

THE
TENTH
GIRL

SARA FARING

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK
NEW YORK



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120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Faring, Sara, author.

Title: The tenth girl / Sara Faring.

Description: First edition. | New York : Imprint, 2019. | Summary: In 1978, to avoid becoming a desaparecido like her mother, eighteen-year-old Mavi takes a teaching job at Vaccaro School, an isolated finishing school in Patagonia, rumored to be haunted.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019002534 | ISBN 9781250304506 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250304513 (eBook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Schools—Fiction. | Supernatural—Fiction. | Missing children—Fiction. | Mystery and detective stories. | Patagonia (Argentina and Chile)—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.F3673 Ten 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019002534>

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Book design by Elynn Cohen

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2019

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PROLOGUE

*Do not be fooled:
territorial spirits inhabit our earthly flesh
as we move through this brightly painted world.
And long after our flesh rots,
the spirits remain, playing in the muck.
Only the gods are free of them,
watching from beyond the ice,
in their forgotten houses of cloud.*

—ZAPUCHE TRIBE TEACHING

At the very southern tip of South America, where fields of ice meet mountains of salt, a finishing school for girls existed on a lone shelf of rock. The school wasn't *always* a school—no, it was once a grand country home, built for a wealthy family fleeing unnamed bloodshed in Europe. No one quite understood how this

family tunneled vaulted cottages into sheer Argentine stone, but after their escape from the old country, nothing was impossible for the De Vaccaro family. As the stories go, their clan relished life atop their cliff, at least for a time. Their matriarch, Domenica De Vaccaro, was a cheerful woman with strong hands the size of a giant's, who ate a dozen eggs each day for breakfast—raw—and instructed her sons to *walk off* their troubles and pains. And walk off the sons did—to the City of Good Airs. The remaining De Vaccaro house shrunk to nearly nothing, but Domenica knew how to manage a problem as trivial as loneliness. She recruited girls from other rootless families abroad and offered them a rich education from her perch over the ice.

The first class comprised only ten girls, one of whom was Domenica's own young daughter. She taught them herself. But in time, the classes and the faculty both grew. A president's daughter attended. A tyrant's. An exiled artist's, and the daughter of the minister who exiled him. Such was the will of Domenica De Vaccaro—any gap could be bridged: political, moral, and otherwise. Experts visited from far and wide to take in the Patagonian air and teach lessons ranging from the practical (arithmetic) to the mystical (curing illness with candlelit vigils). The reputation of the school soared, and Domenica soon handpicked her ten pupils per year from the stacks of handwritten letters that reached her ice-locked home, as if flown there on desperate paper wings. They were happy, her pupils, and the precocious little things went on to explore all corners of the globe, enriched with a level of experience few outsiders could understand. Surely, said the Buenos Aires society pages, there was something in the meltwater.

One day, tragedy befell the historically fortunate De Vaccaro family, as tragedy is wont to do. A mysterious illness swept through the house and school, an illness that could not be cured, much less described to those who did not feel its chill in their own bones. The local Zapuche tribe—from which many of the staff hailed—whispered that

unhappy spirits from across the world had flocked there to help their tribe seize back the cliff. They called these spirits *los Otros*, or *the Others*, a name that may be known to you. In time, the house was emptied out—barren, but never soulless.

Sixty years later, an intrepid group of teachers, led by De Vaccaro descendants, ventured out to that remote edge of the world. They returned to the house and reopened the school.

We find ourselves there, on the ice at the shore.

Welcome to Vaccaro School.



MAVI: ARGENTINA, MARCH 1978

The boat wove around dozens of fat, fake-looking icebergs parked in the aquamarine depths to reach this solitary dock. Three hours on the lake, and I never glimpsed another person but the captain, a ruddy-faced, early-emphysema case. After hour one, I was grateful when the massive ice shelf appeared. Its milky-blue shell looks like a cloud formation drawn by a five-year-old—at least from afar. Close up, cracks form black veins in the ice. Black slices that are five times the length of the boat, above the surface alone. Acid worms through my stomach: If I slipped down one of these crevasses, I think I would reappear on a different plane of existence. A Patagonian Alice, lost to Wonderland.

Glacial water gurgles behind me as the captain idles the boat. He crosses his arms, and tattooed mermaid's breasts bulge on his wrist.

Argentina, home of the 1978 FIFA World Cup, reads his pristine sky-blue shirt. A proud proclamation from a country plunged into a state of terror.

“We’re here?” I ask, uneasy, studying the worn planks of the dock, broken wooden teeth. I can’t see a single building, and overgrown bushes conceal any path up the stony hill.

The captain grunts—the most he’s managed besides a series of coughs and belches since we left Punta Bandera—and eases back into his pleather seat, crinkling open his empty bag of ham-flavored chips to funnel spare crumbs down his gullet. I know my cues. I step off the boat, wood creaking. He doesn’t even glance back as he pulls away. At least I can rest assured he hasn’t taken me out here to rob me and leave me for dead. Silver linings . . . I take a breath, one breath, of the crisp air, painfully fresh compared with the Buenos Aires smog I sucked up only yesterday. There’s already a chill damp enough to penetrate the warmest of coats—my ratty one won’t stand a chance as winter nears.

You shouldn’t be here, the wind whispers, curving around to caress the base of my skull. Because good Catholic girls aren’t meant to run away into the wild, much less alone. Or so I’ve heard. Faraway, savage mountains, crumbling rock faces, and lonesome ice peaks—that’s all there is to this inhuman landscape. I rebutton my coat, stiffen my shoulders. I tamp down my nerves—hoping to fool even myself—but I feel it stronger than ever now, that citrusy ache that fills you before beginning a brand-new chapter of life. New-school jitters, sort of. I’m five years old again, every cell alive to the thrilling or wretched twists I might face ahead.

I shoulder my half-empty bag. I was told the house would have everything I could possibly need—the kind of blanket assertion that concerns and delights. Would they have those miniaturized complimentary chocolates fancy hotels leave on down pillows? Or provide a stiff cot and a Bible to rest my head on? Who does Vaccaro School

think I am, and who does it want me to be? Does it know me as the daughter of a wild-haired rebel, or as the daughter of a buttoned-up professor? I wonder, for the millionth time, if I'll be as natural a teacher as my mother was, even though I am young enough to still be in school myself: I'm eighteen, despite feeling a decade older. I wonder if the others here will accept me, even though I've had no chance to soften the edges my godmother always clucked about, with no small dose of affection. I wonder if I'll be able to hide what I must in order to fit in. All I'm carrying with me is the little clothing I thought to be Vaccaro School—appropriate (prim and boring but patched of most holes), my first-ever curriculum plan (embarrassing and incomplete, yet earnest—sure to be thrown away), and toiletries (a toothbrush with graying bristles, a leaking bottle of face cream). It's hardly enough to make do in the wilderness, unless pumas enjoy Lancôme. So I hurry down the dock, locate a set of stone steps tucked into the hill like an afterthought, and climb toward what I hope is Vaccaro School.

The steps are never-ending: the kind you'd expect to find billy goats prancing up, jaunty little grins on their slit-pupiled faces. I wish I had legs that slim and toned; ten flights in, I'd even accept the tufty beard in exchange for them. I swear that the mottled gray slabs beneath me are identical, too, never changing no matter how far I climb—it's as if some god, somewhere, personally curated every molecule on this rock face during an obsessive-compulsive fit. When I collapse on my bag to catch my breath, the geometric pattern of rock stretches above me into an uphill infinity, the trek a warped Sisyphean task. Lord help me.

And that's when I turn: Behind me is a sheer drop, some three hundred meters down to ice. If I were to slip down the stones, I might slide all the way off the steppe and the earth. A familiar ache of loneliness cuts through me like a boning knife. *I came here to escape*, I remind myself. Posing as a twentysomething to teach here was the only way

to protect myself from the men who took my mother. If I didn't feel lonely, I couldn't have fled far enough. But visual reminders like this of the bald fact we live and die alone are few and far between, and they hit me on a primal level. I only hope my mother doesn't—didn't—feel this way in the black oblivion of her cell.

Adrenaline powering me, I push on, and a single chimney materializes behind a copse of brushy-topped araucaria trees as if on command. I see the pitched roofs of hill structures, too, some meters up the steps—medieval-looking and all too incongruous. I pass stone cottages built into the mountain, shuttered. It's difficult to see where one cottage ends and the next begins: They're precariously stacked shoeboxes in the home of a hoarder, uneven layer teetering atop uneven layer, defying my layman's impression of the rules of architecture. The rusted handles of the heavy doors rattle but don't give.

Something in the atmosphere is wrong here, a something I can't articulate—I only feel a discomfort in the hollow of my chest, the same one that tells you you are *not* alone when you want to be, or that you are *entirely* alone when you shouldn't be. But the stones feel solid to me, rasping beneath my feet; the air tastes herbal in my mouth; the sweat smells tangy on my skin . . . The thought crosses my mind that I'm ascending a staircase to a misanthropic, colonial vampire who feeds on young Zapuche women's blood.

The trek, all in all, takes nearly an hour—an hour of woozy stumbling through thickening cloud cover. The fog engulfs the buildings and the path ahead of me, making it impossible to plot a course; I trip a dozen times and curse everyone possible. Mist or sweat soaks through my shirt under my coat, the only crisp white number I own. I briefly consider resting again on my bag so that I don't liquefy into a puddle before Carmela De Vaccaro, but I'm too spooked to sleep when I can't see a meter in front of my own nose.

When I reach into my bag's depths for a clean scarf to mop

myself up, a mottled cloth flag ruffles out of the haze, its pole affixed to the most imposing stone structure I've ever seen. The building is a swollen version of the cottages, its facade crusty and burned. Diseased, leaking pus-like grout at the window seams. Malformed gargoyles hang off ledges irregularly shaped to resemble clouds, intricate swirling carvings adorning their edges. It's grand, wholly European in style, and a touch dilapidated—visibly rich in a history that those who live inside likely want to forget. Bloodred baroque curtains block the second-floor windowpanes, and the unmoving, thickening mist obscures those closer to the sky.

The flag alone ripples with life: On it shimmers a fierce, sword-wielding woman dressed in a yolk-yellow cloak, emerging from a cloud. Lord, I could kiss her: It's the De Vaccaro crest, recognizable from the cover of the brochure. I drop my bag and punch the air. Staggering up the building's front steps, I feel my shoulders relax, and I'm able, for the first time, to fill my lungs to the brim with air.

But the door is an iron wall as impenetrable as a bank vault, and the door knocker is shaped like an unsmiling woman's head—she's understandably upset, I suppose, that visitors will slam her head for all eternity. I paste a jagged fake smile on my face and knock with her. Then knock again. Politely.

“Hello?”

The flag flaps above me, the golden warrior, in her impractical getup, watching. I circle round and find no other entrance, no other stair. Not even a ground-floor window.

Panic creeps up on me, slowly, steadily, from its hiding place on the stones, and latches onto me with its greedy, sucking mouth.

My calls swell into shouts. I pound on the damned door until my palms bruise. Throat scratching, I look for a hidden snack in my bag, sustenance I did not have the wherewithal to pack. I eye the cream—read the ingredients list. *Shea butter*, I think hungrily. Madly.

I chuck pebbles at the various windows as the gargoyles chuckle at me; they know I'm a runner with nowhere to run to, pitiful prey.

It's the truth: I've nowhere else to go, even if the boat captain returned to the dock by magic. My safe havens only exist in memory, and my memory's poor, a winding montage of half-repressed sights and smells, pulled from a life I feel no ownership of. But I better kill that thought. If I think about my past too long, my mind unravels.

I sit and shut my eyes for a minute, only a minute while I mentally regroup, and a tingling warmth spreads through me, a bone-melting exhaustion. I sit, splayed across the steps like an old drunk, a look not all that different from my recent setup in Buenos Aires.

I never intended to strand myself in the Patagonian wilderness.

"Between you and me, Mavi, my dear," said a mustachioed principal on my thirteenth failed interview, grasping at my knee with a limp fish of a hand that made me gag, "someone would have to *die* around here for a role to free up. Unions, you know."

The realization made me consider murder, or at the very least, a nunnery and the associated Catholic-school jobs. But the truth was, there were jobs; there were simply no jobs for me. More than one staff member at every school guessed (correctly) that I might be lying about my age and that the English-language teaching degree a family friend had procured for me was fake. But most important, they knew about my mother.

They knew the rumors about her helping—or indoctrinating—the bright-eyed, radical strangers she called my cousins; they knew the government had taken her away for this; they knew I might be taken next and they would be punished for associating with her kin. As a country, we've learned one harsh fact over the past few years: When the military government takes people to prison, they rarely, if ever, appear again. That's why we call them *los desaparecidos*—the

disappeared. Those who vanished, with no explanation at all. And if you speak too loudly about the missing, if you venture to ask what has become of them, you risk becoming one of them yourself.

As for me, I was a living, breathing reminder of my disappeared mother—my confused grief and rootlessness palpable. My presence alone frightened my peers and even the otherwise fearless head nuns at school. So I dropped out and lived with my godmother, deciding I had a better chance at safety and anonymity while working in a new neighborhood. I waitressed for tips while trying to find a better opportunity. Nothing came. The pizza place cut shifts. The banks froze accounts. The cash I had was the cash I had on hand: hardly more than a handful of valueless currency. I had no passport and no hope of getting one. I was trapped in my country, the only country I'd ever known. Hoping for a better day that never came, then hoping to keep hoping.

I learned they were coming for me, too, when my godmother told me, wringing an old rag in her hands like a chicken that needed killing, that men in uniform had dropped by asking about me. She loved me, she said, but as with many people she loved, our time together must be over, sooner than she wished. They'd killed my mother in prison, she was sure of it, and if they found me, they would kill me and her both.

"The angels will protect you," she said, kissing me and slipping me a wad of bills. Then it was time to go.

So of course I was elated to receive an offer to teach English at a school through an old and loyal colleague of my mother's, the same guardian angel who furnished me with my fake degree, a man we called Tío Adolfo, our Angel of Peace. The offer was from Vaccaro School, in Patagonia, of all places. The end of the earth. He pressed the glossy brochure into my hands like a ticket to paradise. Vaccaro School had once been a finishing school of historical significance,

long abandoned and recently reopened by the De Vaccaro widow, the sole owner of Argentina's second-largest cement company, after the death of her husband. Its reopening would signal a return to more civilized, old-fashioned values—the school would be free of any and all modern technologies, and the privacy of her students (the wealthiest girls in Argentina) was paramount. *She needs new teachers, and she won't ask where you come from, much less question your age*, Tío Adolfo had said. *Besides, you're precocious—you always have been. And she's connected—old money, but at a remove from the military government. Follow her rules, and she will protect you, if it comes to that.* We both knew what he meant.

The brochure photos were striking, showing proud stone structures built into a hill, as well as images of what I assumed were the interiors of those buildings: gleaming, modern, asylum-white classrooms, better than American hospitals in the movies. A dream come true. A way out. Carmela De Vaccaro, a striking platinum blonde who looked like a Norse god crossbred with a Lithuanian model, with rows and rows of teeth she flaunted painfully in every photo, was hoping to find a *young and innovative teacher with an experimental edge* to teach English to her class of twelve-to-thirteen-year-olds. *I know English!* I thought cheerfully. The offer was room and board plus a generous lump sum after the successful completion of the nine-month term. The only catch being that you were stuck in the middle of nowhere for nine months—which was no catch at all, at least for me. It was perfect.

Well, there's another drawback, Tío Adolfo had clarified, clearing his throat, *but you'll think it silly.* Vaccaro School was thought to be haunted.

It was built on land seized from the territorial Zapuche tribe by De Vaccaro ancestors in the nineteenth century. He explained at length, with the wariness befitting an academic speaking about the unsubstantiated and vaguely paranormal, that the Zapuche enacted

bloody rituals every time their land fell under threat. It was said that a Zapuche shaman cursed European farmers who had cleared a Zapuche forest to create farmland in the 1800s. Some of the farmers went mad shortly thereafter, shrieking that ravenous ghosts were sucking their skulls dry, before gruesome deaths. The farmland was abandoned. Even though few Zapuche remained in the area, none of the teachers Tío Adolfo knew would set foot on Zapuche land, much less Vaccaro School, because it was rumored that the last crop of Vaccaro teachers floated away in rough-hewn coffins some sixty years ago, the victims of what was likely another savage Zapuche curse. *Were any of this true*, he'd added, *the curses shouldn't touch you because of your Indigenous blood.*

I found this argument dubious, seeing as I had never learned specifics about my father's tribal roots beyond how they shaded my skin. Regardless, the rumors of these supposed ghosts and their mystical mumbo jumbo didn't matter to me. A haunted house sounded whimsical and sweet after witnessing the government's loaded threats and the raw violence on both sides—the world wasn't a child's game. The stories were surely propaganda to subjugate the Zapuche, anyway, so they would not reclaim their land.

My isolation in the Patagonian outback couldn't come soon enough. In the last few weeks before going to Vaccaro School, I left my godmother's apartment, claiming I had a safe place to stay. I meant to stay with Tío Adolfo, but when I visited the university to find him, they informed me he was no longer employed there. I sat on the school steps, considering my vanishing options, until a nervous clerk pulled me into a quiet office to whisper into my ear that after giving another impassioned speech condemning terrorism on the right and the left, my dear Tío Adolfo—the Angel of Peace—simply hadn't returned to work.

Wishing to protect my godmother, I slept in a Catholic home-

less shelter run by angels (until I felt I was imposing, taking the bed of someone needier with older, weaker flesh and bone), and in an old gallery of shops, my head pressed up against glass separating me from luxury shoes and bags—glossy leather bits and bobs that cost as much as my godmother’s rent. In the mornings, I was woken up by a security guard who toed me with his orthopedic shoe before telling me to beat it.

I convinced myself during those nights that Vaccaro School would be more than a place to hide—on the surface, it might be your typical finishing school for rich girls, teaching classes on crossing their legs the right way and understanding the rules of polo and the like. Bizarre classes for the bizarre rich, unlike anything I’d ever known. But I told myself it would be the first place in my life where I would *excel*. And I would earn the right to root myself someplace good and wholesome by following the rules, working hard, and possessing the very, very, very best of attitudes.

Dripping. Dripping on my cheek, coupled with the stench of tobacco and sweat. It’s arguably the least pleasant way to be thrown from a reverie excluding actual pain, in a moment of extreme thirst and dishevelment. I groan and clap a hand over the slime, my mouth dry as cotton. The dripping smells less of sweat and more of . . . I look skyward, expecting a bird, and see the face of a man—not much more than a boy—with his lips pursed. Dumbfounded, I stumble to my leaden feet. He peeks from a window above me, smirking, wiping his mouth, before dipping back into the building.

I recognize the smell of the goop. The viscosity of it.

He spat on me.

He spat on me! A swell of anger rushes through my neck like a flurry of poisoned quills. I skid down the hill to peer into the upper windows. All but one remain shut.

“I know you’re there!”

Anger overpowers the nerves: its blessing. I wipe my cheek until there’s no trace of glop and rush the door, slamming my hands against the metal facade.

“Forgot the password?” someone calls from above. Male. Smug. The same face peeks out: unfortunately a handsome face, well-chiseled like the gargoyles, though with infinitely more intimidating proportions. Too bad the devilish face houses a brain with a silly child’s sense of humor. He fingers the lit cigarette like it’s a missile to be launched.

“Did you spit on me?” I ask. My blood sugar is far too low for this nonsense, shea butter be damned. “I’ve been left outside for hours and you spit on me?” The quake in my voice irritates me as much as the whininess, but I hold firm.

He smirks again. He’s not remotely perturbed. In fact, he flicks his cigarette into the air, ashing on me fragrantly. I clench my teeth: They say teachers should be patient, but I haven’t truly begun to teach. And he’s not a student.

“How’s this for a password, you bastard?” I say, and as my hands move into a once-obscene symbol that’s lost too much of its power lately, the doors before me groan open.

I freeze. I squint at the threshold to make any sense of what’s beyond the door because it’s impossibly dark inside. The scent of must overpowers, too. Must and clove with a hint of spoiled legumes. There’s a shadow within the shadows—a woman the size of a skeletal giant. She strides out in a floor-length caftan of sorts, and she towers over me. I wonder if she’s hiding a smaller human being beneath the tent—it would be a grotesque but stupendous magic trick.

Her face is bare and drawn but grand, despite the beadiest eyes I’ve ever seen; her hair is pulled back so tightly I fear a giant black plunger is sucking out the back of her scalp. She clears her throat,

with a long look at my impolite gesture. My hands, with minds of their own, pull away to feel at my hairline, and her nostrils flare.

“Miss Quercia, I presume? You are late.”

I smile sheepishly, as one is wont to do. I can feel my armpits sweating again, as if they haven’t already done their fair share on the climb. She crooks a finger at me to scurry behind her. I’m not much of a scurrer, but I don’t think she’ll be satisfied by anything else.

“There must have been a misunderstanding with timing,” I say, pitching myself into the darkness and slicking back my hair. I’m obsequious all of a sudden, nervous and squirrely. I’ve made a fool of myself on my first day. I’ve lost my temper. I risk losing everyone’s good impression of my good attitude. And my hands are filthy and sticky, which means the rest of me must look it, too. “I’ve my lesson plan all written up for tomorrow’s classes, and I look forward to discussing it with Madame De Vaccaro—”

“What possessed you to climb the property with your luggage?” she asks as we press on into the darkness, ignoring me and the fact that one understuffed bag doesn’t make for luggage. We’ve entered a cloud of fetid tobacco smoke. But for her huge form before me, I would be blind, unable to perceive the depths around me. I expected a grand entrance hall, and while the ceiling heights are magnificent, the narrow corridors bend and curve, it seems, or else I’m still woozy from my climb; I don’t see a single corner, and I’ve already lost sight of the entrance.

I splutter. “Necessity?”

“A member of the staff was waiting for you all afternoon by the gondola off the second dock. You look dreadful.” Less an insult than an observation. I bite my tongue until I taste metal and watch her bun bounce in the darkness.

“There is no time for you to change out of your street clothes, so you shall have to go without supper,” she says, as if it’s obvious. I

look down at my damp coat and once-crisp white shirt with a hint of sadness. “I am Ms. Morency to you. De facto head of administrative staff.”

And in that elaborate title, I’ve learned half of what I need to know about her. “A pleasure.”

She doesn’t reply. But I hear a rustling, a sighing, and I strain to listen, to see. Words, spoken in a foreign language? To my ears, the voices come from cracks in the ceiling. I rub at my eyes, as if that will help. It must be a draft.

“It will also be too late to see the mistress tonight. You must remain in your room in the evenings. One is not safe alone in the house at night.”

“Sorry?” I ask, clutching my bag closer. The air is rank now, the smell of spoiled food intensifying into a presence as physical as Morency herself. “Why not?”

“But in the morning,” she continues, ignoring me, “*in the morning*, when you are permitted to move about the house freely, and you do see the mistress, you would be wise to hold your tongue around her.” I assume she means Carmela De Vaccaro. “And to keep your hands to yourself.”

Clearly she witnessed my display outside. “Oh well. There was a boy, he—”

“Oh, Miss Quercia,” she says, dripping disdain, “isn’t there always, with girls like you?”

I stumble in the darkness behind her, grateful not to have her eyes on me. I slip off my coat, but it feels as stuffy as before.

We pass another bend, and pockets of dim light spill from old-fashioned gilded sconces lining the halls. The burgundy Persian carpet is rich, deep, bog-like; my feet sink in with each step. I must be trailing dust and dirt and God knows what. The walls are covered in a fabric I would imagine is called damask even though I’ve no idea what

that is; its texture and pattern remind me of a turbulent sky before a downpour. Dark, grandiose paintings of overcast landscapes hang in burnished golden frames along the walls. Expensive, hand-carved furniture dots the hall, the miniature sort that creaks with disdain and threatens to break the second someone gets comfortable. I glimpse inside an open doorway on the left after Morency hurries past: The figure of a man stands by an unlit fireplace in a sitting room. He leans over the fire as if warming his hands on the dead coals.

A flash of gray, a winged creature with bristly antennae, dances past my face. The moth brushes my cheek, giving me a sick chill. I rush after Morency, not so eager to be left behind in this lavish maze for neurotic moles.

“This is nothing like the brochure,” I hear whispered. As I’m stifling a chuckle, I realize I must have said the words aloud.

She makes the smallest of noises: perhaps a laugh. A cough. A groan. Perhaps her shoe squeaked. Doubtful. Whatever it is, it’s suppressed. We reach a cramped back staircase, and another man appears at the top of the flight. Try as I might, I can’t make out many of his features in the near darkness. He has a thick neck, broad as a tree trunk, and his skin is as dark as tobacco—smells of it, too. He nods and grunts at Morency, or so I think, and I expect her to introduce us. I nearly wave at him, but a shiver goes through me when I see no sheen to his eyes; they are, if anything, empty black holes reflecting the flattest of glimmers, like the bottom of a well. I look down, face hot, and as he passes, he contorts himself toward the wall to avoid skimming me, the rest of his face hidden in the shadows. His thickly veined hand trembles.

Once free of him, I breathe in, out. More musk, plus that underlying fetidness. My throat itches, and I ascend, expecting a hallway as claustrophobic as the stairs.

Yet the second floor is as richly adorned and magnificent in scale

as the first, with many doorways marked by polished, antique golden numbers lining the hall. We arrive in front of room 7, its gilt numeral askew so that it resembles a drunken, upside-down *V* or a prostrate stick man. I can't resist shifting it into the proper position. Ms. Morency's right eyebrow darts upward, and I grin, though I shouldn't. Of course, the 7 collapses when I release it, and so does my smile.

"Your room, Miss Quercia. Please treat it as you would your own." She appraises me, her eyes lingering on the sweat stains blooming from vulgar spots. "Better than your own." I have a feeling she is thinking to herself: *I can't imagine what sort of hovel you came from.*

The floor of that sales gallery in Recoleta, I want to tell her, with a saucy wink. *Like the other rats, and yet, I was hired by your mistress.* We stand in front of the door with a good meter between us. She looks profoundly disappointed, while still carefully tending her haughty uninterest. A difficult expression to master, especially for another commoner—it must require prolonged exposure to the discontented rich, like the cad upstairs. She draws a key from a fold in her caftan with slender, bony fingers, knuckles double the size of mine.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, squeaking. She glares at me with pencil points for pupils. She's intimidating when she's not reduced to a bun bobbing above my head in the darkness.

"I already told you that we were at dinner." She dangles the key. "We attend dinner together at the same time every night, and we return to our quarters together at the same time every night. There is a system here in the evenings, and you've interrupted us all. Do not expect to flourish here with that kind of behavior. You are a long way from the uncivilized streets of Buenos Aires. You are a long way from anyone who cares for you and tolerates your flaws. Do bear that in mind."

And with that, she drops the key into my hand, turns on her heel, and glides back the way she came, an apparition in all black.

A long way from anyone who cares for me and tolerates my flaws. As if there's a dossier of people meeting that description.

"You would be well-advised to lock the door behind you, if you wish to survive this place," she sends back, her morbid warning echoing down the hall.

The hollow in my chest fills with a choking sort of glue. It's not fear, exactly: It's that I've never frustrated someone so much immediately—in fact, I've never been so despised by a stranger at all, outside of President Videla's uniformed goons. I wonder if she dislikes everyone here or if my tardiness set her off. I can't help but feel as if there's a trait integral to me that disappointed her. As if she caught a whiff of my smell and determined I'm the most odious one here.

You shouldn't be here, I hear whispered again, by a draft, a vengeful ghost, or—the truest source—my traitorous brain. But where is someone like me meant to be?

I drop my bag on the floor and rest my forehead against the door. Morency's mention of dinner reminded me that I'm half-starved, and the lack of an invitation hangs heavy in the air, but I'm too tired to defy her and properly make an enemy. Perhaps if I go hungry, I'll be forgiven. *Morency*. I find myself wishing I had raced up and undid her bun, because I'm certain she would unravel.

I fiddle with the lock and open the door into the damp dark, hoping for the very best.

"Let's do this," I whisper to myself, as if my mother or another guardian angel stands alongside me, watching with a gentle smile.

2

ANGEL: 2020-0

The knife cut too-hot treads, and now I'm here.

I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here . . .

I feel the mantra like a heartbeat, its rhythm giving me new life.

Here won't be heaven, but it'll be close enough. Because if *here* means anything, it's *not that fucking hell*, and that's all that matters now.

I open my eyes.

I'm somewhere pitch-black and splintery-looking. No land, no sky, no water to acquaint myself. I freeze, my imagination blooming with all the unholy mistakes this place could be, this cheap wood box, this airless cavity—

Something glimmers in the darkness, and I freak, half expecting a sub-sandwich-size rat to nibble on my toes. *Welcome to the brave new*

world, Angel. You're what's for dinner. But no, it's not a radioactive pest that's glowing: It's me.

I'm out-of-body. I'm floating. I can't feel my fingers, my toes, but if I squint, I can see their outline, their crystalline shimmer piercing the muggy dark. It hits me at once, like a shiver up the spine: This is a ghostly reprieve. My old hands, with their chewed-up nails and wonky knuckles, my knobby knees that always cracked, my asthmatic lungs that couldn't manage a half mile, my skin swollen with constellations of pus: They're all long gone.

The feeling spreads back into all parts of me gradually, like I'm warming up beside an invisible fire after a spell in the cold. I push my starry arms into the wood guts of the closet walls, and there's no resistance. I go on and on, the asbestos stuffing no more than a cloud. It's magical. Frightening, for someone who should be immune to fear.

I'm glittery Casper, my new flesh made of crystal webbing.

I'm fairy floss, spirited far, far away from the ol' USA's unfortunate present.

I'm fucking free.

I churn myself through the walls and into a small, empty bedroom. Unremarkable, except it's entirely painted in light apricot (one of Mama's favorite colors). *Aha*, I think to myself. RGB color code 253, 213, 177. *I got it, Mama. Gorgeous.* I squeeze through a door marked 7 to find myself in . . . a hall.

The house is unreal, as Charon said. Sconces made of real burnished gold, looking like specially wrapped expensive chocolates; the rugs look lush, mattress-deep; and the ceiling heights . . . ! I sound like Mama when she'd peruse the real estate pages for houses we couldn't afford. *Angel, she'd say, look at this one with the marble kitchen island! And a flipping disposal!*

Mama. I feel that pang at the back of my throat, unavoidable even now, I guess.

Am I still Mama's Angel in this new world, or am I something else entirely?

My first name, the monstrosity that is Angel, is more commonish than people think. Mama named me Angel because she said I was born blessed, with a lucky star over my head. I told her once that's not how angels work, and she said, "*Cállate*." I shortened Angel to El when I didn't feel like the meaning behind it was true anymore—after I wrecked my life beyond repair, and—

A man lopes past me in the hall, built like a pro tennis player, his hairy forearm brushing the air where my abs would be, if they had ever existed—yet I don't feel a thing. He has superpale skin, so stark that his thick shoe-polish-colored hair stands out crisp like dog fur on a purebred husky. Ice-blue eyes, the disconcerting kind you find on one of those huskies, or, better yet, a whitewalker. Cheekbones the writer of a teen magazine listicle could cut herself on.

I'll be real: He's what my brain-dead half sister, Liese, would call a *phenomenal catch*, *like*, Bachelor-worthy, before even speaking two words to him. But his angular face scares me. It's cruel in its symmetry, if that makes any sense at all—like the God that made him perfected his glossy exterior as if to make up for skimping on a bargain-basement interior. I knew one too many people like that.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," I say, flustered by our closeness. Force of habit. Despite all my colossal screwups, despite being *here*, I'm unfailingly polite in person, *always* blushing at strangers, no matter the savage thoughts in my head. And it infuriates me now more than ever. The dude stops, as if he's heard a whisper, but after a second—after a haughty grimace, the kind of expression you see on people who demand managers when coffee isn't scalding hot—he stoops to pick up a sheet of paper on the carpet that I hadn't seen. It reads: *Yesi's Lesson Plan*, followed by carefully printed notes in a beautiful cursive hand.

“Peasants,” he says to himself, crumpling the sheet into a ball. Bitterness pinches his face, and boredom deadens it immediately. He keeps moving, walking with the sort of swagger you have if you’ve known only great comfort in your life. One comfort being the absolute and total certainty that you’re important. If they made hazard signs for assholes, this guy would be the poster child, and I would be the hoodlum scratching *x*’s into his eyes.

I could do almost anything next. And yet, I follow him. A part of me wants to scare the shit out of him if only I could figure out how. We go down the steps at the end of the corridor, through a stone hallway, up a carpeted stairway, and into a royal-blue bedroom with a jaw-dropping vista.

And I recognize it.

It’s the Patagonia of my dreams, ripped straight from one of those bizarro Nat Geo specials they used to screen in middle school—fields of windblown wildflowers unfurling before silvery peaks, their blooms like stars studding the night sky. A shock of blue-white glacier rising from the depths, the kind intrepid explorers probably crunch across with snowshoes or crampons or whatever it is they wear (the closest I got to that kind of equipment was passing a ripped guy in a Patagonia vest on the Third Street Promenade once). It’s a thousand times more vivid than anything I could have ever imagined—my dreams remade in Technicolor. I stumble a little on nothing but air, feeling an invisible knot in my invisible throat as my breath is taken. *Argentina*. As a kid, I watched Mama wordlessly paint this view dozens of times, dabbing in each layer with deference, a respect I now understand. Leo DiCaprio would lose his mind, seeing these glaciers before global warming melted them. Ice—great sheets of pale blue, jagged and milky against an indigo sky. Snowy mountains in the distance, peaks puncturing the haze, and enormous hunchbacked cumulonimbus clouds billowing in to meet them. Impossibly majestic—it brings

the Zapuche stories I heard as a kid to life, each and every one of them set here.

So I'm *here*, I think, for the umpteenth time.

The whitewalker cracks a window and lights a hand-rolled cigarette, coolly observing the expanse. He leans forward, angling for a view of the steps, and I follow.

There's a girl down below.

She's a little bit older than me, I think. Nineteen, twenty. She has softly curled brown hair that falls to her waist in a curtain, framing a nut-brown face. She climbs up the hill of stones below us, wiping sweat from her brow, with a look of total determination on her face, like she's that fierce Patagonian explorer I imagined. But when she glimpses the house, she breaks into a goofy grin, ditches her bag, and punches her fists into the air, like she couldn't care less if anyone's watching. It disarms me, makes me smile for the first time in a while, at no one at all. *Hmm*.

The whitewalker watches her like he's a cat and she's the mouse he plans on batting around until she's good and bloodied. *Peasants*, I hear echoed in my head.

"Stop it," I say, snapping at him. He doesn't hear me.

As she approaches the door, she evens out her shirt and hair, composing herself again—the picture of decorum. I know immediately that she's a teacher, but I wonder what she teaches since she's so young. She knocks politely once. She waits a beat, folding and refolding her hands, and knocks again.

No one answers her—I would, if my crystal hands could get purchase on the doorknob. She flits about the steps, craning her neck to see into windows. She hasn't seen the whitewalker yet, for whatever reason. He takes long drags from his cigarette and sneers at her, and I want to smack him across the head. I jab him on the shoulder instead—my finger darts into the squeegee-flesh of his muscle with

practically zero resistance—and all he does is shiver. But that minuscule movement of his sends a jolt through me. *So you can feel me.* But can he hear me?

“Answer the door, fool,” I hiss.

He doesn’t. He licks his lip, pulls out a book titled *Tropic of Cancer*, and languorously turns the pages, without a single look at the words. He tears out a sheet of the book to roll a cigarette. I punch at him repeatedly, but the magic that had him noticing my touch before has worn off. Minutes pass as I creatively try to shock him and scare him to no avail, but my fingers do dive deeper into his flesh, and I wonder if I could wedge myself into his overtone body. Call out to her through him. As I’m hovering around his shoulders to try, he opens the window, and leans over the edge.

Outside, the girl’s slumped on the steps, eyes closed, chin in hands. She must be so exhausted from the trek up, and now she’s been abandoned on the steps as the darkening clouds encroach upon the house. About to get soaked.

Somewhere inside the house, a bell rings—a pleasurable rolling tickle. Whitewalker registers the noise before looking down at the girl again. He’s smoking a new cigarette; he leans forward and ashes its flaming butt on the girl. He grins so maliciously at her that I expect horns to sprout from his head, and then he pitches the entire damn cigarette at her.

It lands near her back, ash end scorching the stone. Inches from the ends of her hair, which blow closer with the breeze. What a game—sing the new girl. Not even I would try this kind of crap on my worst days. Seething, I launch myself out the window, like a knight in crystalline armor, intent upon helping her, God knows why. Her fist-pumping, maybe.

I land gracefully beside her, Olympic gymnast–status. I swear she smells like sweet bakery bread—the first scent I can kind of pick

up on. I stop myself from savoring it (creepy) and tap her on the shoulder.

“Wake up,” I whisper. Again, God knows why.

She shakes me off, as if roused by a fly.

“Oh, come on. Wake *up*.”

I hover a hand over her cheek to slap her awake. But that’s when I pause.

When she’s still, her eyes shut, the hard edge melts from her features. She’s gentle-looking and delicate, like a fawn, with eyelashes to match and a dusting of freckles. As my hand meets her flushed skin, she slaps a hand over mine, through mine, and I feel her clasping the area between palm and wrist, that delicate spot that sends a tremor through me when touched.

She opens her eyes, catching mine for a moment. My invisible pair. It’s as if, in that gummy layer between sleep and full consciousness, she can see me, the pained and desperate and lonely and lost me. And if the harshness of the whitewalker’s expression scared me, the tenderness of hers is . . . soothing.

Shit.

I know that she can’t see me. But I still fall back, self-conscious. And she cranes her neck up, up toward the window I jumped from a moment ago.

“I know you’re there!” she shouts at the window, coming to her feet, all that intensity rushing back.

Whitewalker pokes his head out. “Forgot the password?” he asks.

“Oh, seriously, shut up,” I say to no one. And I thought I couldn’t hate him more. He watches her with a churlish grin, the kind that the dangerous Casanova would flash the ingenue in Mama’s telenovelas before claiming he loved her. *Do you hear this asshole?* Mama would say, grabbing my hand and cackling. *Don’t fall for his BS, Maria Eugenia. Don’t do it. He’s hollow. Let him become a bad memory, girl.*

“Did you spit on me?” she asks. Spit? Did she think my touch was *him* spitting on her? I cross my crystal arms.

The pink in her cheeks ripens to red. At first, I think she finds the dickhead attractive, because she looks at him the way my sister, Liese, looked at her meathead husband (He-who-must-not-be-named) before he impregnated her with his demon seed. But her jaw sets.

“How’s this for a password, you bastard?” she says, flipping him off. I laugh out loud. If only I’d done the same to every idiot I’d met, instead of cursing them in my head and babbling *Oh, wow, sorry for existing* aloud. It’s less than ideal timing for her gesture, though, because the door before us opens, and I swear those black clouds scoot in and settle overhead as a scowling specter of a woman appears in the frame.

The girl stumbles to her feet, blood draining from her face. But she composes herself quickly, looking unruffled as can be, if a little paler. I feel an alien swell of pride and admiration. I follow her into the house and help her with her bag as best as I can because I can tell she’s beat, and the scary woman deposits her by a door marked with the numeral 7. The same door I came through upon my arrival. Fate. She takes a deep breath, a hopeful smile wavering on her face.

“Let’s do this,” she whispers to herself as she opens the door and flips a switch, flooding the room with light. Another whiff of bakery bread—it’s the smell of the crispy-flaky facturas Mama would sometimes bake at home for breakfast, plus a hint of caramel flan. *You better inhale these before I do*, she would say. *They give me life.*

I stop.

Not because I’m worried the girl will *see* me in the light (ha), nor because I’m super concerned about her privacy. (I grew up with a Latin mom and siblings who wouldn’t leave me alone, and I have far too few boundaries, okay?)

I stop because a vibrant flicker of excitement—of joy I thought

lost to me forever—interrupts my thoughts. So sharp and bright and sweet I could cry.

It whispers that there could be a story waiting for me here in Patagonia.

It whispers that this girl could be in it.

Let's do this.

Snap out of it, Angel. To have thoughts like this now is traitorous, cruel, wrong.

But I can't help that I have a sick history of tending to my weird fantasies like rose beds, fantasies that feel too rooted in something real. Sometimes, in the glow I felt after Mama told me bedtime stories, I imagined my Argentine relatives—the ones I never met, the ones I couldn't be sure existed, the ones Mama must have left behind—chattering around me like protective fairies, gently teasing me, asking me to get off my ass and help with the cooking, laughing together. I could *feel* our bond, our closeness, a loyalty that would never wither and die, even though none of it was real. These stories I told myself kept me going through the dark spots. At least for a while.

I shudder, waiting for the feeling to pass. She shuts the door behind her, and I don't follow her inside.

Angel. Get Charon's warning through your thick-ass skull.

Charon explicitly told me not to become attached to anyone here. Because I'm not like them, no matter what I believe. They can't see me; they can't know me. Our kinship is all in my head—it's even more intangible than I am.

Charon is my unwilling asshole of a spirit-mentor, the Snape to my Harry, if I was a loser who thought that way (I am—don't tell Charon). I met him in the cloud house, a halfway house for spirits built by a cheeky Zapuche god with too much time on his hands and tucked in the sky above the ice.

The first time I saw Charon, I was a little put off, to be honest, because he looked like the worst kind of crackhead bum—the sort of guy Liese wrinkles her nose at on street corners—slumped on his cloud chair inside the cloud house, his lumpy potbelly draped with a stained tank top (it looks like a soiled bandage, but he treats it like a Christmas tree decoration), a scraggly, pube-like beard, and two rodent-gray eyes that either scrunch up to judge or widen with mania. He caught me staring at him even though I was a crystal blur, and he set down his runny cheesesteak. He stood, ranting in a booming voice as his “unique” form of introduction, spittle and juices running down his chin:

*There Charon stands, who rules the dreary coast,
A sordid god: Down from his hairy chin
A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean;
His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;
A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.*

I know now that he meant to freak me out, but I couldn’t stop staring at the legitimate clown-car crash of his performance.

“I can tell you’re watching me, scumdog millionaire,” he said, in more of a bark than anything else. “You’re not invisible to me.” He ripped into his cheesesteak with gray teeth. I didn’t ask him where he got it, nor if I could taste it, even though I wanted to (I know, gross).

“Uh, who are you?” I asked aloud, before wondering if he could hear me. “And why can I see you?”

“I’m fucking Charon. For fuck’s sake.” He’s got a mouth on him. “I’m your spirit guide. Like the boatman across the river Styx.” He sighed. “Little turd hasn’t read the classics.”

“I played a Greek mythology RPG once,” I said.

“Let me guess. You played as . . .” He trailed off, squinting at me, and I felt self-conscious, wondering how much of me he could see.

“Hercules or Athena, depending on my mood.” Obvious hero choices, maybe, but I was scrawny and vulnerable once upon a time, so it was a pleasure to play someone strong, someone fierce.

“Ya don’t say.” He narrowed his eyes further and sucked his teeth with disdain—yet we’ve been semifriends ever since. He’s sort of a godlike presence, I would say. I mean, he’s definitely *not* God. He’s just uninterested and blasé and weird, and above it all, he carefully tends to his perverted sense of humor. And that’s how Catholic God acted toward me a lot of the time. Charon doesn’t leave the cloud house, but he is a treasure trove of information (practical and metaphysical) as juicy as his cheesesteaks. Even if he’s not the most eloquent.

“It’s going to be sick in the house,” he told me that day.

“Um, yeah,” I said, being meek and bland as always, with a decent lacquering of sarcasm that a stranger wouldn’t notice. “Sounds sick.”

“Show some respect,” Charon said, seeing right through me. “You being here and not in your own personal hell is all thanks to the Zapuche tribe. One of their goddamn shamans, to be specific.” He fought a lecherous grin, as if the shaman was an ex-lover whose warm skin he could still feel. “Now listen to me, kid. And listen good. Time is circular to the Zapuche—like a stream their spirits can dip into anywhere. It’s a gorgeous concept, isn’t it? Anyway, stop me if you know all of this”—but really don’t stop me, his eyes were telling me—“but this shaman, she cursed this pocket of land seized from the tribe by European colonizers during her lifetime, turning this spot into a frothy rapid, churning together the Other Place and their ruined world over and over and over again. So besides the average Zapuche spirits roaming around this place, there are Others from all ages, too—drawn here like bees to honey, like moths to a flame, like cockroaches to sweet, steaming piles of garbage. Dip in, dip out, dip in, dip out, but only as an Other, and only in this one stretch of

metaphysically spumy stream—the only stretch left to Others. *That* is sick.”

“I think you’re mixing metaphors,” I said, even though I was devouring his every word. I knew I was lucky to be here—that it was an alternative to my personal hell.

He looked down his nose at me. “Did you even listen to a single word I said, you cockroach?”

Later I would know that calling me an insect was his way of expressing paternal affection. I am the pretty little cockroach Charon never had.

After I leave the nut-brown girl in her room, I shimmy through doors and walls to find more activity and end up in a room with a thirty-foot table, covered in outrageous, steaming platters of food and intricately etched crystal pitchers of drink. A feast unlike any I’ve seen outside of illustrations of grandiose royal gatherings in history books. At least twenty sit at their places:

A tall, icy-blond woman at the head, rearranging her silverware with a precision belying her distress, which is tangible in the air around her. The specter who answered the door to her right, sucking in all air and heat and light. Whitewalker, frowning with boredom and guzzling great quantities of a beverage as deep and rich as wine. Beside him, a series of young girls, chattering among themselves, glistening and gleaming with too-perfect youth, like life-size Bratz dolls. One twirls her braids, staring into space. Another secretly carves an initial into the wood of the table by her leg. A couple press gloss to their lips and pout for invisible boys. There are ten little girls, if you include a tiny girl with pale ringlets, seated away from them, who seems to wither before them, not quite here, not quite there. She looks no different from the little girls farther down the table, except for this studied unease of hers.

A man with short, curly white hair and a faraway smile scribbles into a pad. A woman with cat-eye glasses twitches her nose, pupils darting from face to face. A second, wrinklier woman squirrels food into her napkin, then cracks her knuckles on the table to draw attention away from her lap. As if anyone would care if a fist's worth of food disappeared from the overwhelming spread. Last, a flat-faced man with a neck the width of a fire hose snorts to himself. And there, an empty space. The new girl's space.

They're finishing their meal. They shovel food into their faces, as if they're learning how to consume the slabs of meat. Even though their chewing is nasty, watching them makes me miss eating. I used to cook a lot with Mama, making a mess as we whipped up the sweet corn empanadas and gnocchi and milanesas she ate in her youth in Argentina. That food fed some part of her soul that I never came to know, hide it as she did.

I grasp at an empanada in front of the uneasy Shirley Temple look-alike for kicks, and the pastry moves a millimeter or so, to my surprise. The girl startles. I wave a hand before her, and she squints at the faint glow. Maybe I'm imagining her reaction. But I feel a weird little kick in my chest, like a leprechaun's giggling his ass off. I laugh to let it out, and she shoots up, her chair scraping against the stone floor.

Everyone at the table looks at her, at us, and at the icy-blond woman at the head of the table. The specter smolders, and not in the sexy, Liese-approved whitewalker way.

"Whatever is the matter, Yesi?" says the icy-blond woman. "You haven't been excused."

"Right," Yesi answers. "A bit of a cramp in my leg. That's all. I'm sorry, Madame De Vaccaro."

"Please sit."

With a crooked smile, Yesi obeys. Her hardened face tells me she's much older than I thought.

Within minutes, Madame De Vaccaro dabs at her mouth with the corner of a napkin and rises from the table. The little girls and the whitewalker follow her in one direction. The others follow the specter in a loose congregation back toward what must be the staff quarters. I wait for Yesi. I follow her down a hallway, toward her room. She makes a wrong turn, separating from the pack, and stops in the dark, blinking at the bare walls with clouded eyes, lost and blind.

"I'm Yesi," she whispers, caressing the face of an invisible person. "I know you're there."

"You do?" I ask. I remember: She must be Yesi of the crumpled lesson plan. Another teacher.

"I know you're there," she repeats, her fingers curling closed. I can't tell if she can hear me. She trembles. A vein forms a ridge on her forehead. "Please. Won't you talk to me?"

And though I should be relieved to be sensed—even thrilled—I only bubble with an acidic rage, hot and thick in my invisible belly.

A teacher shouldn't be trying to make friends with us, just as I shouldn't be making friends with them. It'll make life more difficult for her. For everyone.

She should be locking herself in her room and praying. She should be guzzling bleach. She should be jumping from the roof onto the ice.

The Others like me don't even remember what good is. The Others want to suck the joy from the lives of the usurper-innocents, to instill fear and suspicion, to breed weakness and mistrust.

Sure, maybe some of them are like pixies, wreaking innocent, small-potatoes havoc. But some are the kind of soulless creature that likes to watch live-feeds of thirteen-year-old girls hanging themselves to feel something. And they think they're owed a cosmic hall pass

here, as if something of theirs was taken from them in the past, as Zapuche holy land was taken from its tribe.

“You should go,” I say to her. “You should hide.” I shudder, watching the vein pulse near her scalp. “Stop talking to us.”

She doesn’t respond. As I float off, she stands in silence, waiting for an answer that will never come. Attempting to quiet her quaking forearms with unsteady hands. Despite her fear, she looks as innocent and trusting as Mama in her hospital bed, nodding yes at the doctor telling her she might squeeze out a few more weeks if she followed his painful instructions. I feel sympathy for her, this stranger. I feel guilt for not helping her.

I look at my own crystal hands as I float. I thought that I would be free here. I thought I could distract myself with pathetic stabs at humor, with random bursts of activity, and with that old friend *anger*, if all else failed. And truth be told, my familiar pain does feel lighter, more diaphanous, as if it’s threaded loosely through me instead of a weighty, suffocating chain around my neck.

But the guilt hasn’t dissipated like the rest of that physical crap. It seems to be growing. Now it’s tumorous, enormous, the size of a little boy clinging to an ankle. *Why did you do what you did, Angel?* Monster. Imbecile. Waste of space, even when hardly anything is left of you.

I stop in the hallway outside room 7 and flit up through the skylight. It’s inky-dark outside, and there are so many stars—dozens of them carpeting the sky.

Angel. Am I blessed to have been spirited to this place, when all I wanted was to be a body, sealed in a coffin, soul fogging up the lid like steam until it dissipates?

I watch Patagonia’s constellations for a sign—finding nothing. You’d think a damn lucky star could guide you instead of winking all self-satisfied over your head.