

Silje was born without a left eye, as though the gods had scooped it from her head before she left the womb.

“Cursed,” said the midwife when she saw the empty socket. “Best to leave this one deep in the forest for the animals.”

“You will not,” said Silje’s mother—her final words before she died. Her husband gathered Silje in his arms, her tiny body still bloody from labor, and he retreated into the forest to mourn and pray.

“Perhaps the gods were blind,” he said, as he stroked his daughter’s face. “They thought to borrow your sight.”

Silje was a sickly babe, and she detested sleep. Nightmares plagued her slumber. As she grew, her single eye took on a haunted look, and crescent bruises cupped both sockets.

“Deformed,” said the other children when she reached the age of childhood cruelty. Other words assailed her—“ugly,” “wicked,” “monstrous,” and they weren’t always from the children.

*You’re like me*, signed the boy without ears. He never spoke to anyone, but he made strange sounds—heavy breathing and low keening—when he was alone and darkness was near. Silje decided they would be friends. Orlo, he was called.

“Why do you make those noises?” young Silje asked the boy one day. The other children had pelted them with rocks that afternoon and they had escaped the village to play games among the aged pines and firs.

Orlo shrugged, trailing a stick in the dirt. *It’s what I hear*, he signed.

“You can hear?” Silje thought he could only read lips and feel the vibrations in the earth. “Can you hear me?”

He shook his head. *I only hear the sounds*.

“How?”

*I listen*.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Silje said, scoffing.

*Don’t you ever try to look with your missing eye?*

“No—” Silje began, then frowned. *Perhaps the gods were blind*, her papa would say. Could she have looked into the land of the gods all this time? She strained, stretching the empty socket open. “I only see what’s in front of me.”

*Close your eye and try to focus on the other one*, signed Orlo.

She did.

Ghostly images swirled in the darkness behind her eyelid, as they had always done. But of course she never could make out the shapes.

This time she reached out to her other eye, wherever it was.

And something changed. The birdsong of the forest faded and the air completely stilled. It was as though her papa had wrapped her in layer upon layer of fleece blankets until everything was muffled. Every sense stripped away, except her sight. Colors bloomed in muted tones. Black shapes rose and loomed ahead, writhing and twisting into trunks and branches.

"It's the forest," she whispered, but she could not hear her own voice. It was the forest, but not the same forest, surely. Perhaps it was the density of the air, or the silence of the birds, or the sickness in the colors.

Another shape morphed into her view, this one lumpy and familiar. It sharpened.

"Orlo, it's you! I can see you!" She couldn't make out his face in her other-eye-vision, the boy was just skin and folds of cloak, eyeless, mouthless. "There's someone else, too."

The other shape was just to the right of her and turning her head took immense effort. The shadow focused.

Silje screamed. She tore open her eye and her own voice crashed into her ears.

*What? What is it?* Orlo signed, leaping toward her.

"It was me, I saw me." She lashed out, feeling for whatever had stood to her left and watched her with her own missing eye. But her hand groped empty air. Nothing was there. "Something has my eye," she said. "And it can see us."

*Maybe it's your double-walker. Or it's the same thing that has my ears.*

Silje shivered, imagining the thing that watched them breathing in the way that Orlo did. Rattling breath. Low moaning.

She did not attempt to see through her missing eye again, but sometimes when she blinked or dozed, she saw things.

The forest, shadows like gashes and flora like bruises. A field with bloated crops and diseased earth. And then, every once and a while, herself. Her braids twisted to rest at the nape of her neck. Her back, prickled with gooseflesh. The vision sharpened until she could see the hairs rising.

Silje learned to sleep with her eye open.

In time, she grew less afraid. Wherever her other eye was, whatever held it, did not wish harm upon her. Perhaps it was a crippled god, blind and deaf, borrowing senses from their world. Doomed to wander and watch in that silent realm alone.

As fate would have it, Silje and Orlo fit together in ways other than their missing senses, and at eighteen and nineteen, the two were married.

Around the same time Silje found a friend in Rheta, another married woman of their village.

"I worry constantly," said the very pregnant Rheta while Silje helped her wash the wool sheared from her husband's sheep. "The midwife does her best but they still come out twisted, or blue as death, or they kill you." She paused and gave her belly a light smack with a dripping hand. "I won't die, you hear? If it's me or you, I'll win."

Silje gently teased the fibers apart in her own bucket. "I only hope mine is whole." Her belly had quickened some months after Rheta's and now it was swollen to nearly the same size.

"Don't worry, sweet," said Rheta. "You're strong and healthy. Your kin will have both eyes. Both ears."

Silje nodded, pressing her fingers to her brow. Tiredness came quicker lately as her body worked to provide for two. Her eye slipped closed, and for a brief moment, she saw Rheta from a different angle, her face clotted and hands full of congealed wool.

That evening, Silje dreamed. She woke with her heart pounding and sweat pouring down her back. The dream faded quickly, flitting out of reach like a feather on the wind.

Orlo was already awake and dressed and the dream vanished as he signed, *Rheta's child came in the night.*

"We shall go and see them, then," declared Silje.

Rheta's baby was wrinkled and red, not twisted or blue.

"The gods were kind," said Rheta, looking weary. "But they still saw fit to keep something."

"What do you mean?" asked Silje.

"Have a look, sweet." Rheta hooked her finger between her child's lips and pried his chin down. He yawned, his mouth a deep crimson. And tongueless.

The nightmare returned. She saw the silent place as she had last night, and then the hands of the crippled god as though they were her own, black as dread, white as terror. Unspooling as they reached for Rheta's belly. Ghostly flesh tearing.

Silje gasped and stumbled out of Rheta's home. She collapsed to her knees in the mud and closed her eye into smothering silence.

There was Orlo, who had followed her out, the back of his head a rash. And there was her, folded on the ground.

She returned to her eye and her own sobs cut the silence like the butcher's knife. "Orlo, it's..it was—"

*I know*, he signed. And at that moment it occurred to Silje how white Orlo's face was. The blood had drained from his cheeks and his lip trembled. *I can hear new things from the dark place. The crippled god speaks.*

"What does the god say?" she asked, though she did not want to know.

Orlo took a breath, opened his mouth, and then, words spilled from his lips.

*"I wished to hear,"* he said, words clipped and voice rough from disuse. *"So I found ears. I wished to see, so I found an eye. I wished to speak, so I found a tongue."*

The unraveling hands flashed in her vision again as they snatched at a child's tongue. She closed her eye to check the silent realm.

Her own face loomed. The crippled god was on her and her missing eye stared directly into her closed real eye.

Panic flooded her entire body, yet she could not move while she remained in the silent place. She wrenched her eye open and crawled backward, screaming, "Orlo! It's here, it's on me, *help me!*"

But Orlo could not hear her, and his focus was elsewhere, listening to the new voice, relaying its words into the real world.

*"AND NOW, I WISH TO LIVE."*

Silje screamed again and then her voice was cut short as she slid into the crippled god's eye. Still in front of her, still on her. She dragged herself in and out of the silent realm, pulling herself away, yet it did no good. The crippled god remained. In pure silence, slick and coiled claws plunged into her belly and enclosed around her child's beating heart.

She felt nothing, heard nothing.

She could only watch.