

THE DEPTHS THAT LIE
BENEATH

THE ELEMENTALISTS

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I

THE LIES WE HIDE BEHIND

ALICE

The shapes that Alice drew were finally true. Maybe it was the scent of lavender wafting in through the front windows, or all the coffee she'd had, and it was already three in the afternoon. She wasn't supposed to have coffee—her therapist said it heightened her sense of detachment. But Alice knew that sometimes even therapists told lies, and today caffeine was the only thing anchoring her to reality.

The shapes were true today. Maybe it was because the lines were red, or she was alone, or because the kitchen door kept swinging open with its usual stupid *creak-clack-creak*, intruding on her thoughts. She saw those interruptions like points on a map, destinations for her pencil on the page, pinprick lights calling out to her in song.

The page was more real today. Maybe it was because she hadn't been to school, and Father wasn't home yet, and she didn't know where he was, and she *hoped* he'd finally

managed to find that cliff he'd been teetering on. But that wouldn't be true.

Today her lines were strong. Because even terrible artists sometimes have good days. Because sometimes even hopeless drawings can reflect the truth.

The front door slammed and she was proud she didn't jump. Her pencil only slipped a fraction of an inch. The mark it made was a jagged fragment of her mind, falling into the white recesses of the page. She felt the world flicker around her.

She let one jaw muscle clench.

"You're drawing again."

Father was lurching, and it was only three in the afternoon. Alice took in a whiff of fresh lavender and moved the pencil another *flick*. A shape was growing.

"Look at me," Father said. There was no edge to his voice. It might have even been kind.

"Look at me," he repeated, softer.

She tried, but her eyes went first to the picture of Mother on the table. The one she'd brought down with her to draw beside, the one with Alice at age six, and Mother with the seashell necklace Alice had made, the two of them looking so happy. Their long, blonde hair matched perfectly in the setting sun.

"Don't look at *her*," Father said, a hint of a hiss escaping his lips. "I want you to look at *me*."

He took a step forward, toward the kitchen table. He was on the other side of the room. It would take him three and a half strides to reach her, unless he'd drunk enough to wreck his gait; then it would take five. She let her pencil drag along the page, staring at his boots. Those brown

boots, covered in mud, which meant he'd been crying again. Which meant his drinking had been worse, so it would probably take six. He'd found his cliff, but he still hadn't taken the plunge.

"My *face*, dammit," Father said, listing sideways, using the back of the couch for support. The kitchen door kept moving, *creak-clack-creak*, and Alice moved her pencil down, and right, then up and curving down. There. A true shape. Something no one could destroy.

Her eyes finally made it to his face.

"You went again," she said, and she saw his eyes tighten. The wrinkles there were more pronounced than she remembered. She hadn't truly looked at him in so long.

"Of course I went," he said, taking one step forward. Four. "You weren't at school."

Creak-clack-creak.

"I was sick," Alice said. "You would have known that if you'd been here."

She shouldn't have said that.

"*Liar!*" he said, the sound reverberating. He tottered. Three steps left.

"I'm not lying," Alice said, feeling calmness overtaking her. She was true, today. Her pencil couldn't lie. "You can call the school and see. I am feeling better now. Thank you for asking."

"You're drawing again." His eyes narrowed. "Have you been drinking?"

"Mrs. Erion says I'm not to have caffeine." But therapists sometimes lied.

"It's not *caffeine* I'm talking about, young lady." He

stayed where he was, leaning on the back of the black recliner. "That cabinet was locked."

"Drawing isn't against the law," Alice said. As if to prove her point, she moved the pencil and began again. The shape grew, mirroring her thoughts. The lines were jagged, sharp, pressing. Her thoughts were almost a blur.

"You always do this," Father said.

"I'm allowed to draw." *Creak-clack-creak*. Something flickered on the wall.

"You don't even *care* she's gone."

Alice set her pencil down, feeling coldness settle in. She took in a breath, mustering control of her limbs, her eyes, her voice. She reached for her long blonde hair, remembering Mother's in the photograph. She didn't look at Father's feet. She couldn't look into his eyes. She stared at the page instead, enduring the coldness as it fell through her.

Her lines were true, but the room was not.

"How *dare* you say that to me," she said, and she was proud of the way her voice didn't flinch, didn't cower, didn't shake.

He was there in a flash, suddenly beside her, nearly ripping her shirt as he dragged her off the chair, up onto the table. His strength was incredible, his eyes sharp.

It didn't hurt.

He didn't say anything at first. He just held her, face to face and eyes to breath. He held her collar, tightly. Her hair draped over his arms.

"You're a waste," he said, and somehow that hurt more than anything else he could have said.

It was only three in the afternoon.

The walls elongated in her vision, the true lines on her page escaping their boundaries, growing upwards, extending. She watched them quiver as they moved, crawling along the table and up the yellow kitchen walls, the scent of lavender filling her. *Creak-clack-creak* the kitchen door said, but the world as Alice knew it was no more.

Father was gone.

In his place was a dragon, a fire-breathing dragon that smelled of beer, great reptilian face built from small red flickering pencil lines. It opened its mouth and words came out, but Alice was focused on the pain inside its eyes.

“I tried to send you away,” the dragon said.

“Then why *didn't* you?”

The room had turned into a palace, into a vast room lined with mirrors and glass, and they were flying on wings made of pencil dust. Alice was a dragon of her own, and Father's breath was fire.

“Why don't you just leave?” his dragon asked.

She had thought about it. She had even done it, but he didn't know. She hadn't made it far, and he had been deep inside his locked cabinet. She imagined that cabinet to be magic, full of secret potions and spells. She wanted to escape into it herself, and had, and would again.

Creak-clack-creak.

“You need me,” Alice said. The truest thing she'd said. But she felt his grip tighten, his face move near. The grip at her collar grew more fierce. He was coiled like a snake. It was only a matter of time before he came unleashed.

“All of this is because of you,” Father said, and she felt it like a blast. Red fire assailed her, flying from his lips, and she flinched but took it full in the face. Her long hair flew

as she recoiled, the pain of it stinging her to the core. She tried to move, but he was holding her too tight.

She looked around the mirror palace room, seeing no rescue in it. No wizards or mages, no sprites or elves. It was just two dragons, fiercely battling their reflections. This, like all her battles, must be won alone. She felt a tear drip from her eye as the red lines crawled, as she felt the world around her quiver in despair.

Escape, like so much else, was a two-faced sword. You can run, but the hurt you leave behind might be less than what you face. You can flee, but it's only three in the afternoon.

When you're in your father's grip, it doesn't matter what lies you tell.

"She loved you," Alice said, knowing it was false, thinking it might help.

She was wrong.

He hit her then, right across the face. She flew out of his grip, slamming hard into the kitchen cabinets and falling painfully to the floor, her limbs askew. The red lines flickered and moved, but her world held for a moment longer. She watched as her father dragon loomed near, feeling the stinging in her cheek.

"You killed her," Father said.

"*Liar!*" Alice shrieked, scrambling to her feet. Her hands were claws, her arms wings. The room tilted and turned, red lines everywhere. The mirrors were agitated now, reflecting wild light. She wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come. All she had was anger, pure and clean, but anger wasn't enough for words. All she had were

lines and shapes, true shapes, disguise. All she had was stinging skin.

Father took a step, his wing rearing back. And before she could do anything, before she could duck or scream, he had raked her yet again. She fell sideways, scrambling on the cold linoleum, red lines shifting in her vision. She longed for a door as pain filled her, for a portal, for escape. She crawled, but he kicked her shin. Then he hauled her up, lifting her as if she were a simple cup of tea, throwing her back onto the table without even a word. The dragon in her vision reared, eyes flashing, fire raining down on her.

Creak-clack-creak.

She screamed as the blows rained down. She felt their familiar shape and screamed, though every fiber of her wanted not to. Tears tracked down her face as the red lines flailed, slicing, slapping, tearing, true. He hit her and she burned, the fire from his eyes worse than anything else in that cold, cold room.

Creak-clack-creak.

Then she saw it. The magical portal she had wished for. It opened in front of her, on one wall where mirrors were. It yawned open as it shone, and she reached for it with claws of red.

But Father was too strong.

He took her and wrenched her to the side, and she was dimly aware of her consciousness beginning to recede. She had moments left to leave, to run, to win, or he'd have her again. He'd destroy her face—may already have—and she wouldn't go to school for a week. Maybe it was better that

way. Maybe that was true. Or maybe she should run just like he'd asked her to.

He pulled back for one moment, taking a breath. She saw his jagged face rear up into the air, and her eyes flicked one last time to the pencil drawing of her mother on the table.

Then she moved.

She summoned all her dragon strength, ducking under his swinging claws, sliding and falling and getting up and lurching toward the door. The portal yawned and shone, *creak-clack-creak*, and she heard him roaring behind her as she made it all the way to it and out. Lines shattered around her as the sun burst into her skull, tears streaming down her broken face as she kept moving, one foot in front of the other, trying not to scream as Father thumped and rumbled and roared behind her in the house. She was free, now. She was destroyed.

It was only three in the afternoon.

DOTTIE'S POND

The water in front of Alice glistened, turgid, deep. The recent rains had raised the pond, and now it swirled in the moonlight. There was malevolence in it, Alice thought. There was fear. There was truth in the way it rippled, the way the algae crept across it, the way one branch stretched out from the shoreline, cresting the water here and there, knobby wood gasping for a breath.

She knew exactly how it felt.

She touched her face, wincing as she watched the water. A light breeze blew, cooling her skin and sending a cascade of ripples across the surface of the pond. She let out a deep, ragged breath, stretching out her legs.

Ponds are like appendixes: no one knows exactly why they're there. But sometimes useless things are the best things. Sometimes they make it easier to belong.

The caffeine was wearing off. The world was back to real. And Father hadn't found her here, here in the mud,

even though those were his bootprints clearly marked right next to hers in the grass. She imagined his tears, glistening in the moonlight, a bottle of beer pressed into his hand. He hadn't fallen in this time.

She imagined a face in the water.

She imagined her mother.

She touched her hair as she did, the wavy blonde length of it reassuring between her fingers. It was the only thing of her mother she had left.

Dottie's Pond was small, fed by a spring, in the middle of Santa Teresa County Park in South San Jose. Alice wrapped her arms around herself despite the warm California night, wondering for the thousandth time if she should just slide into the pond and be done with it. But it was just a pond, right? What ill could possibly befall her there?

She shook her head, wiping a tear from her right eye. She knew what harm. The haunting stories were true. A ghost really did lurk beneath the surface, waiting to pull unsuspecting people in.

She had seen it. She was sure.

"You didn't hide the bruises well enough," a voice said, and Taylor stepped into the clearing. He was blond like her and tall, though his hair was shorter. His blue shirt rippled as he moved, revealing his strong chest. He smiled through sad eyes and sat. Alice leaned against him in her mind.

"It's dark," Alice said. "You can't see my face."

"Was it bad this time?" He searched her eyes.

Alice shook her head. "He thought I was drinking."

"Were you?"

"Caffeine."

Taylor clucked his tongue. "You know what that stuff does to you."

"And I drew."

"Something nice?"

"Dragons."

"Always dragons."

"I know they aren't real."

"We missed you at school."

"Bullshit," Alice said, and Taylor squawked a laugh.

"We're *really* not supposed to be here."

Alice used her foot to draw a pattern in the grass, badly. "He was here today."

"Oh. Shit."

"Yes."

"Tell me. Was it bad?" He was asking her again.

She didn't meet his eyes. "I wouldn't be here if it was bad. I wouldn't have been able to walk."

They were silent for a moment.

"I looked for you all afternoon," Taylor said. "I was hoping not to find you here."

"They don't patrol the park anymore."

"That's not what I'm worried about." Taylor was looking at her again. She liked the way he looked at her. She felt her broken face heating.

"I had to see what he was feeling," Alice said.

"There are no dragons here."

"That's because I haven't drawn them, yet." She wasn't skilled enough to draw those lines.

"She's not coming back."

"You don't know that."

Taylor sighed. "Alice, I know you mean well."

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

Taylor spread his hands out in front of him, a gesture of placation. “The haunting isn’t real. It’s just a story they tell kids to frighten them away.”

“Then why aren’t we allowed here?”

“Because the park is *closed*, Alice. And because it’s dangerous. This pond has very steep edges, and it’s deeper than it looks. But you know that.”

She knew that better than anyone.

“Just...” Alice began, but she didn’t have the words. All she had was sadness, pure and clean. Sadness for her mother. Sadness for what might have been. She stroked the bruises on her face, wincing a little, wishing she could snuggle against Taylor. Maybe then she’d find some words.

Taylor had lapsed into silence.

She looked at him, at the curves of his face, at his eyes that were blue to match his shirt, dark now with night upon them. She imagined the pond reflected in those eyes, and she wanted to sink into them and never return. She watched him, but he was silent, staring at the water.

“Thank you,” Alice said, and he stirred, giving her a glance.

“For what?”

“For looking for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

Taylor let out a long, deep breath. “Sometimes I wonder,” he said, his voice quiet in the night. “I wonder if I have enough energy for us all.”

Alice didn’t know precisely what that meant, but it sounded like the truth. “I drain you.”

Taylor shook his head. “I drain myself.”

But Alice knew she’d been too much. She pulled away,

shifting quietly an inch to the left. Taylor didn't notice, didn't stir. "Maybe we should swim." He was getting worse, lately. So was Father. Maybe there was something in the water.

Taylor snorted. "You hate swimming. You're afraid of water."

"No, I'm not."

"Swim, then. But I'm not pulling you out."

She looked at him. "Yes, you are."

But she wouldn't swim. The water was probably cold, and she hadn't brought the right clothes, and anyway Taylor was right. There were few things Alice hated more than water.

Her fingers itched for a pencil, for a crayon, for a paintbrush. She wanted to draw again. She wanted dragons, some escape. Father would be asleep, soon. Then she could sneak back in and get some rest. Then her face could heal. Her mind could slip away.

"Taylor," she said softly, "talk to me. Tell me what's wrong." She longed to reach for him, but he was still staring at the pond.

"I heard from Dad today. My parents are splitting up."

Alice felt a little pang hit her in the chest. But— "You knew they were going to."

He didn't move. "There's a difference between knowing it and seeing it," he said. "They were so...cold. They barely spoke. Somehow that was harder than anything else that's come before. Dad didn't even look at me when he left."

"Oh." She felt her heart go out to him. "It's not your fault. Things had been going badly between them, remem-

ber? They'd been headed that way for years. Maybe the entire time." It was the truth.

"They would have stayed together," Taylor said. "For me. They would have, if I hadn't seen Dad with...her. If I hadn't walked in on them while she was climaxing, while he had her up against the wall, while—" He choked up, fists clenched, feet curled. She hadn't noticed his shoes were off before. His perfect toes were white beneath the moon. "I'm sorry. I know this affects you, too."

Alice let out the breath she'd been holding. "It's okay. It's not our fault."

Taylor was silent.

She waited, but he didn't say anything. "What's wrong?" she asked after a minute.

"I, uh. I don't want to tell you."

She actually reached for him, then, trying to grab his arm with her hand, but he flinched away. She almost let out a sob right then. "You can tell me anything," she said instead. "You know that."

He gave her an odd look, as if she'd said something funny. "I failed the science midterm."

"No." She refused to believe it.

He nodded. "I'm too stupid for school."

"Stop," she said. "You're not stupid. You know that." He had known that. She had told him.

Hadn't she?

"I don't know *anything*."

She heard the bitterness in his voice, and for the first time she felt fear ice through her. He was worse than usual, tonight. It had been a long time since he'd been this sad.

She clutched her arm, pretending it was his. “You’re smart.”

“Liar.” She heard it as a ragged whisper, as a choked reply.

She released her arm.

The stinging in her face returned.

She wasn’t lying. Not this time.

But maybe... “Do you need some help? We can work on science homework together. And math.” He also struggled with math. But he’d always refused her, before. He’d wanted to do things on his own. She didn’t expect things to change now.

“See? You know I’m stupid.”

She reached for him, but he pulled away.

So she sat there staring, watching the waters of Dottie’s Pond shift and stir, wondering if the ghosts beneath the surface were real or if they were simply her imagination. It was getting more difficult to tell.

“You’re sad,” Alice ventured after a while. It didn’t get to the heart of things, but it was the best she had. Sometimes you had to read the truth between the lines.

Taylor was silent.

She thought about what to say. Words were sometimes easy, sometimes hard. It depended on the emotions they were meant to convey. It depended on how real they were, or not. But her friend deserved the truth. He had always deserved that.

She wished she’d been able to tell him that before.

“You’re a good person,” Alice said. She ignored the stinging in her face as she watched his eyes, the moonlit blue. But his face was impassive. She tried again. “You’re

worthwhile.” It was what her therapist had said. She didn’t think it would work.

She was right. Taylor snorted, loudly. “At least your dad pays for therapy, for whatever good it does.”

She heard the anger embedded in his tone. “I hate therapy,” she said. It wasn’t precisely a lie.

“It hasn’t changed you.”

“That means it isn’t working.”

“It means you don’t *want* to change.”

As usual, he saw to the heart of things. “I could just turn him in.”

“And then you’d be put into the system. We’ve talked about this, Alice.”

“I know. I just...maybe he’d be put in jail.”

“Guy like him? With the money he has?” Taylor laughed. “He’d get away scot-free. Corporal punishment, they’d say. That’s all it is.”

“He yells at me. He screams.”

“So do you.”

“Whose side are you on?” Alice felt her face heating, felt the pain of it. She shifted further to the left, the pond reverberating. “It wasn’t Mother’s fault.”

Mother was too dead to know.

“I know,” Taylor said. “Sorry. Adults are just...*fuck*.” He let the expletive slip out as if it were a bowel movement, squeezed between his hips. He seemed satisfied to have it free.

“I know,” Alice said. “I know.” It was the truth. She played with her hair, admiring how it fell past her shoulders. She imagined it wet with pond water, floating. She imagined her father seeing her corpse upright in the pond.

Would he even grieve? Or would it be good riddance to him, like her mother was before, dead to the element that took no prisoners, that gave no release, that held no sympathy for girls, or branches, or algae, or storms? The pond didn't care, and neither did her father.

"Fuck," Alice echoed, and Taylor nodded along. "I'll help you," she continued, and that was that. "You'll pass science class. Okay?" She longed to reach for him. She did so in her mind.

"Okay," Taylor said, but she could read his tone. He'd given up. She'd never heard him like this before.

"Taylor," she said, and for one long moment she almost told him. She almost told him how she felt, what he meant for her, what his friendship had meant for all these years, what his presence and his kindness and his eyes did to her, aroused in her, how he flooded her with beauty and awareness and the truth. She almost said every little thing she'd held in all those years, but his face was too impassive, too controlled, too held in. She knew that look. She knew what Taylor needed.

Taylor needed a lie.