

Alula

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Abstract

The following is a novella which follows a character, Atlas, named for the famous Atlas who held the Earth above his shoulders by his great strength—but named not for that reason—named rather for that selfsame Atlas’s size, enormous by comparison to the Earth he held above him. Imagine a man of that size. Wherever could a man like that fit into the tiny Earth he held above him?

This is Atlas’s entire story in many ways. He is a man trapped—trapped in a world that is too small for him, trapped in himself and by himself, unable to escape his own perception of the cage which holds him and thus trapped in his very mind itself. As Atlas traverses his life and his relationships (or attempts to, to the best of his ability), he reveals himself to be a man who could never fit into this world. The tragedy of a man like that is Atlas’s story.

Within this novella is the story of Cain and Abel, gone somewhat astray, the story of love and loss, of loyalty and betrayal, of captivity and freedom, of life and death, and of a horse named “Alula.” But most of all, this novella is the story of the human condition gone wrong and the ultimate depths of the failing of self.

Introduction

This story is a strange one. Not so much in its content, certainly not in its form or execution, but most definitely in its writing—in the author’s journey from page one to conclusion. How much could a life change in the course of the writing of one fairly short narrative piece? More so than most (if any) could ever imagine. This story is special to me, then, for this reason (among a few others which will be mentioned shortly).

When I, the author, read this story from start to finish, I do not see the story unfold as it is written on the page. I see it unfold as it was written in this life. From page one to final page, as Atlas and Chance, Lola and Alula, are doing what they are doing (and what they will be forever doing as they are etched indelibly in ink, permanently on the page), I see a different page one and a different final page and different pages all in between. This story is not about me. The characters are not me. The situations are not mine. This is not an autobiography, nor was it ever intended to be one. That connection or lack thereof cannot be overstated. But for me, this work is a story of memories—memories of where each page was written, what each room looked like in the glow of the computer screen as words were being set to page, what latest piece of life had been torn off and thrown away bit by bit as page after page was birthed. And so, this piece constitutes a very odd journal of sorts, completely disconnected from its plot and characters—a book of memories that will always be invisible to the reader, disconnected from the story in every way but the time in which it was written. Our only connection, these characters and I, is at the final page, where Atlas sits, still, unmoving, to this day, and forever. We merge there, this

story and I, only at the very end, which may be why I am so glad that now, after more than a year of work, I will never need to revisit this story again.

And on the note of other reasons why this story is special to me (a note much higher and brighter than the last), is Loren Graham—a mentor, an inspiration, and a friend to whom I owe a great deal of gratitude for the work put into guiding and shaping this piece and, more so, the friendship given out so selflessly to a student who had not attended a class in more than fifteen years. Loren, to you I will always be grateful. In many ways, you gave writing back to me when it was on the brink of being lost, and in doing so, with no hyperbole, you gave back a part of me that may have been swallowed and lost to the way life goes. That part of me, which is writing, plays too big a role in my spirit, in my soul, to be eaten away and lost by any cause. For that I am eternally grateful.

All of which leads me to thank Carroll College as a whole, and in particular Cassie Hall, for allowing for the longest completion time for a thesis in Carroll College history to take place. Thank you, Cassie, for being there at the beginning of this journey and at its end. This piece would not be possible without you.

And finally, there would be no “Alula” without my wife, Mallory. In her is a heart filled with beauty that no author, no matter the height of genius, could ever find words adequate enough to put to paper—certainly not this author. Of that I am sure. She began this journey for me by way of the purity of that heart, and reached out to Cassie Hall to get a copy of my diploma from my graduating year of 2005 (little did she—and I for that matter—know that my degree was never conferred due to this little thing called a Senior Thesis not having been completed). Her motive? To plan a surprise graduation party that I never had all those years ago—a party

interrupted back in 2005 by family tragedy, loss and a ripple effect still felt to this day. And though that graduation party will, again due to tragedy, though different this time, be ever only a dream, graduation and the conferral of a degree will not. And so it is with a great thanks to my wife that I present this story in its completion, and for the completion of a college degree that unexpectedly and quite shockingly took nearly twenty years. I love you, Mallory, my wife forever.

I hope the reader finds some enjoyment in the story presented here or, if not enjoyment, some thanks perhaps that it is only a story. It is bleak. It is dark. It is hopeless and filled with terrors. For the reader I hope for a life nothing like Atlas's or Chance's or Lola's or Alula's, and I ask, boldly and perhaps most inappropriately, for the reader's prayers for anyone whose life might be. So if there is any constant in this story, it is suffering, and suffering, as most people above the age of, well, birth, are aware, is real. While Atlas and Chance and Lola and Alula will perhaps never find the end of their suffering, my prayer is that anyone out there who reads this story and shares their pain, might find the end of their own suffering. And soon.

And so with that, I present to you, "Alula."

DAY ONE

It was the coldest winter on record. Fifty-three degrees below zero, beating out the previous record by one degree, recorded in Old Forge in upstate New York in nineteen seventy-nine. Not far from there, tucked in a little hillside twenty miles north of Albany, was a little, black farmhouse with a crooked, sagging roof and a brick chimney off to one side reaching toward the drab and somber sky. The cold penetrated the single pane windows in the kitchen and clung to the tile squares on the floor and the backsplash and produced a frostbite-blue haze in the moonlight, and the old, bell-shaped crystal lanterns that housed the kitchen lights were tombs, lavished by the dark brought on by the storm. There was a small wooden table, white lace curtains, a farmhouse-style deep double basin sink in dark, hammered copper, a boxy, old General Electric refrigerator dead to the storm, walls in repainted white and adorned in crucifixes, old but lived in and charmed by years of life passed between these walls, all washed in blue and cold, and Atlas, sitting alone in the dark behind a bowl of cereal in good china. He was young still, thirty-five, with soft, brown doe eyes filled up with kindness and a full baby face that made him look twenty-something, like he'd never grow old. His long nose and close-shaved head was flanked by the largest ears allowed on a man, and a scar whitened by time across his

forehead from a bicycle accident when he was young gave him the appearance of a pet badger. Something about him gave off the impression of unconditional love—love like a dog would give—as if he would be your best friend forever in exchange for a little food and a rub on the belly. It certainly wasn't his size that gave that impression. He was six foot eight, hands the size of lunchboxes, shoulders wide and boxy, feet like flippers, and he towered over the bustling crowds as he strode through Midtown to work each day, fast on muscled legs. He could have been a linebacker or a power forward but he never took to sports. They were too loud, and competition never appealed to him anyway. He loved the silence of solitude and the warm blanket of himself that he could crawl into and just watch the world go by.

Atlas reached for the spoon, old silver, an enormous hand moving slow and heavy through the moonlight like water, and every movement was deliberate, as if it took too great an effort to move even one bit more or one bit quicker. The tiny, delicate spoon disappeared in his palm. All life had gone out from him, and whatever it was that was left would never stomach this or that or anything else, and on his face was a sadness so deep to the heart that its witnessing would call to mind an emotion that in human history would never be given a proper name but was known to all in the dark place that hides somewhere inside all men. A grandfather clock in the hall chimed twelve and Atlas rose from the kitchen table.

Atlas moved through the house as if dragged, good china bowl in hand, drowning silver spoon and all, resting his weighty hands on the dark, varnished banister and the antique sideboard in the hall, headed for the front entryway and the cold outside. His stomach was knotted and sick and empty, but it had been that way for such a time now that he might not have recognized any other feeling, except maybe in memory. As he reached the door, he could hear the

old farmhouse groan against the snow and wind. Icicles draped over the windows like razored lace valances, cusped and bared. He laid his hand on the heavy door and felt the wind draft beneath it. The chill was deep and dark, and his bones too might have groaned against the cold if they had not been numbed already by the pain. He set the bowl on the floor in front of the door and turned back to the staircase that swept upstairs in a large arc, up, up, up into the dark.

With the power out, the old farmhouse hid secrets in its corners. Phantasmagoric shades looped out from beneath closed doors and slid across long hallways and played at fear in the hours leading up to dawn, but Atlas knew well enough the corners and the hallways and the doorways of this house, and each year those same shadows called to mind less and the less the fears of a child and more and more the bright, vivid memories of his youth, playing in those same corners and hallways. Those summers were some of the best of his life, secluded and tucked in the fields and the forests, wrapped in the blanket of Upstate with Gram and Pops and Mom and, in the nights, late, after work and a long commute, Dad, who would rumble down the gravel driveway in his Road Runner, giving notice with his noise and his high beams that the farmhouse was off limits to the dark. Atlas reached the top of the staircase and for a moment thought those same shadows were sinister upon him. But the house was empty and lifeless, and the shadows stayed where they were, for now.

In the master bedroom, an old canopy bed was dressed in sheets and comforter and Gram's handmade quilt, the only one left in the house after the extended family had picked clean most everything else. In fact, the master bedroom was the only room not echoing with empty now that they had been gone a year. Atlas thought that room, which had given birth to love that rippled through the family, should remain as it was in their memory and had fought to keep the

last of the quilts where it belonged. He reached out for it with his huge underwater hand and laid a touch of love on the lion's face which had once been brought into existence by a hand that shared the selfsame blood as his, and his breath formed clouds of freezing vapor in the air above it.

He scooped up the quilt and the comforter and the sheets, laying bare the mattress beneath it, and swam downstairs in slow motion, carrying it all high on his left shoulder, sure to keep it from dragging on the ground. The blue light and the cold seemed to deepen as the night passed on into the darkest hours, and when Atlas reached the doorway at the bottom of the stairs, he picked up the good china and the cereal and the drowning silver spoon and opened the door to the cold outside. The night was black and starless, and deep snow drifts piled high against the farmhouse. Atlas stepped out into the cold and, even with his enormous legs, waded knee deep in frozen powder. Twenty feet off, where there would have been a driveway if not for the snow, a car was still running. Its trunk was popped open and its headlights sprayed yellow light toward an old, red barn in the distance. Dark grey gas flowed from the tailpipe and fought with the air and the snow for a moment before its heat gave way and it disappeared into the night sky. Atlas trudged past the car and painted his shadow in the crystal snow ahead of him as he neared the barn, balancing the blankets and the sloshing milk and round oats, which had by now formed tiny crystals and begun to freeze. He watched the sloshing carefully and slowed when the white waves began to crash against one another and threatened to spill over and disappear into the snow below.

The walk to the barn seemed to stretch out forever, the yellow beams from the headlights widening as they traveled and disappearing into the night so that the edges of the light formed

the faintest of corridors down which Atlas walked, careful of the blankets and the china all the way. The trees like bars of a living prison passed him by in silence down the darkening hall, a canopy of foliage above and the night beyond it, and only the wind dared make a sound as he passed. It too stood in silence when he reached the big barn doors and creaked them open just wide enough to slide inside.

Stacks of rectangular hay bales decorated the barn's interior. Saddles hung neatly from posts separating the horse stalls, and a ladder rose up to a second story loft where handmade furniture was set around a small area where Atlas's grandfather used to sneak away to smoke when he thought no one was looking. Atlas could still pick up the faintest scent of nicotine infused with hay and horse, though all but the hay had long since gone from this place. Atlas moved slowly to one of the stalls, this one with a small plaque that read "Alula," and retrieved a large, brass skeleton key from a hook on the post below the saddle. He picked up the blankets once again and turned and looked into the darkness of the barn, and his face swelled with heat against the cold. His throat tightened hard and his eyes dropped to the floor where a small keyhole was barely visible in a matting of hay inside Alula's stall. Atlas knelt and held there, blankets wrapped around his neck and shoulder, fine china in one hand and key in the other, for a long time, and then he placed the key in the shadowy hole, turned it, and opened the hatch.

A rush of shadow came up from the blackness below, mixed with air warmer than the frozen night. Swirling darkness billowed beneath the open hatch, and the silence thumped against Atlas's ears. The milk in the good china had crystalized around the oats now, and the sloshing had settled. The oats wobbled just a little, stuck in the milk mire as Atlas descended the ladder into the root cellar. His pupils widened, and the darkness came inside them, illuminating

the hatch in a dim black-grey where shadows made shapes instead of light and all of reality was defined by the shades. There was no sound down here, no beating of the heart or swirling of the blood, only the dark and the thumping of silence in its place. Atlas's loafers, soaked through from the snow, touched ground at the bottom of the ladder, six feet down. The ceiling was too low for him to stand up straight, and so he bent down low and entered further into the dark space before him. It was warmer down here, but still uncomfortable, and humid too. The walls disappeared without the light, giving the root cellar the appearance of infinite space: no boundaries, no edges, only forever. The ceiling was the only clue of a separation between one space and the other, with thick wooden beams framed every six inches and left over pieces of root from trees that had lived here long before the barn, twisted and scraggly, running through the exposed dirt between them, long ago cut off from their life source and left to remain here in this space forever. The floor sloped downward until Atlas could finally stand straight. He walked down and down until even the ceiling disappeared, and then he stopped.

Atlas stared out into the infinite, silent, alone, peering out into the abyss, the nothing, until, slowly, as if coming forth before him, a shape appeared. A tube, like a snake, long and lean, traveling from floor to ceiling—a copper pipe. A bit of brick wall behind it. A large rectangle, hairy-looking, monstrous and spiky—a hay bale. Then a chain, running from the pipe along the floor, past the hay bale and wrapped around the figure of a man. He lay on the ground against the hay asleep. A black rag was wrapped around his mouth, tight to the corners, and his legs were chained together and to the pipe behind him. Atlas set the comforter and the lion quilt on the ground beside the hay bale. He reached out with the frozen bowl, intending to place it on the ground next to the figure, but he froze, arm outstretched and, for the first time all night, began to

shake. He could feel his face redden in the darkness, and his eyes filled in a fraction of a moment until they could no longer hold the deluge back. Silent tears burst from his soft brown eyes and streamed down his blotchy red face, and the image of the figure chained on the ground before him was fogged and magnified by the salty lens, wavy and shifting as the tears fell hard to the ground below. Atlas's teeth clenched so hard they might have cracked and he let out a howl his voice alone could not have made, and his soul screamed and growled in an unending stream of pain and rage. The fine china bowl shook so violently in his hand that the frozen milk and oats sloshed out as if in a mixer possessed, and with eyes in slits of anger, he hurled the bowl against the cellar wall and hunched his body down and over the figure who had now awoken from slumber. The bowl evaporated into dust, and Atlas growled above the figure, every muscle fiber bursting against himself, as if to hold himself back from the stranger and to hurl himself toward him all at once. The figure's eyes flashed at him in the dark, but Atlas had turned already and was up the ladder and into the barn before another move could be made. He slammed the hatch door closed and locked it with the key.

Outside the snow and the wind had stopped, and the moon had begun its slow climb into the tree line, tucking itself away behind the aging oaks and pine.

DAY TWO

The creature in the storm cellar woke to the start of an engine outside. Atlas could feel it, knew it was stirring in the ground beneath his feet, beneath the snow, beneath the dead grass below it, beneath the rock substrate, down deep in the earth and fifty yards ahead, buried in the cave below the barn. He turned his mind from it.

Snow had fallen in sheets during the short night and the car was entombed now in a mound of pristine, crystalized white, iced over and hard, like the shell of a tortoise or a cockle. The soft interior, having been cracked open at the driver's side door, had lost all its heat and the cold inside, ubiquitous and omniscient, clung to the leather seats and stung through Atlas's overcoat, drawing out his own heat from the skin and breath, drawing *him* out in tiny pieces, one warm bead at a time, matching him to the cold, dead, cut-open carcass of the sedan's interior. He wiped at the windshield with a sleeve, fighting against the fog that he himself had created, but it was the life from his own body that would keep the glass enshrouded forever. He blasted air at the windshield from the vents beneath it and got out of the car.

The sheets of ice and snow, six inches thick, cracked and screamed as Atlas laid his enormous bare hands on their sides and pushed, hard, sliding them in one or two unbroken layers off the hood and the roof and the trunk and onto the ground below. The driveway, just rock and

pebble beneath the snow, would need to be shoveled out for there to be any chance of escape this morning. There was an old rusty shovel in the barn, hanging just inside the doors, and it would have to do.

Atlas looked out at the barn from behind the car. The tailpipe's constant stream was the only source of heat for miles, the only source maybe anywhere, Atlas thought, and it smelled of sulfur and rotten eggs. At the tree line, ravens cawed and flew up and out, deeper into the forest. The sky was grey, and it hid the sun somewhere beneath its heavy blanket and behind the evergreens and the darkness that clung to the forest deep past the clearing. *Five thirty a.m. or six maybe*, Atlas thought. The city was a two hour drive, and shoveling out the driveway would take another thirty minutes. He could do it. But the barn. The barn looked back out at Atlas as he looked out at it—old, grey boards nailed together with aging, rusted nails, tall and proud—beautiful once, but no more. It had a face this morning. A scowl. A mouth made out of ten foot doors and a cyclopean eye beneath the peak of the grey roof—a small window with red paint peeling from the frame in faded flakes.

Atlas stood statuesque by the trunk of the car, and the wind picked up, but even it, in gusts, would not have moved a hair on his head. His eyes fixated on the barn. On its face. He had never seen it before, though he had gazed on this same view from the tall grass off the house's side porch for hours during the summers of his youth, lying on the cool earth, letting time slip away forever without even a thought as only the young can do. How was it that in only one night, a life could change so much? And a short night at that. The barn glared at him and at his thoughts, and he took his eyes off of it and down to his feet, planted, rooted, deep in the snow, unmoving. The smell of the exhaust was sickening now and Atlas wrenched himself—uprooted

himself—from the earth and headed for the driver’s side door. There would be no shovel this morning. There would be no barn. There would be no face.

He lurched inside the car, his enormous body rocking its frozen carcass and kicking off some of the leftover dusty snow from the roof and the hood. It was no warmer inside now than it was moments ago, though those moments somehow felt like hours to Atlas, the feeling of it washing over him all at once, like storm water raging down a gully. A kind of panic pulled up from inside him somewhere deep, and it was frightening. Fogged in and trapped inside this frozen body, too big for it, crunched small to fit, head tilted forward against its upper limits, pushing at the soft fabric that hid beyond its impenetrable boundaries, his legs too long, pulled up tight against his pelvis, punching at the pedals, and his hands, paw-like, swatting at the steering wheel and wrapping around it, as if it were a beating heart, clutching at it, trying to hold it in place, thinking it might beat one time too many and be gone to dust, leaving no way to control this frozen body—leaving only some kind of heartless, dead creature trapped inside itself, looking out through the slowly fading fog at the face in the barn, born in the night and never to avert its gaze.

Atlas drove his huge, soaked loafers into the pedals and shifted into reverse. He could see the barn now more and more as the fog cleared and the cabin warmed, and the car squealed and whistled as the tires churned at the snow but in a moment caught at something hard and launched backward and down the driveway toward the road, bucking and reeling, trounced by the ice beneath it and at its sides. Thrown side to side and against the boundaries of the inside of this frozen beast come to life, Atlas stayed locked on the barn, on the face, as the car bounced out over an embankment and onto the plowed road behind it. He had never felt a panic like this

before. He had never felt anything like this before. As Atlas shifted the car into drive and took off down the road, away from the house, away from the barn, away from the property intertwined in love and memories with his youth, he clutched hard at the beating wheel and felt the panic, not subsiding now, but rising up faster and faster, up through his neck and his cheeks and flooding his mind all at once, drowning him, until he knew in an instant something brand new: that there was a place inside him he had not known existed until only in this very moment, an empty cavern or a cave, a physical place deep somewhere inside his body, and that in this place was born this fear, this panic, this emptiness which now took him over and threatened every part of him all at once. How could one have places unknown to one's own self living and occupying space within one's own body, Atlas thought. *This body is mine. These are the spaces only I know and they are mine alone. Intimately mine and no one else's. How then does this place exist? And what lives inside its empty hole that I feel now crawling up through the whole of myself, choking my heart and emptying my chest of air and spirit?*

The fog had cleared from the windshield now and Atlas's beige sedan kicked up mud and rock as it sped down the rural upstate roads. The farm was long gone from sight, and the clock on the dashboard read six a.m. He would make it into the city with time, even if traffic was bad. The panic began to fade but in its place an image appeared and stuck in his mind, hard and secure: the plaque inside the barn, sitting now above the cursed creature chained deep underground—the plaque that read “Alula,” carved in wood by Atlas himself as a young boy from an oak that had died years go and fallen into the backwoods behind the barn. The plaque that read “Alula” took over the whole of his mind and he could see only it though it no longer hung above the stall where it belonged, for it had fallen into the pit, and the dark figure locked in the root cellar

caressed it gently against his featureless face, shrouded in shadow, and he kept it with him at all times, taking great pleasure in disgracing it, wounding it and making it entirely his own. And this is the image Atlas would live with now and for the rest of his life: the figure locked below and the plaque that read “Alula,” and the monster’s defecation running down its carved letters and into the grain of the old oak’s wood, staining it over and over and over again for all eternity.

Alula.

Atlas opened the front double doors to the 66th precinct as if he was coming home. The officer at the front desk, called Moody, looked up as the door shut behind Atlas with a thud and a look of exasperation came over his squinty face. Moody looked over the top of his thick glasses and let out a sigh that was a little too loud to be polite.

“Mr. Johnson.” Moody scowled a little as the words came out.

“Officer Moody.” Atlas replied. The scowl intensified. “Is Martin in?”

Moody rocked back and forth in his chair behind the bullet proof glass. He placed his pen down purposefully and let out another sigh.

“Look, Mr. Johnson,” Moody adjusted his spectacles and set his gaze on Atlas. His big bug eyes were set too far apart and, magnified behind the glasses, gave him the look of a goldfish swaying around in a plastic bag. “The detective is extraordinarily busy this morning. You can’t keep coming around here like this.”

“I’d like to speak with him when he becomes available,” Atlas said. “I can wait.”

“Yes, I know you can,” Moody said a bit under his breath. “Take a seat.”

Atlas sat on the wooden bench he'd sat at three times a week for the last month and waited. He never brought a book or a newspaper or a crossword puzzle or a distraction of any kind, though he'd often sit and wait most of the day before the detective would see him, if at all. He just sat and waited and replayed the images over and over again in his mind, waiting until he could see them again.

"I don't mean to be a bother," Atlas said softly, as he had said every day since the first a month ago.

Moody softened, if only a little, and a look of pity washed over him. He nodded at Atlas and picked up his pen again, returning to whatever it was he was doing before Atlas walked in.

Hours passed and Atlas watched the station come to life as the morning became afternoon and people, people of every kind and sort, came through the big double doors and back behind the bullet proof glass, some detectives, some uniformed officers, some in handcuffs, some dragged kicking and screaming and spitting, some crying, fathers with their children, mothers, homeless and destitute.

At last, near five, a man appeared behind the glass and came through the door at the side. Diminutive and frail looking, the detective wore an overcoat that was a size too large and it looked like it was trying to swallow him up as he came into the waiting area and approached Atlas with his hand outstretched.

"Atlas, how are you," he said, nasally and in a bit of a shout.

How are you? It had become an impossible enigma, a question Atlas had come to loathe. He'd never realized before all of this how often these words were exchanged—at the grocery

store, the gas station, restaurants and on the phone. *How are you? How are you? HOW ARE YOU?* He hated it. Despised it. *How do you even answer a question like that, he thought.*

“How are you?” Atlas said. This had become as acceptable a response as any he could think of, and most people seemed to let it flow right by.

“It’s been busy, Atlas. It’s been busy. I do apologize for the wait, and I wish I could have come out to see you earlier, especially that there really isn’t anything new to discuss, I’m sorry to say.”

“I see,” Atlas said. “Nothing?”

The detective sat down next to Atlas and looked at him tenderly. His feet barely touched the ground and swayed a little on his toes as he reached a hand out and placed it on Atlas’s shoulder.

“Listen, Atlas. Like I told you before, I’m going to keep a keen eye out for anything that comes up. I promise you that. I do. I really do. But—” his voice trailed off and he broke his gaze. “This is a closed case. The chances of anything new coming up are, well, they’re just, they’re not very good. It’s pretty clear what happened. I hate to say this to you again, Atlas, I do. I really do. I hate to say it. It’s just that it’s pretty clear what happened here, and there really isn’t likely to be anything new. I’m going to keep a keen eye out for anything though. I promise you that. I do. I really do. If anything—“

“Can I see them. Please,” Atlas interrupted.

The detective looked down at his feet swinging back and forth, toes scraping the tile floor gently.

“Please, Martin,” Atlas said softly.

There was a long pause and the detective's feet stopped swinging.

"Come on back," he said. "I'll take you."

They got up together, Atlas towering over everything and Detective Martin Powell disappearing beneath his overcoat, and headed into the station.

The room was filled with two dozen police officers's desks, all of them grouped in twos, facing each other. The walls were taupe, and the paint and the desks were old. The clear winter light from the City came in through a series of small, square windows that looked out on an alley on the south side and mixed with the rays from the green fluorescent tubes that hung from the popcorn ceiling. It turned the room an old color, like the paint and the desks. Detective Powell's desk stood out in in the center of the room, a complete mess with papers stacked and scattered haphazardly about. A photo of his wife and kids in a silver frame sat cockeyed on a pile of papers. They looked happy, Atlas always thought. Happy.

Detective Powell took a set of keys from his trouser pocket and unlocked the bottom desk drawer. The bottom desk drawer. That was where she stayed now, a few inches above the dirty floor, locked up in the dark in a tiny old tin box. Atlas could see over the detective as he pulled the drawer open. A photo was placed there neatly, carefully, solitary, alone, laying on the green-painted wood of the drawer bottom, just big enough to fit inside it.. Detective Powell took it gently and handed it over to Atlas, hesitantly, almost painfully.

Atlas leaned down over it and looked at it—into it—a young lady in a yellow sun dress shoved between two dumpsters in an alley, her arms resting up high like the wings of a seagull,

her body sunken into trash and broken glass and then, at once, the borders of the photo disappeared behind his eyes and the horrible portal opened up for the first time in his life. He was in that alley. He was in it now. The woman's slim body was twisted wrong from the waist down, some of the weight held up by her arms wrapped over the nubs of the dumpsters where the truck would have forked the containers up and over and dumped the trash into its belly with the loose slamming sound of metal arms at four in the morning on a cold New York day. He could smell the cold on the metal dumpsters and the damp air and old newspapers soaked in melted snow like dish rags laid on the ground to mop up the filth. He could see the blood flung up and over the sides of the blue dumpster walls. They were dainty, thin lines, but they had power in them. He traced them back far from where they ended their lives—one inside the corrugation of the black plastic dumpster lid, another off to the side, arcing against the blue side wall, another straight up like a fountain—back down to the beautiful body, to her slim, frail arms, where a hypodermic needle teetered from the skin, threatening to pull itself out and run off and hide.

The body was the most beautiful thing Atlas had ever seen. He tried to see her face but the face was wrong. It was the face of a body. It had the eyes of a body. The mouth of a body. The lips of a body. The cheek bones and the eyelashes and the eyebrows—the beautiful eyebrows—no, not beautiful, just present, just there, just existing, altogether existing and altogether gone, on the face of a body. And so he saw something else as he stared down into the moment—nothing. Not a sheet of black behind his eyes or a swirling cloud of darkness but nothing at all, as if his eyes had lost their purpose altogether. Had they? He wondered as he realized the nothingness creeping across him.

“Atlas.” Detective Powell looked up at him. He could see the agony etching into Atlas’s face in front of his eyes and his eyes well up and his skin flush. “Atlas, why do you do this...” but his voice trailed off in a deep echo inside Atlas’s mind as the panic space from the drive this morning welled up inside him, this time with no warning at all. It swept over him and caught him up like the waters of a tsunami raging past the shore. Twigs and glass and palms ripped across his face and his eyes filled with the water of the sea and mixed with blood running down his face. His enormous body shook as he was dragged away from the detective’s desk and the photos and his life. His hulking shoulders shuddered up and down inside his brown suit jacket and he thought to protect his chest and so he clung to it, grasping at it, squeezing, and he thought of exposing his wrists to the storm, but only for a moment. He sat in silence at the old, green desk as the last of the quaking of his mountainous shoulders subsided. He patted away the ocean from his face with a quick and gentle dab from his sleeve, seamlessly and quietly, and no one at all noticed him. Inside his shirt and his jacket a crucifix had come loose from the shuddering and fallen out over his shirt as he leaned over the desk. The feet of Christ dangled over the woman in the yellow sun dress and the blood and the dumpsters and the ravage.

Atlas cradled the photo gently, his giant bear hands still shaking lightly but enough to make the photo dance across his palms, and he quickly, and gently, laid it to rest again back in the bottom drawer of the detective’s desk, so slowly that the moment may as well have lasted forever.

“Thank you,” he said, unsure if the detective was still speaking or not. He tried to wipe his eyes discreetly. A grown man, towering over the world, strong and powerful, weeping in a room full of bulls and bears.

“Atlas?”

“Yes.”

“Can I give you a lift home?”

“Home?” Atlas said as if the word were foreign. *Home.*

“Come on. I’ll take you home.”

The two walked out together, dwarf and giant, back through the side door behind the bullet proof glass and out the big double doors of the waiting room and into the cold New York City afternoon.

Apartment Three was in the middle of a long, narrow hallway in a complex built in the early eighties. The hallway smelled of something stale, like a wet glue smell, that seemed to come from the maroon carpet or maybe from the blue pinstripe wallpaper that peeled every so often at the seams between the sections. Detective Powell had dropped him outside the building and Atlas had walked in alone, but he couldn’t quite remember how he got from the car to the apartment door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys and stared at the doorknob for a moment before placing the one brass key into the doorknob notch by notch. He’d lived here for six years now, thousands upon thousands of times opening this same door, walking into this same living room, sleeping in this same bedroom, cooking in this same kitchen, every day and every night for the last six years, except last night, at the farmhouse, the first time in all that time that he hadn’t come home to Apartment Three. And now, when he opened the door, it was as if he hadn’t seen his home in a hundred years.

Atlas's pupils dilated, adjusting to the dark in the room as he stood in the threshold and looked inside at his life laid out for him in a display like a museum. The place was small, just big enough for a working professional, one who didn't spend much time at home, or, if they were really in love, a young couple who could navigate a tiny kitchen with electric burners and a bathroom where the toilet touched the outside wall of the shower. A worn, black leather couch owned the living room space atop an old, red and gold Turkish rug with tassels. Atlas must have left the lamps on when he had rushed out two days ago. Their light cast long, stretched rectangular shadows like old fashioned caskets across the room and left the rest of the place in only a dim, cloudy light. The room was tidy, almost untouched, and the air tasted stale as if it had been sealed inside for too long.

Home.

Atlas lifted his foot from the ground to step inside but it was heavy, weighed down by something unseen, and when he looked at it, though he felt his muscles stretch and pull, it hadn't really moved at all, and the threshold stood before him no closer now than when he had opened the door to begin with. His loafers were still wet from the morning in front of the barn, though they dried in bits, stains on the leather, like patches of a Rorschach test. His socks were still soaked through but the snow-turned-water was warm now from his heat and mixed with sweat. They stuck to his toes and tried to worm in between them and sucked at his skin when he walked or shifted his weight. He would lift his enormous, wet foot and step over the threshold as he had for the first time six years ago, when the apartment was empty and new to him, as he had done when he had come home from work every day after that, as he had done when he had carried his bride home for the first time, smiling and laughing two years later, her golden hair so long it fell

to the ground and swept over the entryway as they came inside, as he had done afterward, when she was gone, and after that when she was gone forever. He would step over it again now, this time carrying the man in the storm cellar with him over the threshold. Over the threshold and into his home. Their home.

He would walk inside and he would sit at the couch that she had picked out, though it was too big for the room and looked silly and out of place, which made him love it all the more, and turn on the television and watch something—it didn't matter what—like they always did, until they didn't, and the empty spot where she sat would stay empty as it had for the last year, and he would eat dinner, as they had together at the high bar countertop—spaghetti or galumpkis—like they always did, until they didn't, and the empty spot where she sat would stay empty as it had for the last year, and he would go to bed in their bed, where he stayed on his same side as he had done for the last year, alone, afraid to touch her space, afraid that it would prove she wasn't there, and he would go to sleep and wake up the next day and begin again.

And as he lifted his enormous foot into the air, this time for real, and felt the wetness between his toes and his foot locked inside the shrinking leather loafer, he saw the man in the root cellar sitting on the couch beside him, in her seat, watching television with him, and then at the high bar countertop, in her chair, eating with him, and then in her spot—no, not there—never there. No. No one would touch these places, not even Atlas, who hadn't—not once in the last year—for these places were hers, just as she had left them, and if they were touched, they would lose a piece of her each time—if a hand was laid on a picture frame or a pillow or a table, it would no longer have been touched last by her, and when he looked at it he would know it, that her print was no longer the last, that her touch was no longer the last. He would not allow it. Not

from a stranger, not from a guest, not from anyone. And most certainly not from the demon in the root cellar.

Atlas dropped his foot back to the floor and grabbed the door. He stepped back, away from this place, and swung the door closed, setting his eyes one last time on the dimly lit museum, on the too big couch and the Turkish rug and the high bar countertop and the side tables and lastly, as the door shut before him, the framed photo on the wall in the entryway—Atlas at a boatyard somewhere at the Cape, smiling in the sun, his buck teeth white and exposed and his arm around a beautiful girl in a yellow sun dress.

DAY THREE

The plaque that read “Alula” was indeed still hanging on the post in front of the empty stall where it had always hung, and when Atlas ran his hand across the rough oak he knew that it was, in fact, real. Beneath his feet, however, he had become less sure. As he stood there, looking at the latch to the root cellar and the padlock around the iron ring, he questioned for the first time his very self and whether or not he could trust this person he had come to know so intimately as Atlas James Johnson the second.

The barn had been built in 1890 by Atlas’s great, great grandfather, whom they called Alfus, a nickname born of a story lost to time and death, but the root cellar had been put in later, by Atlas’s grandfather, Gerald, a man of great integrity and a hard worker, who had died from lung cancer, likely given to him as a gift from his thirty five years flying over fields spraying pesticides onto neighbor’s sprawling, aching fields. It was Gerald who had suggested that the farm and everything on it, barn included, be left solely to Atlas when he died. His wife, Sophie, who would have agreed to anything Gerald said, agreed to this as well. Together they most likely thought that Atlas, who loved this place as a child, would raise a family here someday too, as they had done before him. Even afterward, after Sophie had passed and Gerald had learned of the

Incident, he would have kept that beautiful thought alive in the spirit of this farmhouse, Atlas thought—a memory of what could have been.

Atlas looked down at the padlock and the iron ring and saw those memories, all of them, all at once, filled with color and light and a young child running through the tall grass behind the farmhouse, yanking on a kite held high in the wind while he watched, his hand intertwined with hers, her yellow sun dress brighter than the sun itself on the side porch on a perfect summer day. He stood there with his mind breaking and saw all the variations of all the possibilities of that moment split ahead in time, all that could be, all that could have been, and he shut it off at once with a sheet of black across his mind. It would be too much to bear. To think it would be to stain it with reality. And this was reality. The water jug in Atlas's left hand, shaking now, the shovel from just inside the barn doors in the other hand, the barn and the root cellar below his feet. The thing locked inside it. And Atlas himself. Here. Now. It would have been almost three full days now since the thing down there had anything to eat or drink. It would die soon unless he intervened, if it even could die. Of that Atlas was still unsure.

The padlock cracked open, its snap echoing through the rafters as Atlas lifted the hatch and stared down into the darkness again. A sound, like a flutter of wings. From inside the dark. No. Ravens in the rafters, disturbed by the crack of the padlock and the thud of the hatch door let to fall open. The ravens cawed out and settled again up by where Grandpa Gerald would sneak a smoke, up in the loft with the hay bales laid out as couches and chairs. The darkness down below swirled. The rustle of something down there. Still a bit like the flutter of wings. The ravens had settled and were preening on Grandpa's hay bale couch. Atlas gripped the shovel tight and lost his right foot to the darkness as he stepped into the hole. Then his left. Then his ankles, his shins,

his torso, his head, entering the shadows as if wading into a pond at nighttime. He gripped the shovel tight and saw nothing but darkness ahead. It swirled and entered Atlas's eyes, blowing open his pupils, blackening his eyes, leaving only a tiny outer rim of soft brown and tiny filaments of tan and yellow, like vibrating strings, made small and crunched and pushed back by the big bang of blackness. Out of the darkness and the thunderous silence, at last, a voice:

“Atlas? Is that you?”

A gasp of warm, stagnant air filled Atlas's lungs, like air from an old tomb being opened, the long-sealed spirit of the place rushing out to find freedom, or death, or to possess again a new tomb of its own choosing. Atlas breathed deep into the swirling darkness and could sense the presence in front of him, but the dark was still too overwhelming. He placed the jug of water in front of his foot and began to push it further into the cellar, sliding it across the ground inch by inch. The shovel he gripped tightly at his side, and his heart began to beat in his ears, overwhelming him, like a drummer at the attack on the stretched canvas of his eardrums, pounding and pounding, waves of blood unrelenting against the shoreline. This moment, this exact moment, he had seen in his dreams. He had willed it in his dreams as he fell asleep each night, bringing each detail into the dim light of his mind one by one. So much had it occupied these hours of the night that it became like a lullaby without which he would never have fallen asleep. And then, in sleep, his mind could wander wildly, and he was no longer responsible for what things might come forth out of the darkness and into that dim light of his slumbering mind.

His movements were all at once. He was an athlete, caged on the sidelines game after game, never allowed to play, only to watch, helpless at the score or the plays or the outcome. He had sat on the bench in full gear his whole life, chained by himself, knowing what he could do on

the field or the ring or on the streets, and knowing—just knowing—that was the very reason why he remained in captivity, the only guard himself, himself the only prisoner in a cell of his own making, and his enormous hands shook with the thought of freedom. He crossed the darkness like a wave, with speed and precision, with destination, and an elegance that defied his hulking power, the chains of a life of holding back for fear of his own power fell to the ground around him, and he was upon the creature in an instance. The shovel had already plunged through the creature's neck and severed the head from the body. And just as Atlas's enormous foot came down upon the severed head, the darkness whisked away like fog in a breeze and the creature's face, eyes wide in horror, still alive for but a brief second it was clear, the brain dying in an instant sliced into smaller instances, just enough to see Atlas standing above him, Atlas could see his brother as he truly was. Horror. Pure horror. Though as Atlas stomped his brother's face into the root cellar floor, confusion flooded him. The horror was not from his brother's soul. The dying eyes held horror from the outside, not from within, a reflection in his eyes of Atlas's boot collapsing his face into nothing. But the thought could not stop him. And Atlas let out a sound like a wounded animal, and he stomped and he stomped and he stomped. All his brother's features, identical in every way to Atlas's, pounded into mounds of broken skull and flesh, and the darkness swirled back around it until everything disappeared again.

This was only one of Atlas's many fantasies—images he had seen in his mind so many times now that they had become a part of him. But as he sat in the darkness of the root cellar, he placed the shovel gently on the hard ground and instead kicked the water jug down further into the abyss and heard his brother open it and begin to drink. Breathing out the stale air, he wrapped his huge arms around himself, swaying back and forth on the cold ground. His blackened eyes

filled with rainwater and the only sound of his sorrow was the raindrops falling on the ground and the soft shudder of his shoulders rubbing against his overcoat as he shook in silence. He stood and turned his back to his brother, heading for the stairs.

“Wait,” his brother called out. His voice was parched and soft and difficult to hear, his voice the same as Atlas’s except dry and unused for days.

Atlas stopped. He cocked his head so his huge badger ear locked in on the sound.

Silence.

Atlas found the stairs, climbed them and reached the top. The trap door squealed as he lifted it up and pierced the silence. The ravens on Grandpa’s perch fluttered up into the rafters and Atlas dropped the door from his massive hand.

As it dropped, out of the darkness, Atlas thought he heard one last call.

“I’m sorry.”

The door thudded to the ground, and Atlas paused, wondering. He had left the shovel in the dark, he thought. He’d have to get it tomorrow if it snowed again and it seemed to snow every day now, blankets of it, just covering everything in a thick shell that froze over every night and locked the world down tight and maybe forever.

That night Atlas dreamt about Alula. It was one of the summers of his youth—the one summer that he had become obsessed with the idea of becoming a priest and went around the farmhouse blessing the doorways and the forks and the lampshades in perfect Latin—*In nomine Patris et fillii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*—as he waved his hands in the air in the shape of the cross. They had a dog back then whom they named David but who would later only ever be called “Sparky” after he chewed through the wiring of Mother’s hair dryer that had fallen off the

countertop and had, apparently, looked like a Twizzler or a rawhide to a puppy's eyes. Sparky was the only thing in the house Atlas couldn't bless, though he tried, exhaustively, running around (*In nomine Patris et filii et...*) while the dog took off running down the stairs or out the back porch or round and round the kitchen table.

That summer, while Atlas was blessing the farm, Atlas's grandfather had begun a project inside the barn. It was a secret project, one that the family was expressly forbidden from having any knowledge of and, as such, Atlas's grandfather would padlock the barn doors each night so no one could sneak in which, of course, didn't stop Atlas from trying to peer through the gaps in the siding to see what his grandfather was up to.

As it was, he was building a stall for a beautiful foal who was on her way by trailer from Colorado as the stall was being built. There was a special brightness in Grandpa's eyes that whole summer, preparing, building, getting ready, and holding his family in suspense over what was to come. And when she did finally come, led out of a silver trailer hitched to an old Chevy Silverado all the way from out West with the family gathered around outside in happy shock at the living, breathing horse stumbling about, Atlas blessed her and named her Alula before anyone could catch their first breath. And Alula stood still as stone for her blessing. *In nomine Patris et filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*

It was a beautiful summer in every way, and Atlas would never forget Alula prancing around the fields in the summer sun like a ballerina dancing in the tall grass back behind the barn. She would wander by the fences over by the road and at the property line by the forest from the very first day on the farm. Atlas thought she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, until, one week after her arrival, everything changed.

Atlas was accompanying his grandfather to the feed store where he would learn how to care for Alula—all the responsibilities a young child should be made aware of, according to Grandpa. Left alone at the counter while Grandpa and the store owner went out to load hay bales, Atlas, quietly blessing bags of grain and ride-on tractors, was met by an unassuming little girl, seven or eight, who popped out from behind the counter like a jackrabbit and climbed up to the top of the pile of grain bags just quick enough to catch the end of a blessing.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was curt and flat, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Atlas still had his hand raised, flat and upright like a karate chop, mid prayer. He turned around and dropped it to his side at the sight of her. She looked like a tiny little empress scouting out over her land from a hilltop made of grain feed, and the look on her face was one as if she was about to call upon her army and they would appear, racing up the hillside to her aid at once. But instead of calling an army to her aid, she smiled and giggled just a little and hopped down from the grain pile and ran over to little Atlas, nearly tackling him to the ground with the biggest hug a tiny child could ever give.

“I’m Lola,” she said.

And Atlas fell in love.

By the time Atlas got home, he had stopped blessing everything in sight, and he had decided that he and Lola would be married. Probably later that summer. It was the most beautiful summer ever, after all. And he would give Alula to Lola as a wedding present because he didn’t have any money for a ring, and they would live at the farmhouse forever until they were old like

Grandpa and Grandma, and they would watch Alula run around the farm in an endless summer that would be their lives together.

That was the day that Atlas dreamt of, while the snow buried the farmhouse around him in the night, though in his dream it was his brother there at the feed store, not Atlas, and Atlas had to watch from behind the large storefront window which had iron bars behind it across the whole of its face. Atlas saw the day that changed his life forever from outside himself, unfolding exactly as it had all those years ago, with every detail intact—every detail except him.

It was his twin brother that nearly fell over at that great embrace and lost his heart to this little girl at very first sight, not Atlas. It was his brother that had blessed the feed bags and the tractors and the store, not Atlas, only, the words were different, and Atlas couldn't quite make them out as he pressed his face against the glass and his ears perked to listen. Yes, there was something terribly wrong with the words. It was the cadence, the flow, the tenor. A panic welled up in little Atlas as he tried to listen to his brother's words but he was too far away and the words were whispered, deep and dark. A raven landed hard on a car behind Atlas and startled him away from the store. He looked back at it and heard its black wings flutter and flash open into full display, and it froze there for a moment that seemed like forever. And in a moment it was gone, out into the air alone, and when Atlas turned back around, the store too was gone, only a field in its place and far, far away, a horse running across the fence line, bucking and neighing, trying desperately to get away.

SIX HUNDRED AND SIXTY DAYS EARLIER

Atlas drove. The traffic in the city threatened to box him in and hold him back forever, blocking him at every light, every turn, every crosswalk, and the city skyline towering above him seemed to close in on him the closer he got to the edge of the city, slowing him, clutching onto him, pulling at him, until he finally broke free. He drove west, the tan Chevy flying now through Pennsylvania and on into Ohio. He drove with no destination, following the graphite trails from Interstate to Interstate, on into Indiana and Illinois. For hours upon hours he drove, the roads glossy and wet, though there was no rain, and the days turned into nights and the nights turned into days, and Atlas drove.

He had forgotten about sleep and food or, perhaps, he didn't need them anymore. It was the road that pulled him on now, and maybe it would be endless, and Atlas would drive forever, his enormous hands wrapped around the broken leather steering wheel, his head crunched up against the grey cloth roof, staring out at a destination that would never come. But it did come, finally, when the tan Chevy had decided that they had arrived, and its old and tired engine coughed and breathed its last breath and rolled to a stop just as the ocean came into view on the horizon, lit up by the dying sun as nightfall came upon them.

Atlas took a pistol from the glove box and placed it in a pocket in his tweed sport coat. He could see the Santa Monica Pier in the distance as he pushed the Chevy into the parking lot of a small art store and so, deciding without thinking, he went there next, out to the pier, chasing the setting sun which dipped now into the lapping waves at the edge of the world.

It was night by the time he set foot on the worn wooden planks of the pier, but the night had lit up in neon lights and called a crowd from out of the dark to laugh and play and buy hot dogs and slices of pizza and hold hands and to live, and so Atlas turned from it all, into the dark sand and into the dark spaces beyond the neon lights further down onto the beach. And so he walked. Miles and miles he walked. Behind him, the lights faded away and the darkness wrapped about him, and his singular trail of footprints became swept up by the rising tide and washed away forever.

Alone now in the dark beside the sea, Atlas stopped at last and sat facing out at the lapping waves. He could keep going, he thought, if only he had a boat. He could sail west across the Pacific and just keep going. But he knew eventually he would find land again—Asia, then the Middle East, then Africa or Europe and then the sea again and beyond that there would be nowhere left to go and he would see the City skyline in the distance, and then he would know that no matter how far he went, he could never escape.

Sitting there now, in the dark, he pulled the small pistol from his jacket pocket and cradled it in his lap between his chest and his knees pulled up close to him. It was cold now, and a breeze from the ocean chilled the night. He could smell the grease and metal of the pistol in his lap as it soaked up the chill and froze his fingers, tightening the skin and numbing them, and the metal at his chest, too, soaked up the cold, the tiny crucifix against his bare chest, hidden under

clothing that could not hold back the dropping temperature of the night. Strange, he thought. How very, very strange. All of this would go on, round and round, only with different people every time. We all just trade places, playing all the same roles in all the same spaces, and only the names and the faces change, endlessly change, each one of us thinking somehow we were the only ones who were ever here.

Atlas grabbed the slide and snapped it back. Even in the dark he could see the glint of the copper round pull up into the chamber, quick, just for a moment, before the slide came back and locked the round inside the barrel. When he lifted it up and placed it on his temple, he could feel the cold barrel sting his flesh. The wind didn't care who sat here on this beach, he thought, alone in the dark. The lapping waves would reach up the beach and then recede again, and they would do so forever, round and round and round. Just like people. He wrapped his finger around the trigger and flipped the safety off with his thumb, and the cold metal at his chest stung straight through to his heart. Atlas closed his eyes and the dark sea and the beach became only sounds around him, and he prayed.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name—”

But the words were soon choked up by his throat and lost somewhere between his lips and the wind.

“Holy—Mother—God—Please—”

The pistol at his temple shook in his hand from the cold and the trigger beneath his finger pressed gently in and out in that small space between life and death.

“God—Please—God—Forgive me—Lola—”

The tide flooded into his mind and lit up his brain in neon lights and sounds and smells and memories, like the Pier, miles away now down the beach. Atlas was home, at his apartment in the City. It was June 2, warm and muggy. He had been out at the movies, and he remembered coming from the dark, air conditioned theater out onto the street and feeling the city heat come at him all at once. He was supposed to be at work. Back then, he had picked up a job framing houses, outside the city mostly. The night before, in an act of God, lightning had struck an enormous, ancient oak tree in the back yard of the house his crew was putting up, and it had split in two, right down the middle, with one half peeling away and crashing down into the new construction. The damage was absolute, and the job was called off until the contractor could work out all the necessities. And so, this day, June 2, after Lola had gone to work the early shift at the hospital, and as Atlas was headed out the door, keys in hand, he got the call that his day was not to be what he had expected, and he decided to make it something fun instead.

After the movies, he spent some time walking, taking in the city before he found himself home again. He put the key into the door opened it, not to an empty apartment, but to his bride, naked, pushed up against the too-big couch, her knees on the seat cushions and her breasts against the couch back, her head tilted back in ecstasy and her long, beautiful blonde hair tossed around, hanging down to the small of her back where Atlas's brother held her with his enormous hands and drove himself into her, rocking her body back and forth as if in a violent dance. It took them a moment to stop—a lifetime, forever now in Atlas's mind—enough time for Atlas to watch the couch knock back and forth against the side tables, throwing the light from the lamps around the room from beneath their swinging shades, enough time for Atlas to watch Lola turn her head toward him, still with a smile filled with happiness on her face until she wiped the hair and sweat

from her eyes which came to rest on Atlas's face. Enough time to count the seconds it took for that smile to fade from her face. Far too many seconds. And enough time to always remember the look of pity that replaced that smile. That pity would mark him from that day until his last, and it would never fade.

The cold and the night seemed to shrink Atlas down into the dark sand and, for the first time in his life, he looked small, small against the sea, small against the sky, small against the night. He was shaking violently now, his huge body dwarfed by the night sky and the endless ocean, and he became like a child lost by the seashore, his heart squeezed down and beating madly against the silver cross upon his chest.

And then, at last, his prayers fell to silence and his body shook a little less, and he saw in his mind his gorgeous bride's face, smiling and laughing at her husband's pathetic obliviousness, his stupidity, his innocence. He pulled as hard as he could on the tiny trigger but no matter what he did it would not move. And he knew, the signal from his brain—the pulses of electricity, of life—would never reach his hand, no matter how long he sat there, cold and wet and waiting. Those circuits were never built to connect inside of him and he would never know how to make them right.

Even at this, he thought. And he tossed the gun into the sea.

DAY FOURTEEN

Atlas sat before his brother in the cold dungeon below the barn and watched him as he slept. The overwhelming smell of urine and feces had taken over the stale air now and his brother's scent, sharp sweat and rotting breath, fumed up over him and entered his nostrils. Their resemblance to each other was remarkable, even for identical twins, every detail seemingly the same—bone structure, skin tone, hair, height, weight, even now in adulthood—everything the same in every way, except for Atlas's badger scar, that faded white stripe drawn into his skin and become a part of him forever, a small a detail that could change a man to a beast, if only in appearance. Atlas hunched over his sleeping brother, their self-same features split by that single slash, making Atlas's protruding jawline and long nose look snout-like and his jet black hair slicked back like fur down a badger's head and back. One might even have imagined claws at the ends of Atlas's hands as they rested on his knees, drawn open as if in an embrace or, in the darkness, an attack. And at his feet, his brother, resting as a man, his protruding jawline and long nose and jet black hair slicked back, chained to the wall like an animal but made all the more man by it—a man curled up in sleep in a womb of his own filth.

Atlas had woken in the freezing farmhouse at three, when the moon was still high and fighting the grey night sky for dominance against the cloud giants, pregnant with morning snowfall. The sound of his screaming still echoed through the empty rooms. He sat up in bed,

wet with rapidly cooling sweat that chilled him to the core and snapped his mind back from the darkness and into the open air. In his dreams he had been home on the night it happened. But instead of closing the door and leaving, as he had done that day, he began a rampage through the small apartment. He began to beat on the too-large couch with both fists, hammering at the leather while Lola and his brother, naked and still aroused, stood holding each other, watching in horror. Atlas howled as he hammered at the couch with all his strength but his arms passed through the air as if through water and his blows landed slowly and without strength. He screamed in a rage from a place inside himself that could light a fire in Hell itself, but his voice came out only in whimpers. His blows futile, he began to tear at the leather instead, scratching at it with his nails, trying with all his might and all his anger and all his pain to raise his voice to shake this place apart with the booming power of his suffering. Still, the couch took no damage, his voice whimpered as a child's, and his wife in her yellow sundress, still hiked up over her hips, held Atlas's naked brother not with horror on her face but with a smile at Atlas's weakness and a peace at the revelation of this part of herself to him at long last. It was that smile that would have dominion over him forever.

And so when he woke he went straight for the barn, convinced in half-sleep to heap his fists upon his brother's head and scream justice in his ears until the blood drowned out his words and the light faded from his brother's eyes. But when he got there and hunched over his brother's sleeping body, claws out, an animal ready to tear at the flesh and devour it with a brutality that came only from the instinct to survive, his eyes filled up with tears that fell to the ground in great globes down into the hay and stone with a muted, echoless thud, and he sat down in stillness and watched his brother sleep. Each day he had come to lay vengeance on his brother, to make him

feel pain, to bring justice into the world, and each day he had done nothing, and now, in this moment, Atlas didn't know if the tears he shed were for his soul slipping away or for his pathetic weakness at not being able to destroy the evil trapped in front of him.

“Chance. Wake up.”

Atlas looked through the dark at his brother's eyes as they opened on him, and the two looked at each other as if in a mirror. Their eyes burned with hatred, enough almost to set the darkness ablaze.

“What do you want from me?” Chance's voice was dry and cracked as the words came out, intended to be screamed but swallowed up by weakness and the dark. The root cellar seemed to shrink in on them and narrow behind their gaze of one another.

“I—” Atlas broke his gaze and looked down at the cellar floor. Weakness. Weakness poured out of him, and he knew it. He wanted to shout back at him *I want you to suffer! I want to take everything from you! I want you to die here alone in agony! Die! Die!* He had said these things so many times in his dreams, in his fantasies, trying to prepare the perfect words to come before he took his life from him. But even in his fantasies, even in his dreams, there were no perfect words. There were only new words each time. New tortures each day. And none of them were ever enough.

Atlas had thought it was because they were only fantasies but now a dark thought descended upon him—one that had been growing in him since that first day—when by chance or fate or divine intervention he had seen his brother walking down Thirty-Second Avenue alone in the dark with the city still asleep around him and no one, it seemed, but the two of them alone for miles, as if it were meant to be. And when it happened, all at once, and Atlas had pulled up

alongside his brother, handcuffed him and thrown in him in the trunk of his car, he had already begun to know what he felt now in deadening blows between his ears: nothing would ever be enough.

“Let me go,” Chance said, almost in a whisper. “Just let me go.”

Atlas knew his brother could see his weakness. He had always seen it. He had always known.

Take your pants down! Atlas screamed in his mind, eyes still on the matted hay and dirt at his feet. *I'm going to take it from you. I'm going to shear it off. Leave it for you to look at and let it shrivel and rot in front of you.* He screamed so loud inside his mind that he wondered for a moment if the words had reached his mouth. There was so little left of him now. He feared even his rage might soon be gone and, with it, the rest of him, and maybe it was he who would die here on the cellar floor, alone in the dark.

“Why?” the word came out like a whisper. And when it had left him, Atlas knew for sure that his heart would never heal and his mind would never be at peace again.

“*Why?*” Chance responded, a mocking in his voice. “Why what?”

“You know what,” Atlas said slowly.

“You want to know *why?* Is that the reason you brought me here? How many days have I been locked up like this? You come down here and stare at me and don't say a word all this time. You leave me here all day, all night, chained to the wall. And now you ask me ‘why?’”

Atlas looked up from the floor.

“Let me go,” Chance yelled. “You're a child. You're just a sad, pathetic child, Atlas. Look at yourself.”

Chance pulled the chains against the wall in a spasm. He had found his voice now and he boomed out at Atlas.

“Let me out of here!”

Atlas stood up and turned from him.

“That’s right, Atlas. Run away. Run away, you coward. You want to know ‘why’? There’s your answer. She didn’t want you, Atlas, that’s why. How could she? Look at you. Run away, Atlas. Run away. You never had what it takes. You never will. Everyone but you can see it. You could never do what it takes. You could never take care of her like I could. How could she ever love a worthless creature like you?”

Atlas reached the hatch and looked back into the darkness at his brother but all he could see was black now. He paused and his mind lit up, shades of yellow flashing before his eyes. His heart beat wildly, but wrong, heavy, thudding churning of the blood, pain with each beat. He could see her vividly there in the dark, looking back at him, chained to the wall, her yellow sun dress dirtied by the filth and blood smeared from across her arm.

I loved you! he screamed inside his mind. *How could you?* His head pounded and thumped with the beat of his heart and the whole of his body felt like pins and needles, like it had been too long unmoving and had fallen asleep, the entirety of it, all at once. *How could you do this to me?* He could no longer tell if he was screaming aloud or alone in his mind, and the pain crawled across his skin, and he thought that he might die. All of time seemed to stop and the world became nothing more than the root cellar and the darkness in it.

He would never remember turning back into the cellar and pouncing on his brother—that space and that time was swallowed up by the dark forever, but he would never forget the feeling

as he broke his hands on his brother's body, the shouting *why? why?* that no longer mattered whether it was said aloud or inside himself, the smell of copper and the heat of his brother's blood mixed with his own splashed across his face, the rage, the pain, and the permanence of it all—the memory forming that this night would be with him for the rest of his life, and it would never go away. It fit—that memory—right alongside the rest of his pain. Together they had all the same characteristics, all the same feelings, the same taste.

He might never have stopped pounding on his brother if not for the crucifix around his neck which tore apart from its chain and landed in the mud and the hay and the blood in front of him, and he stopped and remembered the day he met his wife, in that store, blessing the farm equipment and the register and the hay for their new horse, Alula. And he saw those same hands now, their bones shattered, their skin torn open, the blood dark and black, and the crucifix in the filth of this dungeon beneath Alula's stall.

His brother was still breathing when he closed the hatch door behind him, small, shallow breaths. But Atlas breathed full and heavy as he sucked in the cold night air around him.

As he left the barn in slow, soft steps, knee deep in ice and snow, he could feel himself fall deeper into the chasm of the dream that his life had become, and he knew now that it was a dream from which he would never wake. Half way back to the farmhouse, he fell on his knees, deep into the snow, and looked up into the night sky. He had no heart from which to pray. No mind from which to find the words. No voice with which to cry out. And the empty shell which was his body toppled over, prostrate, lifeless, like a felled tree, a trunk with leaves and branches, still alive, in a way, but cut off now, alive but dead, a living corpse. He rolled onto his back to face the night sky, only grey, no moon or stars, no light at all, and reached for the crucifix around

his neck, but there was nothing there anymore, and he remembered how it had been ripped from his chest and fallen in blood and filth in the hell he had created beneath the barn.

As the snow fell atop his body, slowly piling upon him, burying him in cold, he tried to think of God, to say something, to beg or plead, to see his face, to see salvation, or damnation, to see him some way, any way, but he could only see Alula, in the summer months, prancing around the fenced in arena, bucking and jumping in the sun, and this was the thought that took over his mind, possessed it and flickered on it, like a projector, memories that would have once brought joy but now were only shadows and, perhaps, he thought, always were. And he remembered the night he last saw his beautiful mare Alula.

It was the third of July, fifteen years to the day that he first met Lola in the feed shop in town. Atlas had driven up from the city, twenty-two now and just graduated from college. Lola was to meet him at the farm at eight in the evening. He had planned this night for months. Really, he had planned it for years—fifteen years to the day—when he had stopped blessing the tractors and decided he would give Alula away as his wedding present to that little girl on the feed stack.

Atlas arrived at the farm at eleven in the morning. The whole family was waiting when he drove up the driveway and Alula was, as usual, racing around the far perimeter of the fence, bucking and neighing, trying to hop the fence or learn to fly. Chance came first to greet him as Atlas squeezed out of his little Camry. Chance smiled. Wide and full of teeth as if filled with joy. Filled with joy then. But not now, in memory, as the snow fell on Atlas's face. Filled with shadow. And truth.

“Dad's in the barn,” he said.

Atlas nodded.

“You ready?”

It was a stupid question. Everyone knew Atlas had been ready for this all his life. Funny now, thinking back. *You ready?* As if he might have said “no.” As if he could have ever said “no.” But for fate and God and the chain of cause and effect that made the present moment unbreakable from anything that had come before it, perhaps he could have. Perhaps, in the darkened memory, that had been what Chance had hoped for—for fate and God and the fabric of life itself to melt away and for Atlas to have changed his mind. *I’m not sure. I’m having second thoughts. I don’t know.* Or even just a look of doubt behind the words which he said:

“I’m ready.”

It came out like a rock, unmovable, as sure as the day he had first dreamed it all up.

Chance looked down at the ground and reached into his back pocket. He took out a little black box and held it out for Atlas.

“Cleaned and cared for and far away from muggers and pick pockets. Nothing can go wrong now,” Chance said.

Atlas took the box and opened it. A silver band held up a tiny diamond that sparkled clear and pure like a snowflake. He closed the box and smiled wide as could be.

“Is Alula groomed yet? Atlas asked.

“Not yet. Mom’s almost done with the ribbons for her mane.”

“Yellow, right?”

“Yes, yellow.” Chance rolled his eyes.

“With white polka dots?”

“Yeah, yeah. With white dots. It’s handled. Go see Dad.”

Atlas put the engagement ring in his pocket and headed toward the barn. He could see Chance out of the corner of his eye walking toward the fence as Alula steamed past. He turned around.

“Don’t take her out,” Atlas yelled back.

“I’m not.”

“Seriously, Chance. Don’t take her out. I want to get her dressed up early. It’ll take an hour to put the bows in her mane, and longer to brush her out and get it cleaned up.”

“She wants to run,” Chance shot back. “Look at her.”

Atlas walked back toward his brother and held his arms out defensively.

“She likes to run in the pen. How many times do we have to talk about this?”

Chance turned around and looked out at Alula, bucking around the fence. He almost whispered.

“She wants to get out. She’s always wanted to get out.”

“What was that?” Atlas came in close.

“Nothing. Whatever. Go see Dad.”

Atlas turned around and headed for the barn. As he neared it, without looking back, he let out a holler: “She loves it in there, Chance. Can’t you see that?”

Atlas opened the big barn doors and found his father in the middle of a place transformed. Hay bales were laid out like seating but with an antique wooden table at the center, covered in white linen, set with forks and knives, wine glasses and candles, set centered squarely above the hatch to the root cellar, which was covered now in fresh hay. Candles lined the stalls

and the walls and the ground, everywhere, unlit still, waiting for the evening. Atlas's father came out of Alula's stall with some brushes and a bucket.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "Is it up to standard?" He smiled.

"It's beautiful, Dad."

"I'm so happy for you, Atlas."

Atlas walked around the barn and ran his hand across the table, the wood of the stalls, up to the hand carved sign that read "Alula." His hand stop there, and he hesitated.

"She's going to love it," his father said. "Don't worry."

"She'll say yes," Atlas said without looking away from the sign.

"She'll say yes," his father replied.

"Mom has the bows, right?"

As he said it, he heard a creak and loud thud from outside the barn. He rushed outside just fast enough to see Chance riding Alula bareback at full speed out of the arena and across the property. They moved so fast together, he tucked down into her airstream and she pointed straight ahead like an arrow, bolting for the tree line.

Atlas called out. "Chance!"

But he was gone, a hard right along the edge of the forest and toward the back of the property, behind the farmhouse and out of sight.

Atlas broke loose and sprinted for the car.

"Son of a bitch," he murmured in a huffed breath.

"Atlas!" His father called out. "He'll bring her back. Come back here and help me with the saddle."

But Atlas was gone, too fast, too powerful, stuffed back into his Camry, tires spinning dust as he drove across the lawn and into the tall grass around the side of the house.

“Atlas!” His father hollered after him as the car skidded past the barn and behind the farmhouse where the fields opened up to a plot of large berms and deep ditches with tall grass that hid rocks and boulders beneath their swaying surface.

Atlas could see them up ahead as he drove along the overgrown dirt path, an old wagon trail from a long time ago. Alula was on fire. Jumping the berms and diving over large rocks and old fences torn down and snared in rusted barbed wire. Her mane kicked out in the wind and flowed into Chance’s face, mixing with his long hair as they flew like one. She really did want to fly.

And so she did. Across the open field and directly for the edge of the forest which spread out for acres in wilderness so dense the darkness came out into the light at the tree line just to make its presence known.

Atlas watched them through the windshield—Chance and Alula were one. But as they came to the tree line, Alula, with her deep brown eyes, looked into the darkness and began to buck and change direction, wild, possessed by something, until Chance could barely hold on. He grabbed her mane hard and pulled it back, but she only arched with it, her front legs coming up in the air and staying there, frozen, like a ballerina, her head tilted back, as if in ecstasy, until at last she came down hard, and Chance with her. His pelvis collided into her backside with a crack and his head slammed against her neck, splitting open his lip. Blood poured out of him and onto Alula’s blonde mane and mixed with it, sweat and blood and yellow hair. Chance tried to hold her, gripping her between his legs and pulling back her bloodied hair as she neighed and moaned

but her deep, soft brown eyes had gone black and she reared up again and sent Chance to the ground. Out of breath and exhausted, he sat up, sweat in his eyes, and saw her as she broke for the trees, black eyes, black forest, yellow mane and black blood. The sun was coming down now above the evergreens as Alula disappeared into the womb of darkness beyond the trees.

Atlas saw her disappear through the windshield as the world rocked up and down and sideways over the berms and into the ditches, whipped by tall grass and kicking up rocks and dust and debris, and Chance, in the dirt, wiping the sweat from his eyes with bloodied, dirty hands. Atlas stopped the car in the middle of the field and got out and ran. He ran past Chance, past the tree line, into the unknown, and he could see only her before him, though she was gone to the dark. As the sun came down around them all, Atlas ran and ran and ran, deeper and deeper into the darkness. He could hear their voices trailing behind him, Chance, his father, his mother, his grandfather, beckoning to him, but their voices were like ghosts in the wild, flitting between the trees as he ran past them and through them and on toward Alula, until he could hear their voices no more. His legs and his lungs burned so deep within him, fighting against the beating of his heart, fighting to run, fighting to push ahead, but his body was weak and, though he would have fought until his dying breath, eventually his legs buckled and he tumbled over a fallen tree and collapsed. He looked around himself and realized the way back might now be impossible to find. And the way forward was lost now too. Alula was long gone in any direction by now and the night was falling quickly.

By the time Atlas found his way out of the forest and back into the fields it was dark. He could see beams of light as he neared the forest's edge and hear their voices again. His mother,

seeing him bruised and bloodied from his fall, ran to him and embraced him and together they broke out of the wild and back toward to farm.

“It’s almost seven,” she said to him, wiping his forehead with her sleeve.

Lola would be there any moment now, and Atlas felt his heart was hollowed out. This was wrong. It was all wrong. He looked up at the night sky, and it too was wrong. There was no moon and no stars, and the wind had picked up and with it a cold blew onto the farm, too cold for summer, too cold for anything.

As they walked past the barn, Atlas could see the candles lit and sparkling around the dining table, laid out with forks and knives atop the pristine white gown of the tablecloth. The sign that read “Alula,” hand-carved above her stall, glimmered in the candlelight.

“We have to get you fixed up,” his mother said, pulling him in close to her as they walked together.

But it was too late. Car headlights flashed across the farm as Lola pulled off the main road and onto the driveway.

“Quick now, we’ll stall her,” mother said, and she pushed Atlas toward the farmhouse. “Get dressed and wash your face and your hands.”

She took Atlas’s head in her hands.

“Everything’s going to be alright.”

Atlas ran toward the farmhouse, still in shock, running on someone else’s legs, seeing with someone else’s eyes. He glanced back at his family, huddled together outside the barn. They looked at him, he thought, as if he were another person. All of them but Chance, whose eyes were fixed on the tree line behind the farmhouse.

Atlas ran inside and up the stairs just as Lola's car pulled up to the house.

In the old mirror in the bedroom upstairs, he looked into his eyes and into his future as he splashed water across his face and saw himself running through the dark woods, running, running, running. Running after Alula. Chasing her into the darkness. His legs and his lungs burning. Breathing fire. Breathing shadows. Blood and sweat mixing on his brow as he tripped and fell and tripped and fell, further and further into the darkness.

He cleaned up and put on a dress shirt and tie, which he never wore and would later look back on feeling foolish and childish, and ran back down the stairs and out into the moonless, starless night.

Lola greeted him with the biggest smile and embraced him with what felt like her very heart.

"Atlas," she whispered in his ear.

The family huddled around each other, a chorus to the embrace, and Atlas did feel childish then, as if it were prom night or his very first date. But Lola's embrace brought him back and the soft air from her mouth on his ear sealed his fate. It was this moment that would begin and end his life. She tilted her head against his in the direction of the barn.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Can I see it?"

Atlas wondered if she knew, wondered if the huddled family and the cracked barn door showing off the fantasy of candlelight, made everything so obvious, silly even, but when he looked at her, her smile somehow grew even bigger and he knew everything would be alright.

They turned to walk toward the barn, the huddled family still watching. He turned over his shoulder to them.

“Dad?” he said.

His father nodded at him and Atlas knew. They’d be back out looking for Alula when the coast was clear. It was going to be okay. Everything was going to be okay.

Together, Atlas and Lola, holding hands, walked out toward the barn, and Atlas felt the ring in his back pocket pushing against his body with each step, and a peace and silence entered him, somewhere deep inside him, in a place he’d not yet known—a peace he thought would be with him now forever, and that peace overtook him, as the two stood before the barn and the candlelight streamed out at them and lit up their faces in flickering warm light, and Atlas was overcome. He wanted her now. He wanted her forever. And he could wait not one more minute until he had her.

And so, filled with peace, and filled with love, and filled with confidence, Atlas dropped to his knee right then and there and pulled the small black box from his back pocket, and when he looked up at Lola’s face, he knew she hadn’t known, because the smile on her face grew somehow even bigger, and before he could say a word she was in his arms again, and the soft, warm air from her mouth entered his ear.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes.”

“Wait! The ring,” he said. And he pulled back from her and opened the little box.

The tiny little diamond on the frail golden ring looked yellow in the candlelight but it might as well have shone out in floodlights, as Lola put her hands to her mouth about to let out a sound of joy when, at once, the sky lit up with horrid screams and howls, as if from her own mouth. They froze in place, and Atlas knew in an instant what he had heard.

From the tree line, even in the moonless, starless night, he could see her shape hobble out of the forrest, trailed by the sound of wolves and led by her own screeching, a primal sound, the sound of death—Alula.

At once everyone ran out into the field, everyone save Lola, who stood frozen in front of the beautiful barn, watching as this family sprinted into the dark together, her enormous smile gone now, replaced by confusion and by fear.

The noise the beautiful creature made would never leave him, and as Atlas approached Alula, his family just behind him, he saw a vision too that would remain in his mind forever. Her mane was black with blood, her neck torn open, flesh and muscle and sinew ripped away, torn open, gaping. She stumbled, then got up again, then stumbled, trying to reach the family, trying to reach for Atlas. Reaching out for Atlas. And Atlas ran toward her as fast as he could, as if reaching her fast enough would somehow save her. But he knew. As he came upon her, fallen over now on her side, he threw himself on her, embraced her, and they knew each other, as deeply as two creatures could, his deep, soft brown eyes filled up and hers, innocent and sinless, emptying out before him.

Atlas cried out. He cried out for his father and his mother. He cried out for help. But when he looked back, they had all stopped half-way to him.

“Dad! Dad!” Atlas hollered, his voice only cracks and squeaks.

But his father had already turned away, rushing back toward the house. Mother, Chance, Grandpa and Lola stood frozen in shock and horror as Atlas rocked back and forth, holding his love.

“Somebody! Do something,” he cried out. But his voice was now a whisper, crying out only to himself and to Alula.

He looked at her and stroked her matted, bloody mane as he pressed into her wound, thinking maybe he could stop the bleeding, but she shrieked at him as he touched her and the guilt of hurting her more ran through him like lightning.

“I don’t know what to do,” he told her. “I don’t know what to do.”

And as the words came out, his father appeared behind him. Atlas turned back toward him and a flutter of hope danced across his heart. His father was here. His father, who lit up the dark. His father who could fix anything. His father who would know what to do. But Atlas didn’t see his father as he turned from Alula. He saw instead the shotgun, black and inevitable.

“Atlas.” His father’s voice was soft, and it rang strange in Atlas’s ears. “Atlas. Step aside.”

Atlas looked up at his father’s eyes.

“Save her,” Atlas said, pleading, gasping, hoping.

But his father’s eyes told him what he knew with every heaving breath of the beautiful creature that lay beneath him. He could feel the warmth running out of her and into the night air to disappear forever into ether. He could hear her wheezing in pained breath that left her body to become a part of the air in the field, feeding the grass and the tall weeds. He could smell the copper in her blood that poured out to be taken up by the dirt, and he knew. He knew, but he couldn’t.

“We can save her,” he said. But it was almost a question as it left his lips, and his father had already begun to reach down at him and take hold of his arm to pull him away.

Atlas could see Lola, horrified, her hands at her mouth, as Atlas was pulled away screaming, pawing at his father to let him go.

“You can’t do this!” Atlas screamed. “You can’t.”

His father dragged him further and further from the dying horse until a voice, identical to Atlas’s but calm and serene, almost empty, came out into the open night air. It was Chance.

“He should be the one to do it.”

Chance took the shotgun from his father’s hands as Atlas fell to the ground at his father’s feet. He held it out for Atlas, as if an offering.

“She’d want it this way,” Chance said.

But Atlas could only stare up at him, up at his own reflection in his brother’s face.

“Take it.” Chance said. “It needs to be you.”

And then, like in a dream and without the knowledge of why, Atlas held out his arms and Chance placed the shotgun in his hands. He stood and turned toward Alula and looked at her for what he knew would be the very last time.

“She’s suffering, Atlas.” Lola’s voice came through the wind and hit his ears with a chill.

And so he cocked the weapon, loading a shell into the chamber with a crack that split the night sky open.

Slowly, as he looked into her eyes, Atlas turned the gun on his Alula.

“She knows,” he whispered, his heart in his throat.

“This is what she wants,” Chance echoed back at him.

“She never wanted this.”

He wrapped his finger around the trigger and steadied the butt against his shoulder.

“My Alula,” he said.

And he froze. Her soft brown eyes looked up at him and he knew he could never do it. No matter the pain. No matter the suffering. This he could never do. She was his Alula forever and he would not be the cause of her demise.

As if sensing this in his brother, and in one swift motion, Chance stepped out in front of Atlas and pulled the gun from his hands, drawing it up to his eye line in a single motion. He pulled the trigger and the earth broke in two as the buckshot tore through Alula’s beautiful face and pocked the bloodied dirt around it. Flesh in chunks fell back to the earth from the air in which she took her very last breath, and she was dead. Her head fell limp in a mass of brokenness and flesh and brains—a ragged, torn mass of what was once Alula.

Atlas staggered back and into his brother. He turned on him and they met each other in a mirror.

“You could never have done it,” Chance said, handing the shotgun back to Atlas and turning away from him.

As he walked away, the family with him, Lola came up to Atlas’s side and took a hold of his arm. She was soft, breakable, and she smelled of fresh flowers. Her long blonde hair blew across his face as she kissed him through his tears. And as they walked away together, she locked her eyes on his, forcing him not to look back, not to look back ever, and so he didn’t. He looked at her and her alone, but in her eyes he saw Alula, running through the fields toward the tree line just an hour ago, and he realized she had been the happiest he had ever seen her, running, running across the field, with Chance on her back, jumping and running, free from the pen he thought she had always loved.

Atlas was almost entirely buried in the crystal white snow by now. He could feel it all around him, mummifying him in its cold, soaking through his clothing and biting at his bones. He rustled beneath it, and he knew what he had to do.

As his monstrous hands came up from beneath the ground and his enormous feet planted themselves in the snow, and as he drove himself with speed and purpose toward the farmhouse, he saw the black death of that twelve gauge shotgun, and he knew where he could find it, and he knew what he would do.

Inside the farmhouse everything had changed. This place was a burial ground now, and maybe it always was. His grandfather, his grandmother, gone and buried in the ground just a mile down the road. His father and his mother, gone and buried with them. His wife burned to ashes and scattered against his wishes, and his heart in its many pieces along with it, Atlas thought, and Alula.

He reached his grandfather's bedroom and pulled the black death from the top shelf of a closet, cracked it and a shell came up into the chamber. It was dusty, untouched, unused he thought since that night with Alula. This would do. This would do nicely.

Back to the barn and back to the hatch above the root cellar. Back to the root cellar beside the stall which still read "Alula," though she had been gone now for so many years. The barn was filled with candlelight to Atlas's eyes and he could smell the flowers and see the bows of yellow around the stalls. He could see his future here, and his past. He could see them for the first time.

Unlocking the hatch door he came down the steps and met his bloodied brother in the dark. There was no hesitation, no questioning, as he aimed the barrel at his brother's head. He could see Alula's mangled body where his brother lay and as he squeezed the trigger in, his brother looked up at him and a bloodied, toothless smile spread across his brother's face.

Atlas's finger held.

His blood pumped fire.

And where he once saw his future—his family—his own children—playing around the farmhouse in the summer sun, and Lola on the front porch smiling at him in her yellow sundress, he saw now only truth. He saw what he had never seen but what his brother had always known. And all that knowledge played out across an ugly, bloody smile.

"I can't," Atlas said.

"I know," said Chance.

And Atlas began to unshackle his brother from his chains.

"I'll take you to the hospital and they'll fix you up," he began, standing up and turning to help his brother from the ground, but a glint caught his eye—the crucifix, laying in his brother's blood and filth—and Atlas put a hand to his chest, having forgotten it had fallen from its place at his heart.

"You can't fix me," Chance said. "You can't fix you. Lola couldn't fix Lola. No one can fix anyone," he said. "We're all trapped here. Don't you get it? We're trapped here and we can never get out."

“Why?” Atlas asked, his hand still held empty across his heart, and at once he could see what he had felt all his life. That everyone knew a secret that no one would tell him. The look of pity in his brother’s eyes brought it into the world, and he could see it now, clear and bright.

Atlas looked down at the shotgun in his hands and at the pity in his brother’s eyes. Slowly, he lifted out his hands to him, an offering.

“You don’t have to,” he said. But he knew already that this was the secret that everyone kept from him. He was like a child, too fragile and wide-eyed for anyone to shatter with the truth. No, not that. Something else, he thought. Too stupid and naive. And as he looked up, his brother took the shot gun from his hands and pointed it at Atlas’s chest.

At last, Atlas thought, and he closed his eyes and waited, for the blast of the shotgun, for the feeling of warm life leaving his body, for God, for Heaven, for Hell; he waited. He waited and nothing came. And when he opened his eyes, the shotgun was laid in the muck and the shit and the hay and the blood, laid over the fallen crucifix at Atlas’s feet, and Chance was at the hatch door, cracked open now, letting in a soft light from the barn above.

Atlas fell to his knees and back against the brick wall behind him.

“I won’t lock it,” Chance said as he came up out of the root cellar.

It won’t matter, Atlas thought as the hatch door slammed shut and the light went out of the place. And there, in the pit, underground, where all things go to die, Atlas breathed in the stale air, and his enormous heart beat powerfully, steady, strong, beating in his ears, *thump, thumpthump, thumpthump*, beating like it would beat forever.