Part I

May the Earth Grow Pregnant with Turtles
Spring, almost Summer. My twenty-third year in the Ghost Kingdom.

We knew we were wanted gone.
To live without community was impossible. Impossible to live without the cooperative work and reward of crop and harvest, without the safeguard of storage and knowledge, without that multi-leveled foraging, from ground to treetop, that people of all ages can do together. Impossible to live outside the gathering of familiar bodies when the cold rains began in early autumn. Impossible to live without the places we knew to seek mushrooms, nuts, fruits, wild grains, friendship, extra firewood, laughter, medicine, wisdom—with all those places closed to us, as if the forest could have doors. Impossible to live without a single favor or word of advice when the first winter wind broke the last autumn mist and we had one sack of beans and one armload of apples to see us forward.

Yet it was our choice, Ella. Nicolai refused to apologize for making music through the empty space within the unicorn horn. It was the first time I had ever seen him without shame, and I was proud. We each had our stories: the feral, long-tailed memories of our lone journeys which we had not yet told to each other but yearned to, as if they were dreams we’d dreamed up just for each other’s pleasure—and those stories lay sweet on our tongues in every kiss, awaiting some quiet moment of togetherness when we could breathe out and know that yes, we will do this, we will survive. Sometimes, the thought of them was our only nourishment.

Nicolai found us a new ruin to dwell in, during a long sunset ramble he never explained. In the beginning we treasured each other’s freedom, proud of our own ease with each other’s absence. No one visited us anymore, and our help was never welcome. We both yearned to wander, to discover parts of our kingdom we had never seen, to believe this land still loved us and held some place for us, even if our people did not. We
thought of living in the original castle ruin. We thought of living in the cliffs over the sea. But I knew when Nicolai wandered so far and so long, without telling me he would go, without heeding the desperation of our workload, he also thought of hunting. He thought of it, but never did it. In my heart I knew this: we could not live alone in this place without killing for food. Nicolai knew it, too, and the knowing drew him restless down old animal paths he knew from his dreams, from the dead memories in his wolfish bones. But we both knew without ever saying it that to kill would be to pass through a one-way door, to leave any possibility of our people’s forgiveness behind forever. And so from these ramblings Nicolai returned tense, silent, resentful—usually. But this time he returned with a home.

“One of the old mansions,” he told me, too breathless for full sentences. “Some of the old parts—wood we can break for fire. Stone walls still solid. Hiba-vine so thick, you can’t see the coastline. They’ll never know.”

“The coastline?” I said. “Where?” Hiba-vine is so heavy with protein and nutrients, every part of it edible—berries, leaves, roots—you could feed a family for a day with three handfuls expanded into gruel. Our people wander as far as we do, and would never, I thought, leave such a gift untouched.

But they have, because the mansion is cursed. It sits on a hillock, so covered with hiba-vine that no one had noticed it, the day all of us—all of our people—had tossed every unicorn horn (except for one) into the sea and sworn never to return, never again to disturb them for all the generations to come.

Following Nicolai east to where the sea cliffs just begin to mellow into low slopes of glowing white birch, my steps slowed as I realized where we went. But when we arrived I stood beside him, without the slightest internal qualm, and said nothing. The sea looked bright and laughing, its flinty waves sparkling so much light we had to squint to greet it. Neither of us spoke, but when we looked at each other, the light was almost too much to bear. I remember that, Ella. The light of our stories waiting in our eyes.

We didn’t tell them that first night, like I thought we would, though we held each other wide awake after blessing our new home with love-making like a young couple first knowing each other. I found myself suddenly afraid, as if I might have imagined the promise I’d seen in that light. What if the entire history were forbidden to speak of? What if we could live in the glory of it, only under the sole condition that we never speak its name?
“Do you want to know?” I whispered, recognizing for the first time the hidden rage in him that used to frighten me, recognizing the memory of it, not realizing until that moment that I had ever feared it, or that rage was its name. “Do you want to know where I went, what happened in the sea? Will you believe it? Will you forgive me?” I wanted to know his story, too, but couldn’t ask it.

He looked into me, some slow process happening behind his eyes like the passing of elements through an old tree, and after a while he spoke in the heavy voice I loved. “There is nothing to forgive.” But he didn’t say more, and so I waited.

I waited until after the first snowflakes—the first we’d ever seen in the Ghost Kingdom—were passed up in the hands of an unfamiliar wind from the mountain pass to Sirenia, and Nicolai came home with the hindquarters of a mountain goat slung over his shoulder. He’d been out all night. I was filling a tub of water next to the fire to take the chill out of it—we hadn’t bathed in longer than I could remember. Pouring from a heavy jug, I couldn’t turn at once when I heard him come in, and I first saw the bloody image as a reflection in water. It had been so long since I’d seen him carrying such a thing. I turned with an uncertain smile, assuming carrion.

“The wolves left it for us,” he said, bending to release his load to the floor.

“On purpose?”

He looked at me, nodded. Nicolai didn’t keep secrets, but he didn’t always explain. I used to think it was pain of some kind that silenced him, but now it felt only like patience—an unwillingness to give words to something not yet fully formed.

“How do you know?” But I couldn’t hold back smiling now. I knew the wolves were speaking with him. I knew some communion was happening, had been happening all along—I knew it was part of his story, and I would hear it soon. He smiled back, still saying nothing.

And we couldn’t speak while we ate that meat. It was too precious and frightening, that feeling of devouring life straight from the source, that thrill of bloodying our insides in a way that could never be undone, that taste of utter rebellion which we could not bear to regret. For as much as we longed to belong to our people, didn’t we need even more to belong to this land—and wasn’t it offering itself up to us? We spent two days working the flesh, storing it, digging and burying, cutting and drying, heavy with the promise of its nourishment, and the snow kept flurrying in eerie jubilation, without ever sticking.
“I saw my mother,” I told him on the second day. “I saw the blood I was born from.”

I had thought I would tell my story from beginning to end, but I ended up telling it inside out, beginning with the heart. My mother, my birth, the cave of forgetting. The slain goddess whose pieces I’d gathered, the dwarf who’d crowned me and pointed the way. How the sea had swallowed me, how I’d made love to the muddy ground. How I’d climbed down dizzy with desire and rose up dazed and free. I had been careful not to tell it in my mind beforehand. I had wanted to give it to him whole. I had kept it virgin, untouched, for him. I left nothing out.

“I knew you were part of Her,” he said at last, touching my heart with reverence against my breast. “I knew it in your absence, when I lay with the memory of you, and the memory of my journey. I found the horn under your pillow. I didn’t know you still kept it. But it turned out—I understood, Mina.”

“What?” We needed only to whisper. We were lying so close, just the way I’d imagined we would, wrapped in our cold bed of exile at the edge of the sea, unknown and forgotten to all of humanity.

“That you…” He paused to struggle with the words, curling his hand into a loose fist and bringing the other to it, pressing them tight together as if he meant to pound the words firmer out of a clay I could not see. “You are like a human aspect of Her that can be known to me, you are my way into knowing Her. A gentler way, a loving way. A bridge. Once She cursed me, Mina. Now She can guide me—if I am good. You will help me.”

“Does anything I say frighten you?”

“Yes!” He laughed—ah, to hear him laugh, Ella! How little have I heard it, in all my life? With Sol, you heard laughter all the time. “Yes,” he laughed. “I am frightened. But I am not the same. I am braver than I was, Mina.”

“Tell me,” I said, snuggling my head into his chest so I could listen to his words where they began.

“There is little to tell.”

“Yes?”

“I went looking for wolves.”

“You did?” I was so startled, I turned my face up, met his beard with my eyelashes, then tried to snuggle back down. I remembered him leaving our house as if he walked on air, swinging the little bag I had packed him. Everything seemed easy for him, and his ease had left me swamped in darkness. He had seemed so simple.
“Not when I first set out, but by the time I lost myself in the forest, that evening, yes. I had no destination. I had no spot I could choose to settle down. I felt I could never settle. The dark closed in around me, you weren’t there—you had been my light, all those years, more than I’d ever known, and you weren’t there. And then I thought of the wolves. They were all I could think on. I was certain they would come for me—not to devour me but to take me back as one of them. I knew all the peace I’d found had been a lie. I could never be human, not fully. I could never be…"

He trailed off and I curled against him but my breath felt a little cold inside me. I was trying to remember for how many years I had longed for him to reveal the existence of such feelings. How I had longed for him to admit the beast in himself, to reclaim it, and if it were hardship to do so—at least to ache openly before me, to give me his tears—then I had yearned for even the tiniest edge of that wound to lick. Yet he had come at last to this place of honesty without me, and I hadn’t even been there to open my arms for him when he returned. For the first time I realized I’d paid a price for my freedom. That forcing him to live without me had gouged an equally large emptiness in my own life—only I hadn’t thought of it until now. I hadn’t thought what I had missed.

He went on, and his story took but a few words—after mine had taken most of the night. He said he howled for those wolves, dared them to come, gave himself up—but they didn’t come. He felt them all around him, toothy and snuffling, silver and fleet, but never saw them. Nothing at all happened until, on his weary, hungry way home on the last day, he untangled a crow from a piece of Sirenian sheep fencing that had washed up the coast. They use that movable woven fencing to graze their sheep, and are careless with its disposal—one of the many faults our people have been grumbling about for years. Nicolai untangled the crow, and the crow lived, and flew, and this seemed to Nicolai a symbol of some purpose he was given, and he felt the wolves watching. But he didn’t understand it. He didn’t understand what the wolves, those creatures of violence, could have to do with tending something so vulnerable. He came home confused by the flavor of tenderness mixed with such bitterness, and troubled, without one glimmer of the light he had expected to cleanse and uplift him, and far murkier in his mind than when he had left. When he discovered my absence, he never blamed me for it, any more than he’d ever blamed me for Sol’s kiss. He blamed himself.

“There’s nothing to say about that time,” he said, and I was grateful for his silence, because it was a silence of self-care. It meant he had come
through it without me, that he’d made himself stronger by surviving it, that nothing of it lingered to weigh either of us down. *I don’t have to tell you of those brooding feelings*, his silence told me, *because you’ve known it all too well*. *We’re past that now.* What he told instead was how he emerged from those days of darkness noticing that he still felt well. He’d never succumbed again to sickness. He realized how odd it felt, to be free from pain or weariness for so long, as if despite all his confusion, his body brightened. He realized how he’d huddled inside that confusion to deny his own wellness, because it frightened him. Sickness had become a comfort.

At first the people were with him in his despair: they searched for me, they cared for him, they made sure he was rarely left alone. But our people have survived so many more losses than this. Too soon, they gave me up for missing. They gave me up to the mysteries of the sea which had swallowed so many Sirenian pilgrims without a trace, to the ghosts and curses and maybe even the revenges—they’d never say it that way, but is it impossible that they thought it?—of this place. This place of endless repentance.

But Nicolai was done with repenting, and strong in his body, and would never give me up. He would not let me go at the time when his people expected letting go. They expected it according to their oldest and most sacred custom. And Nicolai rebelled. He would not speak to them if they denied me. He would have nothing to do with them. The crow he’d freed was female, and she came to him. She paired with Milo, who’d remained alone for all the time we’d known him, riding on our shoulders and loving only us. Now Milo accepted this new mate, and Nicolai saw in her the return of something dark and feminine in a form of Rhiannon, and then he asked for Her help, without knowing how to ask. He searched for me.

He already felt alienated from his people, as did they from him, the night he overcame the pain of our empty bed and lay down in it for the first time, and reached to my side of it, and touched with surprise the sometimes rough-fuzzed and mossy, sometimes smooth-as-water surface of the unicorn horn and—*Mina*, he whispered to me now: *It was warm.*

He felt from the first that the mystery of my absence lay coiled somehow within its hidden hollowness. He turned it every which way in his hands, in his heart, day after day examining it like a tool his species had lost the knowledge of, until he finally remembered what to do.
He breathed. He breathed into it, to fill the loneliness of the space where his people had already left him, already abandoned him to his love. He played that music in all his shame—the feeling he still clung to that my absence reflected some inadequacy within him—and all his heartbreak and all his fury and frustration at all the mysteries of wolf and woman, curse and goddess, people and wilderness, because by playing that music he could move those feelings through him and set them free.

By the time I came out of the sea, hungering after that music like warm bread, he’d been playing it all spring, all summer. He played it to the sea to counter the songs of the mermaids with his own song. So that he could not be drowned by them. So that he wouldn’t lose himself again. By the time I came out of the sea, he’d long since forgone almost all contact with our people, who never openly banished him but never looked at him again.

And all of this, I felt that night, was as it should be, and when we finished with our stories we fell together into a sleep without bottom, without worrying that it was bottomless, without wondering what the future held or what our lives would look like for the decades to come, living at the edge of the world with no community, no purpose, no one in the world to give us meaning, ever again, except each other.

We did not expect you, Ella. We did not expect anyone. By the time you came, later on, I had already given my story to Nicolai. I didn’t have it to tell you, or even to tell myself. If I wanted some taste of the nourishment I’d once drawn from it, I had to look to Nicolai’s admiring eyes to seek its reflection. Yet admiration was not what I needed, nor could I anyway find it, much of the time.

I had told my story, and what? The rest of life lay before us. He had told his story, and what? He’d left so much unsaid. Milo and his mate visited occasionally, a sweet reminder, but mostly they traveled far across the peninsula with their friends, foraging confidently, self-sufficient without us. The wolves left us food again, two more times, before the winter was over. It was one of the greatest miracles I have ever known, and I worship it still. But in between those times, we starved a little.

That winter bristled so cold, it pricked me like silver, made me too irritable to touch even one naked toe to the even icier sea. Once upon a time, I’d flowed within that sea, warm as blood, but that was a dream, and it was foreign to me now. I hardly dreamed at all, and when I did they
were only swarming, foolish, lurid flashes of Lemara's dark-light body, and they felt like only tumbled memories, not a presence of anything or anyone. I sat at the sea's edge, much gentler on that coast and easy to reach, and listened with all my heart, eyes closed against the wind, but mermaids don't sing much in winter. Once I thought I saw one, sitting sad on a jutting stone halfway out to the horizon, looking right back at me with grey eyes, grey hair and a face like a corpse. She looked so unfamiliar, I squinted in surprise, and she was gone.

“I have no connection with Rhiannon now,” I confided to Nicolai. “I have no connection with anyone.”

“You do,” he answered, though I could tell he was beginning to be jealous of my time by the sea, just as we both began to suspect each other's solitude as if it were some kind of betrayal, after all. “It is in you and cannot be lost, even if you can't always feel it.”

“Nicolai,” I panted in frustration. “I was inside the sea. It wasn't a dream.”

“And I was a wolf,” he said. “Once.” And shrugged.

“Then what are we doing here? What did we forsake our people for? We thought we worshipped something, something that freed us. Didn’t we? But what even is it? We have no name for it. We're just dying out here.”

“They forsook us,” he corrected me darkly.

“Why don’t you play the music anymore?” I asked him, softening at the pain in his eyes. I hadn't realized until now that I’d avoided mentioning this. What we had was so sweet, for so long, I’d been terrified of hinting at anything like our old conflicts, terrified of any possible point of tension. Yet suddenly I opened my palms and realized that what I clung to was nothing but a wisp, a remnant—there was nothing there. “That music kept us going,” I said. “And we did it to honor something. When you played that music, we honored the unicorns. We grieved them. No one had ever done that before.” There was such pleading in my voice—and fear, too. I’d never spoken this aloud. It was something I’d assumed about what it meant to us—but what if Nicolai had never shared this assumption?

I thought the gruffness in his voice told me yes, he had shared it. Though his words belied it. “If I played, someone might hear. I don’t want them to know where we are, Mina. They think we’ve left this kingdom for good—I know they do. I want to live out here in secret.”

“What for? I’m so tired of denying ourselves, the way they deny themselves, the way they deny the unicorns—Nicolai—”
He was walking out. Nicolai was so used to not understanding the shades of his own heart, it didn't drive him mad the way it sometimes did me. I couldn't believe we were arguing again. I wanted him to hunt. I wanted the food, and I wanted him to admit that part of himself again. What was the difference between the wolves killing for us, and us killing for ourselves? Weren't they showing us what was right, after all? But Nicolai didn't see himself as one of them. He didn't see himself as sacred, or part of anything. And when I looked down at my own heart, I wasn't sure that if I could do it—even if I didn't feel it as a betrayal of my beloved's deepest wishes, even if I knew how—I would actually kill for myself. No, I didn't think I would.

Such magic was ours, Ella, when I returned from the sea and Nicolai was playing the music of the unicorns. We had claimed ourselves in that solitude, and that confidence had made our relationship for a brief time holy. But as with every magic, when we fell in love with it, we broke it with our clutching hands. And how much more sharply the shards cut us—now that we'd seen, at last, the greatness of the vessel we had broken.

“We're getting too dependent on each other out here,” he told me, coming home that evening. “We'll devour each other, alone together all the time.”

“I know,” I said too quickly, to cover my distress at hearing it from him instead of myself. I had been accusing him, inside my own head, of needing me too much—of idolizing the story I’d told him until it was distorted out of all proportion, until I could no longer recognize it, no longer claim any piece of it for my own. Yet now I felt my desperation for him to be what I needed. For him to be the man I imagined we needed to survive now. For him to be the man who equalled the woman I wanted to be now, now that I had risen out of the sea and wished myself so much stronger. “I know,” I said, with urgency, “but what can we do?”

“Spend more time alone,” said Nicolai, unexpectedly, and oh, Ella—it was hard.

That's when you came. The winter wasn't nearly over. I found Finn shivering in the corner of our old cabin, so much older than I’d known him and so thin I didn't recognize him at first. I’d stolen back there in the middle of a moonlit night to seek a second pair of boots I was sure I'd forgotten there. The sight of another human froze me solid in the doorway, and he looked back at me as if I, too, were a vision.