

But as I draw closer, the scene around the house confuses me. Instead of a nearly empty house to sneak into, I find the mansion surrounded by cars dotting the lawns. There are hundreds of people here milling around in the garden, chatting in between my father's rosebushes and hydrangeas. Why are they all on the lawn? I know Dad would not have approved of this. Feels like a footstep on his face. But I suppose it is Minnie's house now, and like her, it is carefree and elegant. A sign of her Oliver refinement, which she borrowed from our mother and that side of the family.

It was obvious on her, even when I saw her after a decade, when we had turned sixteen. She had come back to stay with us, now that our mother was dead. You could always sense her graceful movements, the age and experience on her face, even when she was kind and cheerful. That comes with being the princess of Oliver Cove, I suppose, a true heiress. It made me feel like a peasant when she could command the house within a month of being there. It's not that I did not enjoy being around her, especially since Maxi had gone. It was wonderful having my lost sister back. But I needed to leave and with her there, I knew I could. And when I left, she took care of Dad and everything else. And since neither I nor Maxi cared for the great "candy" empire of the Grache, she inherited it. The abandoned child of Maximus Grache became the heiress to his fortune. She's been running it for a while now and I've heard it's better than ever.

A flurry of activity that began before I reached the mansion interrupted my thoughts. Ushers were running around, guiding a throng of people from the gardens to the mansion in neat lines. Hasn't the funeral started yet? Amidst the chaos, before I can find a place to park, a valet runs towards me in panic, calling out to me.

"Miss Elizabeth! Please come quickly. They have been waiting for you."

He leaves me there, taking my luggage with him. A cold gust blows through me, my dress clinging to my thighs as I feel the wind through what used to be cloth. They all look so different now, so far away. But it is my father they mourn, right? Where is he?

I shiver as I finally sense him. Somewhere in this house, my father lies dead. I can feel him in there, in the vast silence of the mansion that holds his body like a coffin. The quiet flows from him, everywhere around me, through the mourners, slowing down every motion they make. It ripples and flows with the walls, which shiver like paper with its strength. None of this makes sense, yet I drew to it. A moth to flame, a lamb to the slaughter, a daughter to his funeral.

Does an Albatros pray when it drowns, or does it lament, its worthless break crying out for its father? Does it too recall its failings as it flails, remembering every life that it suffocated in its wings? My mother drowned too, but that was in soap, not oil, in a futile attempt to clean herself from marks that could never be removed.

The main hall is draped with inky shadows as I enter it, covering every inch of the room. I'm surrounded by a crowd, of maids, guests, and ushers, all in black shuffling in these cramped corridors. I must know the people in this room, right? They're people I have grown around, yet

their bodies seem to meld in one another, with no sign of where to look if I were to stare at them. Sometimes in their eyes, I see a flicker of life, as if they see me too, but my lips cannot acknowledge them and my body pushes towards the source of this silence. I stand back for a bit as they enter the chapel, not wanting to disturb their silent vigil. The mourners seem to part though, and between them I see Minnie coming towards me as if bathed in light.

Her tall, slender figure strides through them, her lacy black dress flowing and shining brightly in the darkness. How does she always look so beautiful despite her puffy red eyes? She must have been crying. Without a word, she hugs me and for a moment the world feels lighter, her warmth adding some colour to this dying world, if only for a moment. Minnie kisses me softly on the cheek, her warm lips burning through me, as she looks at me, holding my hands,

“We need to go,” she says softly. “He is in there.”

Then she guides me, her fingers like anchors to my soul, to beyond the crowd seating themselves on their chairs, to my father. A dull yellow glow surrounds his body, the only source of light in this room. Why is he wearing black? He never wears black. I can hear my shoes scraping against the floor, as my body, guided by Minnie, moves closer and closer. I can feel all eyes are on me, as they brood in the dark corners of the chapel, hidden under the flickering worthless lightbulbs. Why was I scared of them, when now I don't even notice them? All I can feel are Minnie's warm fingers.

Then in front of his body, she leaves me. What now? I hear someone crying near me. His eyes are closed, his face unmoving, cold, expressionless. It seems almost like kindness when he lays like that, this stillness so foreign to his body. Was this really what he looked like? At any moment I expect him to move, to curl his lips and say something. Maybe if I focus I would hear him, for a second. And then maybe he could tell me what he wants from me, or how I could make this all better. But whatever I am looking for, he has nothing to give to me.

Soon I feel Minnie's arms on my shoulders guiding me to some chairs in the hall. I sit down as I am told to. Like a good daughter, right? Something like that. A priest walks up to the altar, dressed in the colours of the Ever-Burning. He is young and charismatic, but his movements make no sense. I can tell his voice is strong and eloquent, yet it fades before it reaches me. In the silence of his every motion, his voice feels like nothing but a portent of doom, and it terrifies me. There must be something there, but none of it is for me.

It is all pointless, isn't it? I have made my mistake and now I suffer. I bow my head down in shame, staring at the ground in front of me. Should not have looked at Dad's face so directly, it was wrong to do so. The ground, though, is comforting, and familiar. My eyes follow the circles, the curves and the lines that crisscrossed over the cement floor, hoping to find solace there.

The wind blows from his office window, sending a chill down my spine. He won't notice me if I don't look up, right? If I ignore him, he might just be busy and leave. Nothing good ever came of being here. He would only call me here if he was angry at me. I can feel him sitting in his chair, analysing the document that had sealed my fate. Ignore him. The tiles are good. They have a

name I remember; I read it in a book somewhere. He puts the document on the table and gets up and walks around the room for a moment, collecting himself. He stops behind me, staring out of the window, the heat from his body stronger than the icy wind. It was C something, C de—

“I am not angry. I am just disappointed.” He pauses. He always pauses after everything he said. Walking back to his desk, his gaze is now fixed on me. I know he wants me to look up, but I know better than to do that. This silence isn’t space for me to reply. I can only make this worse. This silence is space for me to feel shame, the depths of the faults that I have in me. I simply have to let this pass. Just stare at the ground, at these tiles, hoping these lines and these circles and these curves will save me. If I can only remember their name. Was it Charbon de ciment?

“You should drop this course. It is better than failing at it.” he pauses again. I knew his expression without even looking up. A look of feigned concern, as if he was genuinely trying to do the best for me as if I matter what I want. Ignore him.

“Tell me if you want that. If you want to stop studying calculus. I’m sure you will succeed in life not knowing calculus.”.

“I did not fail,” I say softly, still staring at the floor. Even the lines of those French tiles trembled at my words, surprised about why I would make this stupid mistake. But it is the truth, right? Should that not matter? I’m taking college courses this year in high school. That is a significant enough achievement for most people. I can feel the heat rise from his body before he says anything.

“You got a B!” He roars, rising from his chair, looming over me. He stands there for a moment, his hands on the desk, and he is staring down at me. His seething anger bubbles from his body before his reproach even began.

“This family did not build itself on B’s. And if you are horrible at something as simple as calculus, then leave it. Write poetry or stitch or whatever best suits your calibre. But you will not waste your time, or mine, on B’s. And you do not justify this failure to me.”

The moment never ends. I just sit there, staring at those tiles, trying to remember their name. It was French; I am sure, something de ciment. Someday I will remember it in time. Regardless, it was better this way. Can I leave now? I never know. As I sit there, I feel soft warm fingers rubbing on my hands. They’re Minnie’s hands. I can feel it as they drag me out of my waking dream. How did I get here? Minnie is standing in front of me, outside in a soft drizzle, holding both my hands with concern on her face.

“Are you okay, Ellie?”

My shoes were wet. My clothes were wet. The crowd around me walking back to the house. It is over, isn’t it? Is that good? Was I good? The grass outside the house is a vibrant green, drops of water slowly bouncing off it. Even the overcast sky is tinted with so much blue.

“Do you need something? Is everything okay?”

Minnie looks even more worried now. A maid rushes towards me, bringing me a glass of water. They're scared because of me, right? Am I causing a fuss?

"Oh yes. All good," I say abruptly, the words stumbling out of my mouth as I look at my sister, trying to smile.

I cannot look into her eyes. Far away in the distance, I see my family's mausoleums. People are still gently streaming from that direction, dotting the landscape in a line of their black umbrellas and black clothes. Minnie pulls at my hands, still terrified, trying to peer into what is happening to me. Why am I wasting more of her time? It's over, she deserves her rest. I must get my shit together. She's dealt with me enough already. I gently let go of her hands, and with a deep breath and summoning my best smile,

"Everything is alright Minnie. Never been better."