises the rifle to his shoulder, aims, fires. A can flies off the wall with a high *tink* and disappears over the far side.

Aaron lowers his stance and turns to look at them both. His gaze lingers, though, on Hadeon. “Never aim your weapon at something you don’t intend to shoot.”

They’re still out by the fence when the sun starts slipping behind the mountains ahead of them, its glare shining in their eyes and making sighting difficult. Hade’s arms hurt from the recoil. The butt of the gun is pressing into a bruise on his shoulder, four marks from fingers that had grabbed him last evening and shaken too hard.

He lifts the rifle one last time, aiming for the last can on the wall. But then Aaron walks into his sights, oblivious, to begin cleaning up the mess from behind the weathered stones. His dark head, a mirror to his son’s, bobs up and down as he gathers the cans and places them in a paper sack to sell later in town for scrap.

“Hadeon.”

Hade jerks around, lifting the barrel away from insanity and pointing it to the sky. His heart is pounding, breath coming fast. Alex stands behind him, an unreadable expression on her face. “I—” Stammering, nothing to say. “I don’t like shooting,” Hade manages finally. Alex nods slowly, reaches out, and Hadeon lets her slip the rifle from his hands.

Five

Alex bounces along ahead of Hade, two rabbits slung over her shoulder, her rifle supported in the crook of her elbow. Hade stares at her back, mindless of the icy creek bed they were crunching their way through, headed home. His mind is on what Alex had shown him, back with the thing crouched deep in the forest, the reason, he is certain, his sister comes out here every day. How it had sat nestled in a copse of trees, waiting. Ready. How Alex’s face had looked as she touched the pale... Rapturous. Like their mother’s on the video.

Was that thing – is that thing why he doesn’t recognize his sister anymore?

“She called to me,” Alex had said, ducking under a hanging willow, her long fingers tight around Hade’s wrist, leading him along. “I’m surprised she didn’t call you, too, but I guess you never heard her real voice, just the video, so maybe you need to meet her first. You’ll see, she knows so much, I can’t wait for you to talk to her. She’s why, she’s why father doesn’t—doesn’t doesn’t worry me anymore, you’ll see. He has no idea. The things we could do with her help, Hade, come on, you’ll see.”

Hade stops still in the stream, his feet soaked, breathing hard. “Alex,” he whispers. The thing – the thing behind them, it could hear them. His neck crawls. It’s watching them, he *knows* it.

Alex turns, the smile fading from her face when she sees Hade’s expression. “Don’t be like that,” she murmurs, setting aside the rabbits and her gun on the creek bank. She comes forward and grips Hade’s shoulders. “I was scared at first, too. But it’s her.”

“It’s the Reach,” Hade whispers back. “Alex, Mama’s dead, that thing, that’s not—”

“Don’t you fucking say another word,” Alex snaps, suddenly furious, and gives Hade a sharp shake of his shoulders. Her face is thunderous. “I was gonna tell you later, but maybe not, not now.” She turns away, but Hade, more conscious than ever of the trees watching their argument, reaches out.

He misses his sister.

Alex stops, then sighs and turns back round again, searches Hade’s face for a long moment. “She told me,” she says finally, “that she knows how to make Dad better. If we can get him to come in here, if we can bring him to meet her, she can help. Take away the want for the drink. Soothe the anger. Make him stop...” She takes a deep breath. “Gran even says he was never like this before she went away, so it makes sense. He just needs Mama back, and then things will be better.” Her face turns radiant again, washed out and happy. “That’s why I brought you first, so you can help me get him here. Don’t you want him to be better?”

Hade looks back over his shoulder, back toward... He swallows hard. He has no illusions about whatever that thing is. No beatific expressions on his face; they don't fit there like they do on Alex's. A memory—sudden, like it was plucked from the back of his mind and brought forward against his will. He thinks of a sun-drenched afternoon where his problems were almost solved, once. The icy pit in his stomach grows harder.

If it were just him and Alex, anything the Reach was offering would be out of the question. But if bringing their father here could make things... easier, cleaner, then maybe.

“Okay,” he whispers. Around him, the Reach seems to quiver in anticipation.