

# JESMYN WARD



*A Novel*

# Let Us Descend

*By the Two-time National Book Award Winner  
and Author of SING, UNBURIED, SING*

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# Let Us Descend

*A Novel*



JESMYN WARD

SCRIBNER

*New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi*

*This book is for Brandon, who saw me and loved me, even when I could not see or love myself, and for Joshua, the first to show me that love is a living link to the dead.*

“When they sold her, her mother fainted or dropped dead, she never knowed which. She wanted to go see her mother lying over there on the ground and the man what bought her wouldn’t let her. He just took her on. Drove her off like cattle, I reckon... That was the last she ever knowed of any of her folks.”

—“INTERVIEW WITH ROGERS, WILL ANN,” FROM *BORN IN SLAVERY: SLAVE NARRATIVES FROM THE FEDERAL WRITERS’ PROJECT, 1936 TO 1938*

There was a ship,  
the *Henrietta Marie*,  
breaking against the furious water,  
and there were shackles  
and the woman on deck  
her legs open in the hiss of a scream.  
... and I was there too,  
unfurling with them all...

—“SHARK BITE,” FROM *THE WORLD IS ROUND* BY NIKKY FINNEY

... Dear singing river full  
Of my blood, are we as loud under-  
Water? Is it blood that binds  
  
Brothers? Or is it the Mississippi  
Running through the fattest vein  
Of America?

—EXCERPT OF “LANGSTON’S BLUES,” FROM *THE NEW TESTAMENT* BY JERICHO BROWN

## CHAPTER 1



### *Mama's Bladed Hands*

The first weapon I ever held was my mother's hand. I was a small child then, soft at the belly. On that night, my mother woke me and led me out to the Carolina woods, deep, deep into the murmuring trees, black with the sun's leaving. The bones in her fingers: blades in sheaths, but I did not know this yet. We walked until we came to a small clearing around a lightning-burnt tree, far from my sire's rambling cream house that sits beyond the rice fields. Far from my sire, who is as white as my mother is dark. Far from this man who says he owns us, from this man who drives my mother to a black thread in the dim closeness of his kitchen, where she spends most of her waking hours working to feed him and his two paunchy, milk-sallow children. I was bird-boned, my head brushing my mother's shoulder. On that night long ago, my mother knelt in the fractured tree's roots and dug out two long, thin limbs: one with a tip carved like a spear, the other wavy as a snake, clumsily hewn.

"Take this," my mother said, throwing the crooked limb to me. "I whittled it when I was small."

I missed it, and the jagged staff clattered to the ground. I picked it up and held it so tight the knobs from her hewing cut, and then my mother bought her own dark limb down. She had never struck me before, not with her hands, not with wood. Pain burned my shoulder, then lanced through the other.

"This one," she grunted, her voice low under her weapon's whistling, "was my mama's." Her spear was a black whip in the night. I fell. Crawled backward, scrambling under the undergrowth that encircled that ruined midnight room. My mother stalked. My mother spoke aloud as she hunted me in the bush. She told me a

story: “This our secret. Mine and your’n. Can’t nobody steal this from us.” I barely breathed, crouching down further. The wind circled and glanced across the trees.

“You the granddaughter of a woman warrior. She was married to the Fon king, given by her daddy because he had so many daughters, and he was rich. The king had hundreds of warrior wives. They guarded him, hunted for him, fought for him.” She poked the bush above me. “The warrior wives was married to the king, but the knife was they husband, the cutlass they lover. You my child, my mama’s child. My mother, the fighter—her name was Azagueni, but I called her Mama Aza.”

My mama set her spear down, stood with her palms open. They shone silver. “Come, Annis. Come out and I will teach you.” I started to crawl forward, her blows still stinging. “Don’t forget your staff,” she said. I inched back before dragging myself up and out, where I stood on the tips of my toes, one foot in front of the other, ready to run. Waiting for her to hit me again. “Good,” she said, looking at my feet, my swaying dance. “Good.”

I have grown from that night to this one. I am tall enough to look down on my mother’s head, her dark shoulders, beautiful and round as the doorknobs I polish in my sire’s house. My mother has a few gray hairs, but her fingers are still sure as daggers, and she is still upright, slim and straight in the full moon’s gloom. We come here, to our secret clearing with the burnt tree at its heart, only a few nights out of the month, when the moon shines full so we don’t need a fire. My mother inspects my hands, pressing each callus, massaging my palm. I may be bigger and thicker than her now, but I stand still as the gap-toothed child I was and revel in her touch, unfurled to her tenderness.

“Your fingers long.” My mother taps the center of my palm, and my fingers close fast. “You practice with my staff, tonight.

“Here,” my mother says, digging out the weapon Mama Aza left her. She runs her grip down the long, thin limb, stained black and warm from the oil of her hands, and Mama Aza’s before. Mama Aza taught my mama to fight with it, determined to pass along this knowing taught to her by the sister-wives across the great ocean.

Mama tosses the weapon to me and picks up her childhood staff, jagged as lightning. I sweat, fear spiking my armpits. My heart thumps in my ears. Mama whips her spear, and we begin to spar: with every spin, every strike, every stab, my mother becomes more fire, less herself—more licking, liquid flame. I don't like it, but then I don't have time to like it, because I must parry, block, jab. The world turns to one whipping, one humming, and us spinning with it.

When we return to the cabin, Nan and her two oldest children are asleep. Nan and her family share the cabin with us. Her youngest two are awake, and they cannot stop crying. They hold each other in their blankets, breath hitching from sobbing, while their mother and siblings doze. Nan has always diverted her love for her four children. She throttles it to a trickle, to an occasional softness in her orders: *be still, hush, don't cry*, and the rest of her care is all hard slaps and fists. She won't love what she can't keep. My mother reaches out to me, and I grasp her hand as we tuck into our bedding. Mama has always been a woman who hides a tender heart: a woman who tells me stories in a leaf-rustling whisper, a woman who burns like a sulfur lantern as she leads me through the world's darkness, a woman who gives me a gift when she unsheathes herself in teaching me to fight once a month.

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THE NEXT MORNING, MY mother wakes me before the sun; she smells like hay, magnolia, and fresh game meat from last night's midnight sweat. I'm exhausted. I want to roll over in our blanket, yank it over my head and eat more sleep, but Mama runs a firm hand down my back.

"Annis, my girl. Wake up."

I pull on my clothes, tuck my blouse into my skirt as we walk toward my sire's house. Can't help the sulkiness dogging my tucks, dragging my steps. My mother walks a little ahead, and I punch down my resentment. Mama is almost running: she has to get to the oven, needs to light and stoke the fire within it, heat it so that she can do the morning baking. I know she is ordered to the house just as much as I am, what with all I have to gather and deliver and



clean for her, to aid her in this morning, but I am short-tempered and tired until my mother begins to limp, a little stitch in her walk. Last night pains her, too. I trot to her, slip my hand through the crook of her elbow, and rub her arm. Look on the soft down of her ear, her woven hair.

“Mama?” I say.

“Sometimes I want something sweet,” she breathes, tapping her fingers on mine. “Don’t you?”

“Naw,” I say. “I want salt.”

“Mama Aza always said it wasn’t good to want sweets. I’d hunt them and eat so much my hands’d stain red and blue.” Mama sighs. “Now having a bit of sweet is all I can think about.”

My sire’s house hulks, its insides pinned by creaks. My mother bends to the stove. I gather wood and haul water and take both up the stairs, peeking into my sire’s daughters’ rooms. They are my half sisters; I have known this since my mother first taught me to fight, yet envy and distaste still burrow in me every morning when I tend to them. They sleep with their mouths open, pink scraped across their cheeks, their eyelids twitching like fish who swim in the shallows. Their red hair snarls in knotted threads. They will sleep until their father wakes them with knocks on their doors, far past the first blush of dawn. I tamp my feelings down, closing my face.

My sire is at his desk, in his dressing gown, writing. His room is stuffy with cold smoke and old sweat.

“Annis,” he says, nodding.

“Sir,” I say.

I expect his eyes to glaze over me as they do every morning, like water over a smooth stone. But his gaze snags on me, square, then trails me around his room as I fill his washbasin, gather his clothes, grip his chamber pot. He appraises me in the same way he studies his horses, his attention as sure and close as his touch on a long-maned neck, a muscled haunch, a bowed, saddle-worn back. I keep my eyes on my hands, and it’s only when I descend the stairs that I realize they are shaking, his mess sloshing in the pot.

I take care to hide from his gaze. It is something that I have always known how to do: I seal my mouth silent. As the day

lengthens, I walk on tiptoe through the wide, dim halls of my sire's house. I set buckets and basins down softly, ease the metal to the floor in a ring. I stand very still, just beyond the doorway of my pale sisters' schoolroom, and listen to their tutor read to them beyond the door. The stories I hear are not my mother's stories: there is a different ringing, a different singing to them that settles down into my chest and shivers there like a weapon vibrating in struck flesh. These girls, sallow sisters, read from the texts their tutor directs them to, ancient Greeks who write about animals and industry, wasps and bees, and I listen: "*Bees seem to take a pleasure in listening to a rattling noise; and consequently men say that they can muster them into a hive by rattling with crockery or stones.*" The youngest sister's voice falls to a mumble and rises. "*They expel from the hive all idlers and unthrifths. As has been said, they differentiate their work; some make wax, some make honey, some make bee-bread, some shape and mold combs, some bring water to the cells and mingle it with the honey...*" I breathe in the pine halls and repeat the most potent words: *wax, honey, bee-bread, combs.*

"Aristotle refers to the heads of the hives as kings," the tutor says, "but scientists have found they are female: actually queens. In ancient Greece, Artemis's priests were known as 'king bees.' Bees, too, were credited with giving the gift of prophecy to her brother Apollo." The tutor gives a dry laugh. "This is blasphemous superstition. However, Aristotle's advice on those who labor and the fruits of that labor are sound: leave a hive with too much honey, and a beekeeper encourages laziness," he says, his voice high and soft, nearly as soft as those of my unsure sisters. I know he is speaking about bees but not—that he is using the bees and the old Greek to speak on all of us who labor. I know he's talking about my mother making biscuits and stews on the stove in the attached kitchen, about Cleo and her daughter Safi and me, who tidy rooms, beat dust from rags, wipe their floors until they gleam like burnished acorns.

I hurry downstairs to my mother, who reads me as quickly as the tutor reads his passages.

"You've been listening again?" she asks.

I nod.

“Have care,” she whispers, and then bangs her spoon on a black pot. The kitchen is thick with salt meat. “He wouldn’t take kindly to knowing.”

“I know,” I say. I want to tell her more. I want to tell her that I envy my sire’s twin daughters, their soft shoulders, their hair pale and thin as spider’s silk, their lessons, their linens, their cream-colored, paper-thin dresses. I want to tell her that when I listen at their doors, I am taking one thing for myself, one thing that none of them would give. I say the tutor’s words in my head again, trying not to feel guilty at my mother’s worried frown, the way her anxiety makes her stab her spoon into the pot. *Wax, honey, bee-bread, combs*. How to apologize for wanting some word, some story, some beautiful thing for my own?

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I say as I retreat outside to gather more wood.

A lone bee meanders through the kitchen garden: plump, black striped, beautiful. It lands on my shoulder, soft as a fingertip, and I wonder what message it brings, from what spirit worlds. They are *queens*, the tutor said. When the bee rises and disappears into a nodding yellow squash flower, wind beats through the trees, and I think for a moment I hear an echo drifting down through the branches: *Queens*.

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WHEN I TURN DOWN my sire’s bed, he watches from beside the cold fireplace. Normally, he is downstairs, sipping amber drinks and visiting with other planters, all buttoned-up vests and murmured conversation punctuated by bluster. Tonight, he sits in an upholstered armchair, part of his dead wife’s dowry. At dinner, he complained of fever and congestion, and asked my mother for a remedy: a mixture of mushrooms and herbs. It is this I set before him in a ceramic cup. He holds the cup with two fingers, his legs long before him, his boots caked with spring mud. His eyes shine with the light of the candles, and I look at my hands: smoothing, plumping, folding. I will myself to move faster so I can get out of this room and into the moonlit night.

“You’re taller than your mother,” he says. Where the tutor’s voice is high and breathy, my sire’s voice is deep, grating. I can’t help but startle, dropping his quilt. “Come,” he says. “Remove my boots.”

I have never done this before. I stand away from the bed, looking down at my own beaten shoes, so worn at the sides that I can see my toes. I can’t move.

“You heard me,” he says. His red hair glints. It is not a question.

My mother has told me the story of how my sire violated her. Of how he came across her, alone in one of the upper hallways of the house, outside of an empty bedroom. How he shoved her into that bare room and bore her down to the floorboards. How he flayed the softest parts of her. How he raped her that time, and then another time at the river, and another, and another, until she stopped counting and became pregnant with me. Years later, he married the white woman, yellow haired with thin wrists, who would later die in the bearing of his twin girls.

As I kneel at his feet, I wonder if my mother felt her heart beating as quickly as the heart of a rabbit hunched in a field at twilight, shying from the shadow of the hawk. I pull at his laces, as far away as I can be from him, so that I have to reach. My arms burn with my awkward cowering, but I unknot and shuck his boots as quickly as I can. His socks smell of overripe cheese. He raises one arm, makes as if to palm my head, grab my hair, pull me toward his lap, but I rise and lurch away from him and am out of the door before he can touch one curl. Still, I see the way he seems fixed on my mouth, my mane, which falls dense and shiny, so resistant to braids, and reflects his own copper glint in its strands.

I would shave it all off, every bit.

• • •

THE YOLK OF THE moon is high in the sky by the time my mother wakes me and we creep from the cabin, from Nan and her children grinding their teeth and talking in their sleep. We walk barefoot to the clearing, making as little noise as we can, stepping on the balls of our feet carefully in bare dirt patches. I sweep our footprints behind us with a tree branch my mother twists from a pine. Ever

since I've been old enough to remember, my mother has asked me to tell her. *Tell me*, she says, *if anybody ever touches you*. It's what she said to me the first time she told me the story of how my sire stalked and violated her. *Please, Annis*, she said. I want to tell her about my sire before we spar, but she digs out the spear and staff so quickly, tossing them through the silver-washed air, that I cannot do more than swing my staff up to block hers, and then we are whirring and whirring, shuddering to a stop before attacking each other again. With every block, every strike, every jab, there is a coil in my chest, and it winds tighter and tighter before it begins to burn. *What is the point of this?* I ask myself. What is the point of this if I cannot use it?

The moon rises, and I am wrung dry, the fury of our fight leaving behind only a slick of resentment. I jab at her and try to forget.

"What was Aza's mama's name?" I ask.

Mama bids me swing, and I squirrel through her defense and touch her stomach.

"Don't know. Mama Aza never told me. Say when her father took her off to give her as a wife to the king, her mama followed them into the morning. Trailed them for miles 'til her father stopped and argued with her mother, saying it was an honor for Mama Aza to serve, that she would be fed and clothed and revered: a king's wife. Say her mama took her face in her hands and kissed her on each cheek and her forehead, tried to whisper something to her, but couldn't talk for crying." Mama pushed my elbow lower. "Mama Aza say once her and her father got to Dahomey, where the king live, the spear became her mama. The cutlass her daddy."

Mama frowns, her face wrinkled as a tablecloth.

"The warrior wives had servants. But all the wives was servants, too. Had to train and parade. Had to move at the king's direction. And warriors couldn't have a family, couldn't have no babies. Was against the king's law."

I stop, digging Mama's staff into the dirt, beaten hard by our feet.

"Tell me about my granddaddy, please," I say, looking at my toes, our feet the same shape. Mama stops. She's told me this story

many times, the first when I was a girl, in one of our earliest lessons.

“Mama Aza loved a soldier who stood guard outside the castle walls and took him as a lover.” She frowns. “The king sent her and the man who loved her to the coast. They was walked to the white men, to the water that don’t have no edge. The whites made her walk through a door to a beach, and then put her down in a ship.” My mother reaches out, pinches my shirt, and tugs before letting go. “They stole her. Bought her here.” She tugs again. “Why you ask?”

I shrug. Her second toe longer than her big toe. My second toe longer than my big toe. Shoes always hurt our feet.

“Mama Aza knew the power of men before she got to that boat. When her daddy brung her to the palace, the king tell her father: I take her for my wife, but she bound to the cutlass, the bow, the axe. Mama Aza said there were hundreds, hundreds of wives, and one king.”

Mama swings, and I block it.

“No other men allowed to live in the palace besides the king,” Mama said.

There wouldn’t have been any other men there with the power to weigh and measure Mama Aza, to appraise her like my father did me. No man but the king: stout, jewelry laden, finely clothed. Perhaps his *tononu*, master of the house and eunuch, at his ear.

I wonder what the royal household saw in my grandmother. If they saw something in her that spoke of power, that told them she could bear more than the weight of her frame. When my mother tells Mama Aza’s stories, I see her in my head, lean and long like my mother. But sometimes I think I’m wrong, that the royal women looked at Mama Aza and saw a girl like me: gangly, water muscled, cup hipped. Maybe Mama Aza had learned to hide her fierceness so good, all the women and the king saw was a thin girl with a spindly line running from head to toe that pulled her upright, defiant.

When the king designated Mama Aza an amazon, did she feel relief? Joy at knowing she wasn’t beautiful enough to be one of his true wives? That she would not have to submit beneath him, to

bear him on her body and then deliver him blood, babies, and breast milk? Was she happy to know that she would learn how to satisfy his other desires, for blood and loot? That she would serve him in battle, hunting elephants, with a knife and spear? That she would bear bundles for him that contained heads instead of infants? Or did it grieve her that she was bound by another invisible rope, had to surrender herself in this palace full of women in thrall to one man?

“I don’t understand why Mama Aza wouldn’t share her mama name. She taught me that the ancestors come if you call them. That if you having trouble, you pray to them, and they give help,” Mama says, swinging again. I miss the block. “Maybe she think her mama should have tried harder to keep her, and she carried the pain of it, still.” Mama jabs, and I parry. The night quiet of people, loud with bugs around us. “Some think those that die come back if they die in a bad way, a way so awful Great God turn they face. Fon believed spirits come for you no matter the why, no matter when, if you call. You swing now,” Mama says. I swing and she blocks and swings. I barely knock it away. I am breathing harder than I should be. Mama steps back and holds her spear out, ready. “Don’t think of me like that, you hear? I always come for you. Beyond this time, into the next. Always.” She steps close, so near our knees almost touch, and wipes wet from my face: half caress, half swipe. “Now, why you ask for Mama Aza’s story again?”

I tell my mother, haltingly. The words crowd one another as the panic I felt in that room froths up out of me, and I have to close my eyes to speak, to get the story out.

“He was,” I say.

Mama nods.

“Watching me like a hound,” I say.

She blinks.

“His shoes. His feet.”

She settles, still.

“Grab my head,” I say.

When she is sad, my mother presses her lips into a thin crease and turns her head away, her cheek a drawn curtain; I saw it first when I was young enough to climb in her lap whole and be held by

her, after I had fallen while running and cut a long gash in my calf. When she is angry, my mother folds her arms across her stomach, as if she could hold in her fury; I saw it when my sire crushed his daughters to him in their finest black dresses as they lowered his wife into her grave, knew it was because he spent the week before throwing every dish my mother set on the table at the floor, the wall, the ceiling, in his grief. My mama and me spent them days on our hands and knees, scrubbing, scrubbing. My mother holds her stomach now, her spear in the V of her elbow.

“Why,” I ask. “Why we do this if we can’t do nothing with it?” I let my staff drop.

My mother closes her eyes, sets her spear aside, and crouches on her haunches. I sink down next to her, let my arm rub against hers.

“Mama Aza taught me this,” Mama says, looking up to the roux-dark sky, her arms still tight around her stomach. “Was about the only thing she could teach me. This and gathering.”

I rub her arm with a finger, all our hard strikes gone from this clearing.

“This place, these people, this world,” she sighs, “was new to her. She ain’t know how to move through it. Didn’t know the order of it. Just a few short months after the ship, she found out. The old master come into the cabin after she birthed me, and he laid claim to me, me wet with birthing blood and bawling. This owning from birthing to the grave, and on down, through children—this world overwhelmed her.”

I grip the soft sliver of meat under my mama’s armpit, one of the few tender, fatty pieces on her.

“This place horrified her,” Mama whispers. “When I got older, I thought I knew. Thought I understood how wrong this place was, but I didn’t.” Mama squeezes her middle. “I didn’t understand how wrong until you came squalling out of me.”

In that one place, my mama’s flesh is soft as pig stomach, the pale plush of intestines.

“Teaching Mama Aza’s way of fighting, her stories—it’s a way to recall another world. Another way of living. It wasn’t a perfect world, but it wasn’t so wrong as this one.”



Mama squeezes my fingers.

“Best we don’t forget,” she says.

The trees wave and whip their fronds above us. The ruined tree creaks.

“You remember what Mama Aza did first as a king’s wife?”

I nod.

“She ran,” I say.

Mama snorts.

“He come at you again, you run,” she says. “Knowing when to stand and when to go, when not to fight, well, that’s a part of fighting, too. Knowing when to wait and bide and watch and duck. You got to know that, too.”

We sit in the clearing until just before dawn, both of us too anxious to do more than lean into each other, hugging, blinking and slipping into sleep in little nods. When we rise and bury our blunt weapons, I pour the last palmful of sand over the wood, and the wind silences. Everything is quiet, until there is a buzz at my ear, a brush of sound. It is an inky bee, drifting in the dregs of the night, in this fighting clearing. Mama and I walk back to the cabins with our arms locked and linked. Her leaning on me, me bearing her up.

• • •

WE GLANCE PAST THE silent cabins and walk directly to my sire’s house.

“We start early,” Mama says as she lights the kindling in the stove, blows in its belly. “Mayhap we finish early,” she says, and I know why. She thinks to hurry our work so I do not have to kneel at my sire’s feet again.

“Yes, Mama,” I say, and set to hauling water.

But the hours unspool anyhow. My sallow siblings want extra water to wash. The tutor wants me to clean and polish the shelves in the nursery turned schoolroom, complaining of dust. My sire wants fresh bed linens, tells me that fever made the ones I’d turned down the evening before reek of sweat. When evening falls, I still am not done. When the family’s bedtime approaches, I find myself sloppily tucking and folding my sire’s linens on his bed, kind Cleo

and sulfur-eyed Safi already gone downstairs. When they left me to finish, I wanted to call after Safi, beseech the thoughtful girl who has always run to hoist too-heavy buckets with me, has always been quick to grab the opposite edge of a bedsheet so we could fold its length together. She would've known I needed help. But my voice has withered. My breath rasps. *Run*, I say to myself. *Mama said run*.

My sire trips into his open doorway: he has hurried here. I jab the last corner under his mattress, rise, and stand, balancing on the balls of my feet. I take a step toward the door. *Run*, my mama said, *run*. *But I ain't got nowhere to go*, a little voice says. I take one breath, and then another, the air cool in the room but burning down my nose, and I know I can't surrender to what he wants to do to me. I know that I don't have my mother's self-control, know that I will struggle with him, that I will use my elbows like hammers, my legs like staffs, that I will make my knees fists. I think of Mama Aza squatting in the cabins, infant in her arms, afterbirth still in her, and this man's father, my grandfather, standing over her, and how it must have rung through her head: *This is wrong wrong wrong*. I hear it now. How the knowing sink in my stomach.

"Annis?" my mother's voice sounds from the hallway beyond the door. She has opened the door, and stands in the open palm of it. "We done." Her arms band her stomach. Her head is down, but then she raises it and I know that eyes can be weapons, too, that they can glitter like small knives, like them used to gut a fish. I have never seen anyone look past my sire as my mother does now, him a buzzing gnat, unworthy of notice, of even a waved hand. "Come," she says.

My sire has his own signs for anger, but I don't look for them. I edge past him to my mother, her bladed hand, the long, dim hallway, the creaking stairs, the quiet kitchen, the murmuring garden, the loud night. We walk past the cabins, past the fields, into the forest to the clearing. We walk as far away from my sire's house as we can. We do not dig out our weapons. We make a bed in the soil we have beaten soft with our feet and pillow our heads with our arms. My mother curls around my back, her breath soft on my neck.

“There are herbs,” Mama says. “I’ll look for them tomorrow. We should have them.” She circles my stomach and pulls tight. “He won’t stop. Every time after the first, I grabbed this,” Mama whispers. She pulls something out of her braided hair that looks like a white awl, thin as a needle.

“What’s that?”

“It was Mama Aza’s. A piece of an elephant tusk. She got it on one of her hunts.” Mama puts it in my hand, and it is smooth and warm as her skin.

“Once I got myself past the feeling of hitting him with it, right here”—she touches my neck, below my ear, where my heartbeat thrums—“I tried to remember that I still had plenty inside he couldn’t take.”

The shoulders of the trees shake with wind.

“Mama Aza said bringing down an elephant is a good way to teach somebody small how to beat somebody big. How you have to be cunning, have to be smart. If you not, you don’t live through it.” Mama slips the ivory awl back into her hair. “You remember that, too, you hear. You don’t need this ivory or them spears. In this world, you your own weapon.”

The moon blanches the sky; she is nearly set before we sleep.

In the hour before dawn, there is a perfect silence. I wake, my mother’s snoring hushed in my ear. I slide my hand up her forearm to the muscley meat before her shoulder and squeeze, hard enough to feel the push of her flesh under my fingers, soft enough not to wake her. I turn on my back so I can see her face: her open mouth, her cheekbones fallen with ease. The moon has set behind the trees, but its light still suffuses our clearing: milky glass. Some nights I steal these moments for myself; what my mother demands in fighting, I take back now. My mama’s face is slack as a child’s; her limbs are so close, they could be my own. I put my hand on her neck, feel the rush of blood there, the red river that binds her to me. I feel as I only can with her.

A buzzing hiccup sounds from the ruined tree above us, and suddenly, the clearing fills with a grating whisper. I squint against the sky and see trailing garlands of black dots rising from the trunk in a humming chorus. I rub the down of my mother’s arm. It takes

moments more, each one stretching thick as honey, to decipher the dark rising, the sibilant singing: a beehive has taken root in the tree, and now they wake and go forth with the dawn. *A little more*, I think. I will let my mother sleep a little more, drift skyward in the place of dreams, before rousing her, waking her, pulling her back here.

*One breath more*, I think, feeling my mother's heart in her neck. *One breath.*

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MONTHS LATER, WHEN I see the Georgia Man standing at the head of the trail leading from the cabins to the fields, my sire beside him, pointing at me and my mother, I dig my nails into my mother's hand to stop her.

"Mama, no," I say.

"Come," I say, echoing the first time she roused me to fight.

"Please," I say.

I turn back toward the cabins, the woods, the far clearing. I pull my mother's arm, try to rouse her to run, but she will not. She stops still and grabs me by my collar. Tears are already leaking down her face, and she does not try to wipe them, to hide the glaze of her sorrow. The sky is thick with clouds, the air heavy with coming rain, the smell of water cloying. My mother has eyes for nothing but me, only me. She smooths her hands over her hair and then does the same to mine, and something sharp knifes my scalp: the ivory awl sliding into place. And then I feel only the press of her palms on my cheeks, my ears, as she holds my face to look at her.

"Annis, my Arese," she says, her voice fluttering. "I love you. I love you, my little one." One of the Georgia Man's men walks toward us and grabs my mother by the same soft meat of her arm as I have done so many times. Cries rise from the people around us; a bolt of summer lightning flashes in the distance. The Georgia men are grabbing men and women and children on their way to their labor. The Georgia men are separating those to be sold. They have come for their goods to march to New Orleans. There is a sinking at the heart of me, a whirlpool sucking down and down.