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The Time Machine

by Lauren Holstein

LB

The night before Sofia crashed across my path, I already knew what was coming.

I had been wandering the forests alone for months now. When Lily died, I could no longer face the others. My family, my pack, had let this happen. They sacrificed her for their own safety, the selfish bitches. I would have broken each one of their mud-strewn, talisman-heavy necks in my jaws to protect Lily. But they had bound me like a trussed hare and dragged me from the scene, while I watched the Elders and their hunters circle Lily's body. Their torchlights turned each one of them into a cunning shadow, and I could see each violent move against her body as clear as a murder of crows across a clear sky. I watched as she stopped punching and kicking. I watched as her body ceased to writhe, or even tremble. I watched as her limbs flopped and fell, moved only by the frenzy around her, passive, inert. Head drooped, torso slumped. A limp rose, dead-headed, lying on the bright earth, petals still soft but crumpled, with only a future or desiccation ahead. I closed my eyes and let myself be heaved away through the trees.

Months later (I think – I had never felt the need to count the days), I was still roaming with no sense of purpose. Why was I even still alive? Why was I keeping myself alive? Most of me felt no reason to eat, sleep, walk. And yet, I kept doing it. Looking back now, I know there must have been some small seed in me that clung to the possibility of life. And indeed it was a kind of seed that I stumbled upon, which opened me up to some potential of futurity.

I was collecting branches for a fire, as I had done every evening at dusk, sweeping dead leaves aside and picking out the driest twigs. As I shifted a pile of soggy leaves from under an alder tree, a white globe the size of my fist shone, like it had collected all the day's light. I moved gently towards it, uncovering the earth around it, to find an abandoned nest in the hollow of the alder's roots.

Five cracked and long-deserted eggs lay in a heap, with one gleaming unmarked orb resting on top. I searched for signs of a mother, of recently shed skin, of tracks in the earth, until the half-moon had risen, and then, with both anticipation and a little guilt, I carefully took the egg in my hands and carried it back to my camp.

I held it like a fragile tiny planet, just discovered, gifted to me to watch over. I placed it on a heap of soft leaves while I started a fire, and then built a sturdy tripod high over the flames, where I assembled a small nest of stones in which to place the egg. It gleamed and sparkled, a reflection of the moon itself, as the flames threw long thrashing shadows around it. It warmed. And I watched. After some time, I lay my palms around it, feeling for some beat of life within, and suddenly, I was lifted, transported, high into the night sky, gently but immediately. The egg still in my cupped palms, but the earth spinning quietly beneath me, us.

After a timeless moment, I was shunted like a meteor back down to Earth. Watching another fire, a massive, life-eating fire. A grown-up Lily, I think, or some woman with her exact silhouette stood aside me. There were flickers of movement and shadow around her wrists, and a tranquil grin on her face. I felt that same stretch on my lips. I felt that same flicker around my wrists. I looked down. There, wrapping themselves with familiar affection around my hands and fingers were several snakes, shining like emeralds as they flung their heads towards the flames with glee. There we were, gazing at our village, burning joyously into stars and dust.

I closed my eyes and felt myself return to the body, my body, stooped over a campfire, with a seed in my hand. And I knew, I knew. I knew she was coming. This sister of mine.