HER DARK WINGS

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For Franzi, Katja and Antje, my Furies, my sisters

Tell me, of a world where the gods still rule in Olympus, where they spread across the world as sure as rosy-fingered Dawn and held their own these many years; Sing Muse, of the Titan spawn; Zeus, Poseidon, Demeter. Sing of Hades; the Receiver of Many, alone in his unchanging, unyielding realm.

Sing of the Boatman, of the Furies, of the rivers that flow in and around the land of the dead. Tell me where the triple-goddess, Hecate, now dwells. Tell me of silver-tongued Hermes, who moves between the land of the living and the world of the dead, foot in either, belonging neither.

Then tell me of the flower-touched girl hidden at the ends of the earth; of betrayal and vengeance, of blossoming and blame. Tell me of heartbreak and healing, tell me what it means to forgive, to plant a seed, to watch it grow.

Tell me what happens next, Muse.

Sing.

SEEDING

The morning after the festival, Mr McKinnon—who wrote and edited the *Island Argus* when he wasn't teaching us—published an emergency edition of the paper. He must have started working on it the second he got home, then cycled around the Island in the dark to make sure everyone had a copy before breakfast. He went to so much effort.

The headline he used was 'Daly's Hero'.

I knew he meant Hero from *Hero and Leander*, because we'd just finished the *Double Heroides* in his class. It must have been the first thing he thought of: how fucked up to teach a poem that ends in a double drowning to someone who'd actually drown before he handed our essays back. But everyone else read 'Hero' and thought about film characters or stupid warrior men from epic poems. People who lived and died starting wars or fighting wars or ending wars; there was always a war

involved somewhere. They'd forgotten about the actual Hero, who was just a girl.

So the headline did not go down well.

Cally Martin, who runs the Spar in Daly, went door to door with a wheelbarrow collecting every copy she could get her hands on; I didn't let her have ours. She dumped them on Mr McKinnon's front step, where, allegedly, Thom Crofter pissed on them, but only on the back page, out of respect. He was careful to avoid the photo of the girl found dead in the lake at the Thesmophoria Festival.

Daly's Hero.

I'll tell you something about Bree Dovemuir—she was no Hero.

Bree Dovemuir was my best friend for almost my whole life, until she became the person I hated most in the world. Sometimes second most, depending on the day.

Three months ago, it was still Bree-and-Corey, Corey-and-Bree, said as one word, treated as a single, doubled-headed entity; a mini-Hydra. The photo Mr McKinnon used in the paper was actually of the two of us, taken from the school website, except he'd cut me out so it was just her. The irony was not lost on me.

Despite his best cropping efforts, you could still see the seashell curl of my ear pressed against hers, the matching double-helix piercings that got us both grounded two summers ago; me for a week and Bree for the whole holiday. We'd held each other's hands as the

needle went in once, then again, pulses syncing with the beat of the song the piercer tapped her foot to.

I hadn't wanted my ears pierced, but Bree begged me not to make her do it on her own. And when mine got infected—of course—it was Bree who insisted I keep them in, making me swear I wouldn't take them out. And the sad thing is that when we walked into school the first day of autumn term, the rings hidden under our hair, it felt like it was worth it.

I should have known she was a snake then; she'd changed her hoops from the steel ones they were pierced with to tiny silver ones, so we didn't quite match.

As if the headline wasn't bad enough, Mr McKinnon had changed the dimensions of the photo and he'd messed it up, stretching her jaw wide, making her forehead huge. If it hadn't been her obituary, I would have been thrilled by her mutant Wanted-Poster face. If it hadn't been her obituary, I would have graffitied it—blacked out her teeth, added a monobrow, some hairy warts. Stabbed out her eyes with the compass from my maths set. Glued it to a doll made from grass and hair, spit and blood, and asked the Furies to curse her for her crimes. But it was her obituary, so there was no point; the worst had already happened.

The photo had been taken at the end of term, just before the summer that was supposed to be the best summer of our lives, because we were seventeen and Bree swore the summer you were seventeen was the best summer you'd ever have. And it wasn't quite the truth to

say it was of the two of us, because Alistair Murray was in the original photo too.

I was in the middle, the bridge between them; Bree's best friend and Ali's girlfriend. Until Bree and Ali decided they didn't need a bridge, after all. They'd cut me out of the picture too.

When someone dies, there are certain things you have to do. The body has to be cleansed and oiled, a coin left on the lips for the Boatman so he'll carry the soul away to the Underworld. There is the prothesis the night before the funeral, where the body lies in state and women sing the dirges over it. The next day is the ekphora procession to the graveside, where milk and honey and wine and water are poured into the grave as an offering to Hades. The chief mourners sometimes offer a lock of their hair too. Finally, the perideipnon feast to celebrate the dead.

Without the proper rituals the dead are left behind on the shores of Styx, unable to move on. It's kind of the same when someone breaks up with you. There are rituals you have to do then too—not official ones, they don't appear in any sacred text. But everyone knows them; the tried and tested ways to get over heartbreak. And you have to do them, or you won't move on either.

First, you call all your friends and they come for a sleepover—they come to you so you don't have to get dressed, or risk bumping into your ex on the street. This is the relationship's prothesis, but instead of singing

dirges you sing your favourite songs, starting with the sad ones and then getting to the real angry shit, the fuck-you-forever songs. Once your blood is up, you delete your ex's number, all the messages they ever sent and block them online. You do it to them before they do it to you—this is especially important if you're the dumped, not the dumper.

Then, everyone lies and says actually they hated your ex, that they were never good enough for you. They promise better, brighter things, offer up rumours of who's newly single, who always had a thing for you. These words and deeds become your bread. They feed and nourish you. They are your perideipnon. Really good friends will bring ice cream, too.

Slowly, you start to come back to life.

A week later, you ceremonially remove a lock, or several, of your own hair and get some new style, or you dye it rainbow colours, and a week after that you kiss someone's brother or sister or cousin behind the old abbey ruins in Fraser's Field. After a month, when it's obvious it's really, truly over, you take everything they ever gave you and set it all alight in your back garden; an offering to Aphrodite to send you a better lover next time. The fire makes your neighbours worry about sparks and wooden fences, and mutter darkly about the noise as you and your friends dance around a metal bin full of burning memories, but it has to be done.

These are the rites of the break-up, and if you do them properly, they fix you.

But when Ali and Bree left me for each other there was no ritual, because Bree wasn't there to be the chief mourner. I was left marooned, somewhere in-between.

Now Bree is actually dead. And if you're wondering if I'm sad about it, because it means we'll never get to mend our broken friendship: No. I'm not.

I'd wished for it.

INVASIVE

Just before she was found, I was behind the south barn with Astrid Crane, who'd adopted me after the Ali-and-Bree betrayal, and some of the others from our year at school, far enough away from the fire that the parents could pretend not to see us.

Astrid had passed me the bottle of wine she'd stolen from somewhere. I never used to drink, but that was the old, happy Corey, who'd had a boyfriend and a best friend. The new Corey had neither, so I'd let the sour liquid spill over my tongue, and scanned the crowd again for Bree and Ali.

I kept doing it; in the village, at school, everywhere. They'd become my North, my internal compass swinging straight for them any time they were around. I couldn't decide if I was relieved or gutted when I realized they'd disappeared.

I also couldn't decide how I felt about the boy I'd just kissed.

The Thesmophoria was good for that kind of thing. It's an old festival; older than greeting the hamadryads when you drive through Green Wood, even though almost nobody had seen one in centuries; older than throwing pine dollies off Amphitrite Cliff to ask Poseidon to keep the fishermen safe. The Thesmophoria used to be a three-day celebration before the winter wheat was sown, to honour Demeter, and only women were allowed to go, but these days it's a one-night-only bacchanal, where everyone on the Island gets absolutely blasted and behaves stupidly. Including me, this year. Kissing a random boy.

It's not that I'd believed I'd be with Ali forever, more that I hadn't really thought about life *After Ali*, until it happened to me. Kissing someone new wasn't unexpected, but it's not like I'd gone to the Thesmophoria planning it. On the one hand, I was satisfied I'd proved I'd moved on so everyone could stop pitying me. On the other, I worried I'd put a nail in a coffin I already knew was welded shut.

Most of all, I was afraid they'd think I was doing fine without them, and that I didn't need them any more. I didn't need Ali, but Bree . . .

I *hated* her. But I'd never, ever considered a life *After Bree*.

When the random boy had come to me, hand outstretched for mine, I was standing at the edge of the festival, trying to drum up the courage to either stay and find someone I could hang out with, or just go home

and listen to my playlist of sadness for the thousandth time.

And then he appeared, with wide shoulders, a smile full of promises, and shadowed eyes; offering a place by his side. I slipped my fingers between his and followed him into the crowd, deliberately not looking for *them*, trying to act as though he was the only thing in the world on my mind as we started to dance.

I didn't know for sure they were there, but it was the Thesmophoria and I couldn't imagine them being anywhere else. And, honestly? In that moment I wanted them to be there. I wanted them to see someone else wanted me. I wanted the whole Island to see that I was fine, because some other boy with a beautiful mouth he'd painted gold, and a hammered copper mask that looked like scales in the red firelight, had picked me out of the crowd. Here was the proof that my world didn't begin and end with Alistair Murray and Bree Dovemuir.

I needed to believe that. And the boy had, for one moment, kissed me with gilded lips and made it real.

His mouth was cold, he tasted like ice or salt, or diamonds—something clear and sharp and glittering, something that would quench or call a thirst, or buy an army, start a war. His hands were cold too, cooling my burning skin where they touched me, and my fingers gripped the lapels of his coat so tightly that they cramped. I wanted more; his kiss made me *hungry*. I wanted to swallow him down, like honey. I wanted to be like the mellified men we'd learned about in history, I wanted to

consume this boy until he was my sweat and my tears, until it killed me and then I wanted to be buried in him for a hundred years.

I'd only ever kissed Ali, so I didn't know how different it could be. I'd thought it would just be a kiss, like a hundred kisses before. I thought I knew what to do, how it would go.

I didn't know anything at all.

And this was a kiss without love, or liking, or even knowing. This was a kiss just for kissing's sake. Imagine if I cared. Imagine if it actually meant something.

I could hear the sound of drums, my own heart thundering. I knew with certainty that the ground beneath us had opened and we were going down, down, down, until the earth would cover us and bury us alive, and I was fine with that. I *wanted* that. I wanted him.

I pressed my whole body against his, and shivered when his hands moved from my face to my waist, holding me to him, keeping me there. Somewhere close by I heard a wolf-whistle, long and loud, piercing through everything. I remembered where we were and pulled back, embarrassed. But my fingers were still curled into his coat so he couldn't get away because I wasn't done—we weren't done. And he was still holding me just as tightly. When I looked up into his eyes, they were dark and shining, like he knew exactly what I was thinking and he agreed, and I turned away because suddenly it was too much.

That's when I saw Ali and Bree. It took me a second

to realize it was them, partly because of their masks, but mostly because Bree didn't look like Bree any more. The day before at school her hair had been in the usual top-knot, chestnut waves bound up and out of the way. Now it was short, cut to her chin, bouncing curls without the length to hold them down.

We'd always had long hair. She'd wanted to cut it for years but her mum wouldn't let her; whenever they fought, Bree would threaten to chop it off though she never did; even she wouldn't go that far. Until now. I felt a starburst of hurt that she'd do something so huge without telling me first, without us doing it together, even though it was stupid and we hadn't spoken for months. I felt like she should have told me, or warned me. Asked me if I thought it would suit her. It did suit her, and that hurt too.

And it never stopped hurting to see her in his arms. To see them without me.

Bree was in a long tartan coat, cinched tightly at her tiny waist, that flared as she spun, her wind-tanned skin glowing warm in the light from the bonfire. Next to her I'd always looked like a child; short, soft and round, milky skin, wheat-coloured hair. And Ali, holding her, tall and broad-shouldered, like a warrior prince. They looked like equals. They looked like they *belonged*.

It killed the kiss. It soured the honey.

The boy followed my gaze and said something, but I didn't hear his words over the roar of blood in my ears, like a thousand birds taking flight at once.

I wished her dead.

I wished for it with my whole heart. Because for a moment I'd forgotten about her and Ali and I'd been happy. But the second I saw them, all of the hurt and humiliation and anger came rushing back and I remembered everything.

How they must have spent weeks laughing together at what a gullible little idiot I was. How, when Ali took longer and longer to reply to my messages, I told Bree I thought something was wrong, and she said I was being paranoid. How when *she* started taking longer and longer to reply, she told me it was because I kept going on about Ali being weird, and she was bored of it. How they were probably together when I sent most of the messages, how they probably showed them to each other.

How I'd tried calling her all the way home after Ali broke up with me and she never answered, never replied, never once said sorry. How she sent her little brothers to my house to bring back the stuff I'd left at hers and collect the things she'd left here. She'd made a list: books, a cardigan she didn't even like, a set of pyjamas, three nail polishes, an almost-empty tube of hand cream, and, worst of all, Ali's big blue jumper that I'd had longer than he ever did. How she'd excised me from her life so neatly and I was here, months later, still clawing at myself to tear all the little bits of her out of me.

I hated her so much in that moment.

So I sent a cursed dart out from my mind, straight into her chest, and wished she'd drop fucking dead.

That she'd be dragged to the Underworld and left there to rot.

The boy spoke again.

'What?' I'd said, barely looking at him, too busy with my hate.

He didn't repeat himself, drawing me back into the dance, away from Bree and Ali, around the fire so it blocked them from view. But the magic was gone, and I'd smelled the fat and onions from the burger stand overpowering everything, could hear the guitar in the band was out of tune, see how stupid we all looked, most of us wearing jeans and bundled up against the weather, faces covered by cheap masks with feathers and sequins that fell off and were crushed into the mud. As if they might be enough to fool any gods that walked among us we were like them. As if we could be anything other than human.

There was no more kissing. The boy left me the moment the music ended, giving me a funny little bow before he disappeared into the crowd, like a character from a play, and I didn't blame him, because why would he have stayed? No one stayed with me. For me.

For a second, I was lost and alone, terrified Bree and Ali would notice, then I saw someone waving from by the barn and the relief when I realized it was Astrid almost knocked me down.

I dropped into the space Astrid made for me, my thigh pressed against hers, and took the bottle she offered. When I raised it to my mouth I could feel her lipstick,

greasy on the rim. The boy's lips had been cool and velvety. I ran my tongue over my own and tasted salt and honey.

Realizing no one else was wearing one, I pushed my mask back and Astrid leaned forward and took it, putting it on and grinning. Stained dark by the alcohol, her smile was a chasm. I shivered.

'Who was that?' Astrid leaned into me, sloppy and wine-friendly.

'Dunno.'

Astrid gave me a look, and I realized how stupid my answer was. There were just twelve hundred people on the Island and the only tourists here right now were a middle-aged couple staying at the B&B. I took a deep gulp of wine and tried to place him—he wasn't from school, I was sure of that. He could be from one of the other islands, gate-crashing our party, I supposed, instead of staying at his own. I wondered how I could find out.

Then I realized, with a sharp, almost-electric shock, that I wanted to know who he was because I wanted it to happen again. That at some point soon I was going to kiss someone—him—not just to prove something, but for real. And I didn't know what to think about that, because it sounded like healing and moving on and I wasn't ready yet. There had been no break-up rites and I wasn't done tending my garden of grudges.

'*They* were watching,' Astrid said, distracting me. 'Ali looked *furious* when you kissed him,' she continued.

'Ali can kiss my ass,' I replied, pleased at how calm I

sounded. I didn't feel it; I felt shipwrecked. 'What do you think of Bree's hair?' I asked, still cool, still casual. *As if I care*.

'It looks like a helmet. She looks like she's about to ask for the manager.'

'Right,' I laughed, even though we both knew it wasn't true.

Astrid prised the bottle from my fingers and brought it to her mouth, tilting her head back as she drank, exposing her throat to the night like a sacrifice. I looked up. It was cloudy; no stars glittered above us, no chance of catching the Orionids. No wishing on a star for me.

I wondered what Bree had thought when I kissed the boy. If she'd been shocked, or relieved. Maybe even a little proud. If she'd cared at all.

Hunter Kelley lurched to his feet, his eyes glazed and fixed on the distance as he staggered away, obviously willing himself not to puke until he was alone. He did this at every party—he couldn't take drink at all. I pulled out my phone and checked the time. Five to midnight. I wanted Bree and Ali to break up horribly and publicly. I wanted to go home. I wanted to find the boy. I wanted.

Lars and Manu started kissing noisily, and I remembered last year when Ali and I had snuck away from the festival, running down the lane hand in hand to his house, to make the most of it being empty. I looked around for him and Bree, but couldn't see them. *They've gone,* my traitor-brain whispered. *Probably at Ali's house,*

in Ali's bed, while you stay here, with your long, boring hair, drinking shit wine.

That's when Hunter screamed.

Astrid pulled me to my feet and we joined the crowd running towards the lake. People were yanking their masks off, frantically looking at everyone around them, searching for their people. You could see the relief as they realized the ones they loved were safe.

Everyone safe, but her.

The crowd parted for me, though no one remembered it like that afterwards. Thom Crofter told my dad he physically tried to stop me from approaching the shoreline, and Mr McKinnon said to Merry he ordered me to stay back. But a lot of people misremembered things on the Island. You couldn't really trust anything that happened here.

Bree was facedown in the lake, her brand-new hair like a halo around her head, flirting with the weeds at the edge. The tartan coat was gone; she was wearing a white dress, the kind of thing her mum was always buying her and she pretended she hated but she never wore anything else. It was bunched up around the tops of her thighs, and even though I hated her I wanted to get in the water and cover her up.

'Is he the one you love?'

'What?' I turned towards the voice.

'I said, look away, love,' Cally Martin said, trying to force me back. 'For gods' sake, child, don't look.' But I was made of stone, and even her strong hands couldn't make me stop staring at the girl in the water. *Bree.*

After we learned to swim, we used to play a game called Dead Man's Float. To win, all you had to do was keep your face in the water for the longest time. She always won. Always. And just when you started to panic that maybe this time something had actually gone wrong, she'd roll over and shout in triumph.

But she wasn't rolling over. People were crying and she wasn't rolling over. The water made her skin look green and mottled. She looked like a naiad. She'd like that. I'd tell her, if she rolled over.

I'd wished her dead. But I hadn't really meant it. It was just the heat of the moment. I'd just meant a little bit dead.

Not dead like this.

She wasn't rolling over.

'Where's Mick Dovemuir?' someone called for Bree's father.

'Where's young Alistair Murray?' someone else said.

'Bree?'

Ali appeared, walking unsteadily over to us all, a bottle of something dark and sticky-looking in his hand. His brown hair was tufted, cheeks reddened.

'Who screamed? What's going on?'

Ali dropped the bottle when he saw her floating in the lake. It didn't break, hitting the wet ground with a dull thud. He stared at Bree, frowning, and then he started to walk past me, into the water.

Mr McKinnon grabbed him then, and Ali lashed out, clocking him in the face, but Mr McKinnon didn't

let go, clinging to Ali as he screamed Bree's name over and over.

'Or did she break your heart?'

I whipped around again, and saw Manu being comforted by Lars. They were the only people nearby, and neither of them were close enough to have said it. Lars gave me a bleak smile, stroking Manu's neck, whose face was buried in Lars' faded lavender hair, and I paused, torn between pressing back into the mass for comfort of my own, and running far, far away.

The foghorn-boom of the Island police sergeant's voice cut across the night as he moved through the crowd, issuing instructions for everyone to keep back, and Merry had appeared by my side, gripping my arm. Then the sergeant was in the lake, pulling Bree's dress down, his back to us. I thought I saw his shoulders hitch once, but when he turned his expression was grimly professional.

'Go home. All of you,' he ordered. 'There's nothing more to be done here.'

His eyes fell on me, his expression full of pity, before he looked away, as the Island's sole other police officer appeared.

'Should I make a list of people here?' Declan Moretide—only three years older than me but somehow police—asked the sergeant.

'I know who's here.'

Which was true. It was the Thesmophoria. It was the Island. Everyone was there.

'Meredith, you should get Corey home,' Cally Martin told Merry, who'd nodded and tucked my arm into hers.

'Let's go home, pet. Come on, now.'

I'd let her guide me away, leaving my ex-best friend dead in the lake.