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### The Kudzu Bible

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# THE KUDZU BIBLE


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A Senior Honors Thesis project submitted to the Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree


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# THE KUDZU BIBLE

Davie Marchant

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# The Magician

willpower, desire, “as above, so below”

It was June and I was just about to turn nine. That’s when my family used to go up to the mountains for the summer. My dad’s Ford Explorer would start beeping every few minutes. My mom said that it was because the trunk door was broken and wouldn’t close right. The sound of the beeping makes me itch and my eyes hurt. I looked out the window, over the Blue Ridge Mountains and wondered, as I did often, how much of the land had never been stepped on by humans.

There was one turn on the way up that, as you rounded the corner, the temperature dropped ten degrees. Almost as if you were no longer in Echo Valley, South Carolina, but somewhere else entirely. I knew we were approaching it by the landmarks along the way. My two favorites were the big haunted house on a hill and a run-down basketball court outside of a trailer park. Every time we drove by, I would mentally track how much of it had been taken over by kudzu. I had been doing this for a while now and most of it was entirely engulfed. There was an RV down there, too. But that, as well, was starting to disappear. I wondered to myself, *If I could get under there, maybe I could get into the RV and hide away.*

Once we had arrived in Caesars Head, it was evening and my little brother, Thomas, was anxious to get outside. My mom rushed us along, telling me to stay with him. There weren’t many other kids in Caesars Head—there weren’t many people at all, really. Recently, however, a new family had purchased a house near us up in Caesars Head. Their kids were named Gracie and Max and they were the same ages of my brother and me.

“It’ll be so wonderful for Cricket and Thomas to have friends their own age!” My mom was ecstatic about the prospect.

My brother was half-way down our long driveway when I realized what my mom had said. I grabbed my pink jacket and chased after him.

Gracie and Max’s house was being renovated when we walked up to their front door. The rather old cabin that they had purchased was being painted and a hot tub was being added to the porch. It was ugly.

Thomas knocked on the door as I stood back. *What if they open the door and there's a bunch of loud noise? Or they smell really bad?* I decided to stay a safe distance. After a moment, Gracie answered the door.

"Are you Thomas?" she asked.

"Yeah. Are you Gracie?" he responded.

She nodded.

"This is my sister, Cricket," Thomas motioned at me.

Gracie peeked over Thomas' shoulder and looked me up and down.

"I'm Max!" a voice behind Gracie said, as a younger boy stepped out.

The four of us began walking toward the little neighborhood playground. I tried to find a way to incorporate myself into the conversation, but it felt like there was a wall between myself and the rest of them. I saw Gracie look at me and I squeaked out a "hello." She, in return, gave me a half smile and turned back toward the boys.

*What do girls usually say to each other? Maybe you should say you like her shoes. Well, no. Jesus. Ask her what her favorite school subject is? No... wait. I think only old people ask questions like that. Do people my age ask other people their age questions about that? I don't think anyone has done that to me...*

"—Cricket!" Thomas smacked me in the arm.

"What? God," I snapped out of it.

"Are you ok playing Ghost in the Graveyard?"

*What are my other options?*

"Sure."

Nothing made my insides itch more than games like this, where people screamed when they found you and when they were running and when they won and when they lost. Thomas wanted to be the ghost first, so he went off to hide. That left me behind with Gracie and Max to count.

"One... two... three..." Gracie began counting.

Max stared up at me the way little kids do before they're taught not to stare.

"Four... five... six..." I chimed in, hoping he would stop. He did.

When we were done counting, we all went our separate ways to find Thomas. Whoever found him first would alert the others and they would try to run back to the base before the ghost could tag anyone.

Armed with a flashlight, I crept toward the woods. Thomas was hiding in the big magnolia tree, I was sure of it. Mostly because that's where he hides every time. Instead of going that way, I took a detour. I turned my flashlight off and stood still as my eyes adjusted. One time at camp, I had a counselor that took us on a nature walk at night where you couldn't use a flashlight and only the rods and cones in your eyes. Since then, I always walk at night without a flashlight. That way, you see more than just what's in front of you.

At the end of the road, I approached the old Earl cabin. Part of the porch was sliding off the side, as the house was in total disrepair, but my dad had shown me a secret before: if you walked to the other side of the porch, it was sturdy enough to walk on—and there was the prettiest view of Pickens and Anderson you ever saw. You have to be cautious of bears while walking at night, though. I'd seen what bears had done to our trashcans at home and I did not fancy being on the receiving end of *that*.

I crept onto the porch, glancing around me for signs of life. On one side, the balcony was made of sturdy stone, so I hopped on top and swung my legs over the side. Staring into the night sky, I examined how hard it was to decipher what was sky and what was land, as the ground hosted a number of twinkling lights that occurred at the same randomness as the stars above.

This is what I loved more than anything: silence in a place that seemed to have the best intentions. Sitting in that stationary atmosphere—in a place that had, inexplicably, always been old—made time feel infinite. As if I could sit there, completely still, for the rest of my life and never miss anything.

“Cricket! Cricket?” like a knife to my forehead.

At first, I couldn't move.

“They found me, Cricket. Where are you?” I heard Thomas call out.

There was a twinge of panic in his voice as he approached.

*What do I do?* I panicked, as I realized they were incredibly close.

*If I walk out right now it'll look weird. And I might scare them by accident. I don't want to scare them. Will they think I'm weird for not using my flashlight? What if they make fun of me for that? I don't think I can handle that.*

I waited for them to pass me, before tiptoeing up to the main road behind them. From there, I walked up behind them, planning on acting as though I was catching up with them. However, as I was about to start my plan, I tripped over a shoe lace and fell.

"Cricket?" Thomas shone a light on me.

I looked up at the group while I tried to fight back tears. The fall didn't hurt much, but the way that Gracie and Max looked at me—or at least how I perceived it—made my body shake.

*How did I mess that up? Stupid.*

"Were you following us?" Gracie looked at me sideways.

"I was trying to catch up," I stared at my shoes.

Thomas was clearly flustered.

"I literally thought you had fallen off a cliff and died," he exclaimed.

"I'm sorry." I kept staring at my shoes.

At home, Thomas told my mom about the incident. In his words, it sounded like I had hitchhiked to Cedar Mountain and back. My mom gave him a hug.

"You know that it's not you, right? That she doesn't care about anyone," she told him, before turning her attention toward me.

Before I could think, I was speaking—as if getting ahead of it would cushion the impact.

"He's being dramatic. It wasn't that bad and he knows it," I blurted out.

Her gaze was harder than it was before.

"He couldn't find me for, like, five minutes—he gets panicked—I catch up with them—everything's alright—and now I'm in trouble?" I tried to reason.

"You left him with two strangers—who don't know their way around yet, by the way—in the dark," she snapped, "Can't you see how upset he is?" Thomas sniffled.

"It's okay, mom. I feel better now," Thomas interjected, nose still stuffy. She didn't flinch.

“You had better think about your actions and pray that the Lord softens your heart,” she looked down on me, “If you don’t get it together, you’re going to have a hard time in life.”

I curled up in the armchair that I was sitting in and rubbed my face against the soft material. Rocking myself back and forth, I kept my eyes trained on *Scooby Doo* playing on the TV.

When I woke up the next morning, the fog had lifted off the mountains. The sun was out and my brother was anxious to get out and get going.

“Cricket, come on. Please!” He pulled on my arm.

“Y’all have to eat breakfast first,” my mom insisted, “Cricket, have you brushed your hair in the last year?”

I tried to push it out of my face, but she insisted on fixing it herself.

“Is that new?” she pointed to the book in my hands.

“I finished my other one yesterday,” I said, trying to pull past her.

“Cricket, come on. Are you trying to make it harder to make friends?” she pulled the book toward her to read the cover. “*The Legend of the Bell Witch*? Cricket...”

“It’s nonfiction!” I protested.

“Obviously ‘The Bell Witch’ is not nonfiction. Come on. When are you going to stop reading about fairies and things that don’t exist?”

Before I could answer, Thomas had interrupted.

“Mom, what’s for dinner? I might go hang out with Max tonight,” he said.

“Chicken pot pie. You just need to make sure and tell me if you decide you aren’t going to eat with us,” she started, but was interrupted.

“What?!” I couldn’t believe it. I do *not* eat chicken pot pie. *It’s the only thing I don’t eat.*

My mom sighed, looked at me with irritation.

“You know we haven’t had time to go to the grocery store yet. I had it frozen for us,” she tried to explain.

“I don’t like chicken pot pie.” There was stress in my voice.



“Then maybe you can go with Thomas to Gracie and Max’s house tonight,” she fired back and put out her hand for my book. I handed it over.

“Where are we going?” I asked Thomas.

“Max and Gracie said that we were going swimming somewhere.”

As we approached their house, they came running out, towels in hand.

“Hi!” I tried again with Gracie. *That wasn’t so bad.*

“Oh hey...” she responded. *I’ll take it.*

We walked down to the creek, which was through the forest a little way. It was only June, so the water was still frigid, even if the air was warm.

The others started wading into the creek as I sat on a rock and pulled a spare book, *Cryptozoology of America*, out of my backpack. I flipped it open to a random page: Sprites and the Fae. I had just started reading when I heard a small voice.

“Are you Cricket?” It came from behind me.

I turned around and looked in the direction of the sound.

“Down here!”

I looked down to see a tiny fairy sitting on a rhododendron leaf. I looked at my book and then back at her. *Almost identical.*

When I nodded, she stuck her hand out. I offered my pointer finger.

“Nice to meet you!” she exclaimed, “My name is Laurel! Like Mountain Laurel!”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I said, still cautious.

“Remember all the fairy houses you built last summer?”

I nodded.

“I’m one of the fairies that moved in!”

*Ohhh!! That makes more sense.*

“Are there more living in the other houses?” I asked.

“Tons! We call it Sleepy Hollow.”

I smiled. “I like that!—”

My thoughts were cut off by a splash of water and Gracie’s voice.

“Who are you talking to?”

I spun back around and looked down at my feet, "Myself."

In the creek, Max and Thomas played and splashed around.

"Knock it out, you two!" Gracie told them. But as soon as they started splashing her, she was in on it too. The three of them laughed and threw water and leaves at each other. I sat from a rock and watched them, which was perfectly fine for me.

"Cricket, don't you want to get in?" Thomas asked.

"No, thank you," I responded.

"You can't swim?" Max asked me, genuinely curious, "because I just learned how to swim and I can hold my breath underwater for fifteen whole seconds now. It's easy! See!" He ducked his head under the water, but Gracie pulled him back up.

"She's just sitting there, talking to herself like a freak," Gracie said. I looked up for a moment to see her staring into my eyes.

"Hey! She's not a freak," Thomas fought back, "Cricket, come on and get in."

*I don't want to get in. Please, leave me alone.* I shook my head.

"You wanna know what I think?" she teased as she tried to look me in the eye. I looked down. "I think that she's scared. I think she's a weirdo. And worse, I think she's a stuck-up bitch."

"I'm not a stuck-up bitch," I said, eyes still at my shoes, "I just don't like getting in the water."

"Is there something wrong with you?" When I looked up, Gracie was standing right in front of me.

"It's okay if you're special. My mom says that we still need to play with you," she put her hand on my shoulder.

After that, I don't exactly remember what happened. I just remember my body tensing up, my brother yelling "She's not special Gracie!" and the feeling of my hand hitting Gracie's face. And then I was running.

Deep into the woods, I stopped for a moment to decide where to go. *I'm so dead. Thomas is going to tell mom and then I'll be in trouble. And I still have to eat chicken pot pie tonight.*

"Cricket! Cricket!" I looked down to see Laurel catching her breath on a mushroom.

"I—I—" I was on the verge of tears. Behind us, I could hear Gracie sobbing and someone running through the woods.

“Come this way! I know a place to hide!” she said, and fluttered ahead of me.

We approached an area covered in kudzu and Laurel gestured toward a small opening.

“If you go in there, you’ll find a door. Don’t go in unless you have to,” she said, and flew away.

I pushed the vines back and squeezed into the underbrush. Sure enough, an old wooden door, stained with dirt and covered in moss. On the top, I could make out remnants of what used to be painted flowers. I crouched next to it and peered through the vines to see what was going on. *No, no. Please don’t. Please, please, please. Just leave me alone.*

Thomas, Gracie, and Max had gathered outside the vines. They split off a bit and looked in separate directions. That meant Gracie was walking right toward me. Panicked, I backed toward the door. In doing so, I stepped on something and fell, crashing to the ground.

“Guys! I think she’s over here!” Gracie yelled.

Without any other choice, I opened the door and entered Kudzu.

# The Emperor

divine paternal, comfort, protection

The door closed and darkness enveloped me. I stood still, hand over my mouth to cover my breathing. I crouched on the floor, crisscross-applesauce, and tried to listen for the others.

“Did you find her?” I heard Thomas shout. I shuffled back, afraid that they could burst through the door at any minute.

After a few moments of silence, I crept back toward the door. I reached for the handle, but felt nothing. Feeling around, I searched the wall for a doorknob or anything that could help me navigate the dark room.

Finally, my hands landed on a hand-held lamp. I turned the knob on the side and it illuminated the room. Around me was an old house, covered in dust. It looked as if it hadn't left the 1960s—as if the last inhabitant had just up and walked out one day, to never come back. *Something feels... off.*

I looked for the door that I had come in through, but there was nothing—just an open doorframe into the next room. I peered into the other room to find a kitchen with faded countertops and plaid curtains. I tiptoed in.

Once in the kitchen, I had a better idea of the layout of the little shotgun house. However, something about it still seemed weird. The lamp helped, but I still felt like there should be more light coming through the dirty windows. I walked over to the sink and it hit me. *Everything here is so small... or maybe I'm big?* I continued investigating.

Down the hallway, I found a front door to the house. I tested the door handle, which groaned before turning. I took a deep breath, clutched my book, and opened the door.

The sky on the other side was in twilight, and above, the Milky Way was visible through the towering trees. Behind me, the house was engulfed in kudzu. It draped over the roof and curled around the water spout... but it stopped at the base of the stairs, as if an invisible force was preventing it from traveling further.

*Where am I?* I walked toward the edge of the forest, where a worn, stone path started, leading out of sight into the trees. *Should I?*

I stepped a little closer. *I'll just go in for long enough that the others give up trying to find me.*

The trail was lined with beautiful mountain laurels and hydrangeas. The light coming through the trees was soft and shone light blue moonlight. Up ahead, blue fireflies floated in endless patterns through the forest.

As I got closer, I realized that they were not fireflies at all, but more fairies. There was a low, harmonious buzz like the sound of tuning forks coming from the places where they were most concentrated. They didn't seem to mind my existence at all. In fact, most carried on their day without a second glance.

In front of me, a family of rabbits passed across the path. They didn't seem to mind me either. One even stopped to sniff my shoe for a moment before continuing. *Nobody is bothered by my existence here.*

My eyes landed on a tiny chipmunk standing off the trail at the base of a tree. It looked up at me with big eyes, as if it wanted to engage with me. *Should I step off the trail? You don't know where you're going. Mom says you can't touch animals you don't know. She'd be really mad if she found out you're doing this. Ladies don't touch wild animals.*

The chipmunk let out a small squeak. *Well, I can't say no to that.*

I approached the small critter, trying not to scare it. I reached out my palm to it with caution. It sniffed my hand before putting its front paws up on my fingers and pulling itself up onto my hand.

I cupped it in my palms and brought it closer to my face.

"Hiya," I whispered. It chattered back at me, as if responding. *What if it has germs? What if mom finds out?*

I sighed and put the chipmunk down. *I need to figure out how to get back.*

The trail led me back to the peculiar house covered in kudzu. The back of the house touched what seemed like endless amounts of kudzu, choking trees and obscuring what might be entire buildings. *Surely, there is another way out. I'll bet that I can go through the kudzu around back and find my way.*

I approached the edge of the kudzu abyss and pushed my hand through the vines, anticipating a critter to crawl up my arm and bite me. Instead, my hands collided with a cool, stone wall.

I felt up, down, and side-to-side. The wall stretched as far and wide as I could feel. *Damn it. What now?* The palms of my hands started to itch.

I flopped to the ground. *What to do what to do what to do.*

The grass felt cool on my skin. I rocked back and forth in it and considered my options.

*I could go back into the house and try to find the door I came through. No, I'd rather not go back in there. What if someone lives there?* I shuddered. *I'll just follow the wall and see where it leads...*

My thoughts were cut off by the sound of approaching footsteps. Goosebumps covered my body. I took a breath and looked over my shoulder.

Behind me, stood a dark figure. It was a black, fluffy mass with wings coming out of its shoulder blades. Its most prominent feature was its shining red eyes.

It crept toward me, hunched over like it was inspecting me. It reached out, with caution, to touch my hair. I looked up at it, making eye contact. *Please don't touch me. Please don't touch me. Please don't touch me.*

It stopped. Instead, it looked down. Its hand, which was more of a paw, seemed to point toward my hands. I looked down at them. *Oh no.* I had been unconsciously scratching at my palms and they had started to bleed.

The Creature backed away. Looking back at me, it walked into the house. *Should I run? Maybe? Yes.*

I got up, but my ankle got twisted on a vine and I fell to the ground, crying out involuntarily.

When I looked up, the Creature was walking back toward me. I held still. It crouched next to me and gently covered me in a blanket. I started shaking as the Creature helped me up and guided me toward the house.

It guided me toward the shabby, but incredibly comfortable, couch in the sitting room. In the light of a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, I finally saw the Creature fully. It had soft, puffy black hair, big, red eyes, and was shaped like a bird without a beak. From eye level, I noted that it was only about four feet tall. Perhaps the most curious, it had fluffy bat ears that fiddled about, as if to communicate something. *Maybe that's how it talks.*

It left the room for a moment, only to come back with some type of ointment and bandages. It reached its paw out to me and waited. I hesitated before giving it my palm. It dabbed on the ointment, which stung. *Tea tree oil.* The Creature saw me wince and stopped for a moment until I relaxed.

When the ointment was lathered on my cuts, it placed bandages around my hands. Then, it stood back up and waddled out the door. I was left alone.

I leaned back into the couch. *What to do what to do what to do...*

My heartbeat started to subside. I laid down on the couch, staring up at the metal ceiling. *It's not going to eat you. If it wanted to eat you, it wouldn't have put medicine on your hands. You don't have anywhere else to go...* and with that, I faded off to sleep.

I woke up to the Creature nudging me. When it saw that I was awake, it shuffled back a little before offering me a bowl filled with soup. I pulled the blanket over my shoulders and took the bowl from the Creature.

The Creature left and came back with another bowl. It sat across from me in a small, wicker chair.

I took my first bite of soup. *Tomato. I love tomato soup.* I took a few more bites.

The Creature leaned forward and offered me a bagel. I accepted.

We ate together in silence for a while, before the Creature took our empty bowls out of the room.

When it came back, the Creature had something in its hands. It stepped toward me and reached out with an offering: my book. *I must have dropped it when I fell down earlier!*

The outside was muddy and some of the pages were bent, but something else caught my eye. I smoothed my hand over the front cover. The paper had gotten wet and ripped half-way down, but over it, some sort of masking tape had been applied with care.

I looked back up. The Creature waited for me, as if it sought approval. I smiled.

Then, something clicked. *Wait a minute! The Creature looks like Mothman.*

I flipped through the pages of my book until I found a spread on Mothman, the cryptid from West Virginia. I showed it to him, smiling.

The Creature leaned in and looked it, ears up in alarm.

"...Mothman?" it asked.

"You can talk?!" I yelped.

"You can talk?" it responded, "Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"Why would you speak English?" I shot back. The Creature looked at me, confused.

"How do you expect me to get anything done if I can't speak English?"

*It's got a point.* I shrugged.

"Why didn't you say anything before this?" I asked, "I'm not the only one here that can communicate." It sighed.

"To be honest, I didn't think it would get this far. I thought you'd be scared of me," it admitted.

"I'm not scared of you." Its head tilted to the side and ears fluffed up.

"Really?" it asked. I nodded.

"Who are you?" I implored, "Are you Mothman?"

The Creature sat back down in the wicker chair and took a deep breath.

"I have many names. The Mayans called me Camazotz and I was a feared by the Mesoamericans. Abrahamic religions call me the Angel of Death..." He sighed, "In America they call me Mothman."

I rocked back and forth, thinking on this. *Ok... this makes sense.*

"Are you a Moth-man... or a Moth-woman?" I half-joked.

The Creature relaxed.

"Neither... but for your purposes, let's go with Mothman," he said.

"Hello Mothman, I'm Cricket!" I stuck out my hand out and we shook hands.

"Go back to sleep," he told me.

"I have to get back home before dinner," I responded. He shook his head at me.



“Time moves differently in Kudzu. When you get back, it’ll only be seconds after you got here. Does that make sense?” he asked. I thought for a moment before responding.

“Yes, but not really... and what is Kudzu?” I asked. He laughed.

“Go to sleep. I’ll tell you in the morning,” he said, and walked out of the room.

I fell back asleep on the couch and woke up. I looked out the window to find the sky in the same twilight as when I arrived, but in a different hue. Instead of blue, the sky was a tinted a dark, burnt orange.

I went into the kitchen to find Mothman reading a thick novel and drinking coffee. He turned to me.

“Hiya, Cricket!” he said.

“Hiya, Mothman!” I chirped back.

“I don’t know what humans like, so I made both French fries and mashed up worms.” He pushed two bowls toward me.

“Thank you!” I smiled, “I’ll take the French fries for sure.”

“Those hands feeling ok?” he asked.

“Yeah... oh, they’re fine!” I started, “So, what’s the deal with the sky?”

“The way it changes colors?” he asked. I nodded. “Well, here in Kudzu, we don’t tell time by the sun and the moon. Instead, we measure the days in colors of the rainbow.” My eyes widened.

“What’s Kudzu?” I asked, “Not the plant, I mean. I know what that is. What is... this place?”

“Well, Cricket, that’s a complex question,” he said, “but to make a long story short, Kudzu is its own world, hidden away from the rest of society. It’s home to those who got lost wandering around what’s left of the outside world.”

“Then why are you here?” I asked.

“I’ve always lived on the outskirts of society, where people are oppressed and weary. The world says that I bring bad luck everywhere I go, when in reality, I’m going to places where people are hurt on purpose—as a guardian angel of sorts.” He paused.

“It just seems as though, recently, I’ve been in the American South more and more,” he continued, “I stay in Kudzu because I

can't go into your world anymore. It's safer here—nobody remembers it anymore.”

“But... how did it get here?” I implored.

“That, my friend,” Mothman started, “is a strange and exciting story...”

# The Moon

illusion, anxiety, hidden enemies

“I thought you were from West Virginia.” I squinted at Mothman as he shook his head. We walked along a warmly-lit path through the forest.

“I’m not ‘from’ anywhere,” he responded. *Well clearly that doesn’t make sense.*

“Okay...” I started, “Do you have parents?”

“Why are you asking personal questions?” he laughed.

“Why aren’t you answering them?” I shot back. He stopped, put his hands up.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, “Light me up.” *That* took me off guard. I had to scramble to get something together. *Nobody ever lets me get this far.*

“What’s your favorite food?” I blurted out. *What the heck was that???*

“Olives,” Mothman cut back, without hesitating. My jaw dropped.

“You like olives, too? I love olives, but my mom says that if I keep eating them, my skin will turn purple,” the words came out of my mouth like diarrhea.

“Well that’s a lie,” Mothman started walking again, “I’ve been eating olives since they were invented. Do I look purple to you?” I shook my head. “Exactly,” he said, “now what else do you want to know?”

“How does time move differently here?” I asked.

“We didn’t invent time here,” he said, “therefore it doesn’t exist.”

“What do you mean you ‘didn’t invent time’?” I rolled my eyes, “That’s ridiculous. Time moves whether or not you believe in it.”

“That’s what *you* think,” he stopped to look at a flower on the side of the road, “We still have seasons here. We have day and night—but we don’t have calculated time and clocks and schedules because we don’t need them.”

He motioned toward the flower. I reached out to touch it, taking care to avoid any stickiness or thorns on the stem, but my hand felt something else: smooth, if not soft, matte texture. The

entire flower was made of some kind of organic material that felt mellow in my hands.

“That flower has lived and died here millions of times. To disturb it would be a rip in the tapestry of kudzu,” he continued.

“Does that mean that nothing dies in Kudzu?” I asked. He smiled, as if nostalgic of my ignorance.

“Nothing ever *really* dies,” he said.

About thirty minutes later—at least, that’s what I guessed since time doesn’t exist—we stopped for lunch. There was a big boulder right off the side of the trail, so we perched on top of that and pulled out our bagged lunches.

I opened mine up. *Thank god.* Inside, a pimento cheese sandwich, toasted, on sourdough bread.

“How did you know?” I asked. Mothman shrugged.

“You told me yesterday,” he took a bite of his sandwich. *Did I?* “Right before you went to sleep. You told me something about chicken pot pie—”

“—My mom made chicken pot pie for dinner,” I cut in.

“Exactly—that’s it! And then you told me that you like grilled pimento cheese sandwiches,” he moved on, “So I had an idea for someone you should meet while you’re here...”

I could hardly focus. *I can’t believe he remembered that. Nobody ever listens to that kind of thing.*

“—her name is Selene and she lives at the base of Table Rock,” Mothman continued.

“What’s Table Rock?” I asked.

“Well, back when the Cherokee lived here their gods and goddesses would meet at one mountain in particular because it was the shape of a god-sized table,” he explained.

“Ok, I guess that makes sense,” I started, “Do they still meet there?”

“They... well,” he stopped, “that was before the kudzu arrived...” The end trailed off as though Mothman began thinking of something else.

“Do the Cherokee still live here?” I tried to re-engage him.

“Not since the kudzu,” he said, distant, “The kudzu changed everything.”

We continued walking until the sky turned a deep pink. The path we were walking had turned rocky.

“Only a little farther,” Mothman told me, “Are you feeling alright?”

“Cool and groovy!” I said. Mothman laughed. “Fine and dandy.”

“We can take a break if you need to,” he said.

“I’m an *excellent* hiker,” I responded. This made him laugh again.

“I’ll take your word for it!” We continued up the terrain.

Little by little, I started to make out a clearing ahead that looked over a lake of water.

When we approached the edge, Mothman stopped, looking out over the water, and waited. I looked over to him to see if he was seeing something that I wasn’t, but there was nothing.

“Wait,” he said, as if he was anticipating my question.

I stood next to him, staring off toward the water the same way he did. Then, out of nowhere, the clouds started to open up above, revealing a beautiful, full moon.

“That’s one of the things you miss out on in your world,” he said, nudging me without looking away from the water, “The moon? She’s full every night here.”

I twiddled my thumbs and bounced to myself, waiting for the big reveal. The moon reflected on the water in ripples, as if it was dancing.

“Here she comes,” Mothman said under his breath. In front of us, the rippling moonlight started to swirl unnaturally. It seemed to come to life right before us, twirling a skirt of moonlight around with it. Next to me, leaves began to fly off the ground and swirl in circles.

I kept my eyes trained on the water as the light and the leaves joined together to form the outline of a beautiful woman. She turned toward us, skin glowing from the inside, and tiptoed toward me, sending circles through the lake of black glass.

As she came closer, I realized that, under her blue skin, she was the same hue as the moon. She illuminated the ground that she walked on, and below, the ground she walked on seemed to liven up a bit, as she stepped; the flowers would open a little more and the grass seemed to turn greener. I looked up at her in awe.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Selene, Great Mother of Kudzu,” she reached out her hand to me and gave me a firm handshake.

“Cricket,” I said, still in shock, “You’re beautiful.” She smiled at me and crouched to my level. When I looked into her eyes, it was like seeing the universe: quasars, comets, entire galaxies. She held my hands and stared into my eyes some more.

“What do you see?” she asked me after an endless moment.

“Everything...” I said, “I see... life.”

“You see me for who I am,” she said, “I am the purveyor of life.” She stood up, gently leading me by my hand toward the water. I hesitated. *I don’t want to get wet.* I followed her anyway.

At the edge of the lake, she stopped and pointed. “What do you see?”

I looked into the water, expecting to see my reflection, but no one looked back at me.

“Oh dear,” Selene said, “is that really how you see yourself?”

“I... I don’t see anything,” I looked up at her for an answer.

“Yes,” she said, “Yes, exactly.”

I stared a little longer, trying to strain my eyes to focus on something... anything. After a moment, an image faded to the surface. I squinted, barely able to make it out, but soon realized I was looking at a figure.

A terrifying woman materialized before my eyes, though still blurry in the water. Her eyes were dark, her face thin and pointy. She opened her mouth, as if to scream at me, but Selene pulled me away from the shore. I fell onto the ground in shock.

“Do not gaze too long,” she said.

“Who was that?” My eyes looked up to hers with concern. Selene looked at me, then Mothman, then back at me. She took a deep breath and held my hands.

“There is treasure in Kudzu—” she started.

“—Is that what will happen to me?” I gulped, unable to listen to what she was saying. Selene sat next to me and ran her hand over my back in calming motions.

“Not if you can find your reflection,” she started, “If you know who you are, no one can take that from you. Even her.” I rocked back and forth.

“It’s okay, Cricket,” Mothman tried to comfort me.

“Cricket,” Selene pulled my attention back to her. I looked up to her with fear.

“What *do* we do?” I whimpered.

“You need to find the treasure,” she responded. I squinted at her.

“What?” *What does that have to do with anything?* “What’s the treasure?”

“It’s different for everyone,” she said, “It’s the one thing your heart desires more than anything.” I thought about that for a moment.

“So probably just a ton of olives?” I asked. Mothman laughed.

“She likes olives,” he told Selene. She smiled at me.

“It could be, but I have a feeling it’ll help you a little more on your journey,” she winked.

“My journey?” I asked.

“Back to your world, *lieblich*,” she stroked my hair. *Lieblich? Only my grandmother calls me that...*

“How do we find the treasure,” I snapped out of my short daze.

“First,” Selene said, “you need to look to others. Learn from them. Ask them where they found their treasure.”

“I.. other people...?” *I don’t like talking to other people.* I felt my heart pounding and my stomach turn over.

“Don’t worry, dear,” she stroked my hair out of my face so that she could look at me, “Kudzu is the best for this! Outside, in your world, it’s not just shadows that you need to look out for.” She leaned in to kiss my forehead before turning toward the lake.

Like a mirage, she was gone.

*What next?*

# The Hermit

soul searching, introspection, guidance

Mothman and I continued along a dark path through the woods.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“I know somebody that I think you’d like to meet,” he half smiled at me like he knew something I didn’t, “He’ll be able to answer some of your questions about Kudzu better than me.”

“What’s his name?” I tried to keep up with him while also looking at the surroundings.

We walked over and around underbrush, making our way along what must’ve been a path long ago. If you looked closely, some of the trees lining the path had symbols caved into them. Worn over by time, they were difficult to make out. I stopped to get a closer look.

“He goes by the Kudzu King,” Mothman said, ahead of me.

“Why?” I brushed off the moss a little and traced my fingers over the outline of the symbol.

“Why don’t you ask him when you meet him?” Mothman looked over, but I wasn’t there. He turned to find me staring at the tree and walked over to join me.

“The six-pointed star. It’s the symbol of the Hermit. It’s representative of the four natural elements. A long time ago, people used symbols on trees to mark their way.”

“It looks like nobody’s been this way in a long time,” I pointed out. Mothman nodded in agreement.

“That’s just the way he likes it.”

Further along the old path, the trail started to hug the side of a cliff. On the cliff side, a break in the trees and rocks formed a small grotto with the source of the stream falling into it from above. Mothman stopped me.

“Careful,” he pointed to the worn stone steps leading up to the mouth of the grotto, “those are slippery.” I mounted the first step with caution. I turned around to see that Mothman hadn’t moved. I stopped, waiting for him to follow.



“When you get up to the top of the stairs, follow the six-pointed stars,” he started, “They’ll lead behind the waterfall. There, you’ll find a door. Knock three times.”

“You mean you’re not coming?” *Surely not...*

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to do this alone,” he sighed, “But while you’re talking with him, I’m going to go get us something to eat. How about that?”

My chin nodded and my eyes filled with tears. *Please don’t leave me.* He seemed to know what I was thinking.

“You’ll be fine!” he reassured me, “And I’ll tell you what: all you have to do if you need me is close your eyes and count to ten.”

“Really?” I squinted at him.

“Really.”

“Pinky swear?” I tried again.

“I don’t have fingers,” he conceded, “but I would if I could.”

At the top of the grotto, I looked around for six-pointed stars. *Up, down, left, right.* Nothing.

I turned behind me to see if Mothman was still there, but he had vanished. *Don’t panic. Don’t panic. You can do this.*

I stepped forward. Then again. *Think, Cricket. Mothman said that it was behind the waterfall.*

The waterfall in question towered before me, the source undistinguishable through the fog that hung in the air. *You’ve got this.*

I took a deep breath and crept toward the waterfall, scaling the walls with my eyes to see if I could find anything that resembled the star.

I had to decide: should I go to the left of the waterfall or the right?

My eyes landed on a crack in the rock to my right. I wiped away the grime, revealing what looked like a six-pointed star. *Good enough for me.*

Behind the waterfall, I crept into the rocky darkness, careful not to slip. In the little light that was coming into the cave, I made out what looked like a door. *Knock three times.*

I took a deep breath and knocked.

Waited.

My stomach turned.

Then, the door opened a crack.

“Who’re you?” a voice whispered.

“I’m... Cricket,” my voice quivered, “I’m from, ummm, South Carolina.”

“Cricket from South Carolina, wha’do’ya want?”

*What do I want?* I thought about what Mothman had told me.

“Why are you called the Kudzu King?” I asked.

Inside, light streamed in through the cracks in the rocks.

The Hermit was seated across from me. His dark skin contrasted with the thick gray dreadlocks that fell over his shoulders and back. His face was wrinkled with wisdom, age, and sun. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Kudzu King?” he started, “Who told you I go by that shit?”  
*That’s what he said, right?*

“Um... Mothman?” I wasn’t sure if he would know who that was, but his eyes sparkled and he started laughing.

“Tell him I’m goin’ by Kudzu *Comrade* now,” he chuckled, “but you can call me Melvin since that’s a bit of a mouthful.”

“Ummmm... okay, I can tell him that,” I responded. *Kudzu Comrade, Kudzu Comrade, Kudzu Comrade.*

“So, I’ll give you the chance to ask me a second question, since you seemed misinformed about the first,” he said. I nodded and looked around in my brain for a better question.

“Are you from my world?” I asked.

“You gotta have somethin’ better than that!” He clicked his tongue at me. I stared at my feet.

*Come on, Cricket. Use your brain! Clearly, there’s something you’re missing here. Think!*

“How did you get here?” I hesitated to gauge his reaction.

“That sounds like you’re asking me a question about a question,” he shook his head, “Figure out what you’re gonna ask, and then say it with confidence?”

*This is so easy. Give me a break. He's just sitting there, waiting for you to figure it out.*

"Why are you here?" I asked him.

"There it is," he smiled.

"Sorry—"

"Don't apologize," he said, "but never waste an opportunity to ask a question."

"I—"

"You want some sweet tea?" he asked me. I nodded.

"Do you know where kudzu, the plant, is from?" he asked me. I shook my head. He leaned back in his chair, sweet tea in hand.

"Many years ago, a group of travelers disrupted the Great Peace, in a time before Kudzu. They traveled here, saw, built, conquered—the whole nine yards," he paused to reflect before continuing, "but in their wake, they saw the great landscape of our world rot because it was being overused. Soil began to crumble, the world eroding away. Mother Earth saw what was happening and she cried 'no more!'"

I waited for him to tell me that she unleashed her vengeance on them, but he let the moment hang in the air.

"She tried to show them her pain, at first by poisoning the soil, and then with a drought, and finally, with a great and burning fever, her body trying to burn away the virus—"

"—Did they listen?" I blurted out. Melvin shook his head.

"See, the intruders brought something with them that they themselves had stolen from somebody else: kudzu. It grew and grew, taking over entire landscapes, buildings, valleys." He paused and stiffened up in irritation.

"Who was it stolen from?" I cut in.

"People many, many miles away across the water."

"So, it was brought here on purpose?" Melvin nodded.

"And, despite popular belief, kudzu didn't spiral out of control one day on its own. It was planted deliberately and when it caused a mess, nobody took responsibility," he raised his eyebrows with shock, sighed, and continued, "But you're here to know how I got here, correct?"

"Correct."

“See, I got to thinkin’ one day, you know, ‘what if I could turn all this kudzu into something useful?’ My trailer was damn near engulfed in it, might as well get somethin’ out of it. So, I started out with food. Maybe I could eat it.” I made a face.

“Ewwww! I didn’t know you could eat kudzu!”

“It ain’t great. I tried frying it and eating it like collards.” He paused, glanced around the room for something. “Ever smelled a kudzu flower?” I shook my head. He walked into the kitchen and came back a moment later with a purple flower. “Smell this.” I took the flower and put it to my nose.

“Grape.” I sniffed again. “It smells like grape.”

“Makes great candy and jelly.” He smiled and sat back down.

“I’d eat anything that tastes the way this smells.” I continued to hold the flower to my nose.

“Well, a man cannot live on kudzu alone... and I knew I couldn’t single-handedly eat the South out of its kudzu problem. So, I started trying to think outside the box.”

“Fabric?” I asked.

“Tried that, but couldn’t quite master it. Instead, I figured I hate payin’ for gas after the oil companies killin’ all the baby penguins,” he shrugged, “I checked some books out from the library and after a few trial runs, it was a piece of cake.”

“It was really that easy?” I was suspicious.

“I’ll tell ya,” he started, “not to brag or anything, but I was pretty good in school. Never went to college, but working at an auto shop really taught me a thing or two.”

“But why are you here?” I pressed on.

“Well, the color of my skin certainly didn’t help. White folks tend to get anxious when people like me start comin’ up with good ideas.”

“That doesn’t happen anymore in my world,” I informed him. He gave me a wise, endearing glance.

“This wasn’t but a few years ago, Cricket.” This caught me off guard. *But people aren’t like that anymore...*

“They told us in school that in the 60s, Martin Luther King led the Civil Rights Movement and—” I paused, back peddled. “I didn’t think that type of thing happened anymore.”

“That’s probably because you don’t experience it every day. It’s easy not to notice when it isn’t happening to you.”

“You mean this happens every day? Like, actually every day?”

“It’s not always big things... sometimes it’s all the small things over time that wear you down before you realize it’s happening.” I let this wash over my mind.

“I don’t think I understand.”

“You won’t be able to understand until you find people in your world who are experiencing what I’m talking about and learn from them. When you stand up in times of injustice, you gain limited access to the world of the unheard. Learn that way.” *Yeah, I’m still confused.*

“But why am I here?” He stopped to think before continuing, “when the world found out what I had done, it caused so many problems that I had no place left there.”

“I feel like that should’ve solved problems...” I was confused. He smiled at my naïveté.

“It really should’ve,” he agreed, “but when only a few people are in power, the rest of us are forced to operate in their interest.” I furrowed my brow, still confused.

“So, when did things change? I mean, things are better now. Good people are in charge,” I pointed out. He looked at me with a sad smile.

“Things have never changed,” he looked me in the eyes, “that’s still the world that you live in.”

I looked at my shoes, whirling this new information around in my head, trying to make sense of it. *That’s not how the world is. Right? Someone would’ve told me that by now.*

“How can I fix it?” the words were coming out of my mouth before I could think them.

“I’m not really the person to answer that question,” he saw my look of disappointment, “but you can always do what I did. You look at yourself, at what you’re good at, what you like the most about yourself... and you think—really think—‘how can I best help others with this?’”

He sat back in his chair, waiting for me to respond, but I just sat there and absorbed the information.

“That’s all you *can* do,” he smiled.

# The High Priestess

intuition, sacred knowledge, the divine feminine

“Did he answer your questions?” Mothman asked me.

“Sort of.” We walked on a trail that led up a bubbling creek.

“Nothing solid.”

“I’m sure he did that on purpose—part of this whole thing is that you’re the only one who really knows where the treasure is.”

“Wait, so nobody else knows? I thought I was supposed to ask people until I find someone that knows.”

“No! That’s the whole point. Only you know where it is.”

“No... I don’t. I’m confused,” I said. Mothman stopped.

“Think about it like this,” he said, “Picture it like a hedge maze inside your brain—the treasure is in the middle. Which means you’ve got it all there, you just need to find it. And the best way to the treasure is through clues that you get from other people. You have to watch the way that they live and maybe you can take hints from them. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” I squinted.

We continued along the river as the sky began to change from red to pink to purple.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You keep asking me that. Have I disappointed you or something?” he joked.

“Not yet,” I cut back.

“We’re going to the far side of Kudzu. I want you to meet my sister.”

As the world of Kudzu got darker, I started to hear the sound of animals in the forest, which also seemed to be growing denser. *It’s probably your imagination because it’s dark.*

However, my fears were confirmed when a wolf’s howling cut through the air. Then another. Then another.

“Should we be worried about that?” I walked closer to Mothman.

“Nah, it’s just some wolves,” he shrugged it off.

“Oh.” *I feel like that’s something that we should be worried about.*

*Cricket, why do you continue to put yourself in situations that you know you can't handle?*

"Are you okay?" Mothman asked me, noticing my concern.

"What?" I snapped out of my daze. "I'm great. I love wolves." He chuckled.

A wolf howled again. I froze up. Mothman held his breath, waiting for me to go back on my previous statement. Instead, I shook my head.

"Wolves are great."

"Perfect," he said, stopping. "Because we're headed toward them." He motioned toward an opening in the forest that seemed to look like it was once a trailhead. I waited for him to tell me that he was joking, but he continued to stand there.

"Look at you! Look at everything we've done so far! You're gonna let some wolves get you down?" I shook my head.

"No. I've... I've got it." I nodded my head as if to convince myself.

"That's what I thought!" He linked his arm in mine. "You're Cricket from South Carolina! You can do anything."

Together, we entered the forest with only wolves to welcome us.

A ways into the forest, I started seeing and hearing things around me that sounded *a lot* like wolves. It was dark, so I pulled the flashlight out of my backpack.

"Hello?" I shone the flashlight through the forest.

"They won't hurt us if we don't mess with them. And we're not going to do that, are we?" I shook my head, but I wasn't so sure about the situation.

Behind us, a stick cracked. I whipped around and lit up the woods behind me.

Nothing.

I turned back around, only to find that our path was being blocked by a woman. She wore a black and red cape that draped over her shoulders and flowed around her feet like serpents in underbrush. Although she held herself as if she was a force to be

reckoned with, I didn't feel afraid. She was haunting and beautiful and strong.

"Jesus Christ, Lilith," Mothman exclaimed, "You scared the shit out of me." As soon as he said it, he looked at me like he had just messed up by swearing in front of me.

"My mom says worse," I shrugged.

A wolf peeked out from behind the woman, and I caught my breath. She knelt down to my level and pet the top of the wolf's head.

"Don't be afraid," she said.

I reached out my hand to the wolf to smell. It crept toward me, sniffed me, and licked my hand.

"I heard you coming and I thought I'd come meet you. The path here is a little different than it used to be," the mysterious woman said.

"Still up and to the right?" Mothman asked her.

"Yep! Not too far from here." She looked at me to explain, "I just renovated."

We reached a stone house in the woods with what looked like candlelight coming through the windows. Moss covered the exterior and as I got closer, I started to realize that there were critters living on the outside. On one side, a jutting rock and some mushrooms had created a tiny fairy village. Another area had a family of lizards. A burrow of chipmunks looked out at me from the foundation.

But perhaps most impressively, above the door, a dragon, mouth open, had been carved into the stone. Inside the mouth, a birds nest nestled, full of babies.

"Hello, my loves," the woman said to the birds as we walked in the steps. They whistled back to her a little song. She opened the door and let us into the house.

In the light, she was even more mysterious. Something about her said "wisdom," but I couldn't lay my finger on it.

"Lilith, this is Cricket," Mothman introduced us, "Cricket, this is my sister, Lilith." Lilith reached out her hand to me.

"It's very nice to meet you, young woman," she smiled.

"It's very nice to meet you, too... average-aged woman..." *What was that?* She laughed at my awkward attempt at a joke.



“You look like a witch,” I said before I could stop myself.  
*Cricket, come on. That’s not what I meant... in a good way!*

“Thank you!” she said before I could explain. *Thank god.*

“You’re welcome!” I smiled back.

“Do you all want something to eat?” she asked us, “I have onion soup on the stove.”

“I would *love* some!” This also must have exploded out of me, because the two of them thought it was hilarious.

“I’ll go grab some,” she winked at me as she turned to the kitchen.

The soup was salty, flavorful, and not too sweet. I didn’t think that I was hungry, but when I started eating, I realized how long it had been. *Or was it that long? How long has it been?*

“So, Cricket, my brother says you’re just in Kudzu for a little while, is that right?” Lilith asked me.

“That is, if I ever go back,” I joked, although it was half-serious.

“Cricket, you don’t mean that,” Mothman said, but I shrugged.

“Why would I? The sun isn’t too bright here. The noises aren’t loud. We eat my favorite foods. There are unlimited olives, it seems like. And, well...” I stopped for a moment to think, “Nobody here treats me like I’m weird and annoying.”

“You don’t seem weird and annoying to me,” Lilith replied.

“Me neither. You’ve been perfectly pleasant,” Mothman agreed. I looked down at my bowl and thought about this. *How could that be true?*

*Nobody is treating you any different. That’s your brain thinking that you deserve special treatment. And if they’re actually treating you different, it’s probably because you act like you want them to.*

Lilith noticed me thinking on this.

“We’re taught to believe that our needs and our feelings are not valid,” Lilith said.

I looked up at her. *What is she talking about?*

“Right?” she asked me.

“We?” I asked.

“I can tell that we are cut from the same cloth,” she said, “Do you know how I know that?” I shook my head.

“Because we’re both girls?” I asked.

“I think that’s part of it, but one day you’ll learn that there’s much more to being a girl than appearing as one,” she said and pointed to my backpack. “What’s in there?” I opened my backpack to look at the contents.

“One notebook, a book about the paranormal, a box of crayons, my Swiss Army knife, a water bottle, cheese crackers, and this flashlight,” I held up the flashlight I was using before.

“That’s how I knew,” she pointed at my flashlight, “because you had the option to pull out your knife when presented with something you couldn’t see, but instead of being afraid, you shone a light on it instead.”

This seemed to make sense to me. I nodded to her.

“You know,” she leaned in closer, “in the beginning, there were only goddesses.” I squinted at her.

“I’ve been told different,” I said.

“No, it’s true! Hand to my heart! I was there to see it,” she said, “it was only when people started building walls and throwing stones that the gods became men. People summoned the divine masculine for strength, but not for the right reasons.”

“You were around when this happened?” I asked. Mothman and Lilith looked at each other and laughed.

“We’re older than we look,” Lilith said.

“I have a *great* skincare routine. Dermatologists *hate* me,” Mothman joked. Lilith rolled her eyes.

“My point is that sometimes, you’re going to find that life has this funny paradox where you’ll have to use the knife to defend your ability to fight fears with a flashlight. Does that make sense?” she said. I thought about it.

“I think so,” I started, “They say you can’t fight fire with fire—”

“—But you can, and you *should*, if you are defending others,” she said.

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

“It will when the time comes,” she said, “but you have to always remember your limits. Never be tolerant of intolerance.” Now I was really confused.

“How do I do that?” I asked. She smiled, as if she wanted me to ask.

“Let me show you.”

Lilith and I walked outside as Mothman cleaned up dinner. Together, we walked around the side of the cottage. The key chain on my backpack jingled as I walked.

“In order to do this, your ego needs to be calm.” She realized I had no clue what she meant. “You need to think happy thoughts about yourself beforehand.”

“Oh, okay.” *I think I get it.*

“So, close your eyes and calm your ego,” she said. I closed my eyes. “Are they closed?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, good. Now get rid of your insecurities. Think good thoughts.”

I sat for a moment, thinking this would come to my brain easily, but it didn't. *Think, Cricket, think. You know what you don't like about yourself. Think of something you do!* But I couldn't.

“Tell me when you're ready, but take your time,” she said.

*You're good at reading! Mom says you read too much, but maybe that makes you good at it! You're good at coming up with stories!* I felt myself calm down.

“I'm ready,” I said, “What's next?”

“Next, think of someone whose world you want to understand better,” she said, “make a picture of them in your head and then imagine what they might think is the best thing about themselves. But don't think too hard”

I started to think about my brother, Thomas. I pictured his face in my brain. *What does Thomas think he's good at? I bet he thinks he's good at making friends. He's good at sports. He's smart for his age.*

Suddenly, the world around me began to change. It felt like a dream, as though I was being projected into a memory... but not my own. I was watching interactions through Thomas' eyes.

First, we were with his friends at the park, where they played frisbee golf together. They played about as well as you'd expect first graders to play, but they cheered each other on as the sun set in

the summer sky. They played until dark, walking home knowing that they would do the same the next day.

Then, at elementary school, where the teacher presented his science project for the class to see. It was her favorite and “set a new standard” for the rest of the class. Across the room, Thomas’ friends clapped and made funny faces at him. *If this had been me, Tilman Smith would’ve been making fun of me already.*

And then, at baseball practice, where music played in the dugout and everyone laughed over snacks that a soccer mom brought. It felt like one of those days where the world appears to stand still and the American nowhere that I grew up in felt like the only place on earth.

However, there was something about it I had not expected—Thomas’ life wasn’t perfect like I thought it was. We were whisked away to the park at the end of our street, where a group of older boys were knocking Thomas around, trying to get him to give them his ball. Thomas didn’t want to, obviously, so they knocked him to the ground. I could feel as they kicked and hit him. And I watched as his friends ran away, leaving him to suffer.

And then, at a baseball game, Thomas was on second in a close game. The batter hit the ball far into the outfield. Thomas ran to third and hesitated before running for home. Just as he was approaching, he tripped on a rock, fell head-first into the dirt, and struck his team out, ending the game. Through pain and tears, I watched as his teammates cried out in defeat. One passed by him coming out of the dugout and mumbled something that could only be nasty. As tears stung Thomas’ eyes, another boy pointed at him and started laughing at his crying. *He’s hurt. Someone help him up!* But another few moments passed before my mom came and helped him to his feet.

But it was another memory that stood out to me. In front of me, I watched myself through my little brother’s eyes during the commotion with Gracie earlier. He was in the water with Max, playing. But he would look back at me every once in a while with a feeling of concern. Not anger—concern. And when Gracie got out of the water to walk toward me, I could feel his body tense up with anticipation and concern.

When Gracie called me “special,” this only got worse. The feeling of anger crept in, as I thought it would, but it wasn’t toward

me. It was toward Gracie. Thomas was planning how he was going to defend me.

I watched as I slapped Gracie across the face and felt Thomas' body relax for a moment and then... laughter? He was genuinely amused by me slapping her. In his eyes, I wasn't a bumbling idiot like I was in my own. I was his big sister and he was worried about me. *Is this real? Does he actually care about me? I thought he just didn't want to deal with me. I thought he was mad at me too...*

*Of course, you did! Because you don't care about anyone but yourself. You're going to ruin all the last relationships you have a chance of saving before you even realize it.*

This thought launched me into the darkness.

# The Devil

shadow self, attachment, restriction

“I’m here to save you,” the Devil said.

She towered over me as I sat on the ground, looking for a way out.

I was in a bright, sterile room. My eyes hurt from seeing the light after so much time the more muted natural light of Kudzu. The furniture, which looked like the plastic had just come off, was a bright eggshell color. It made me want to ball up and touch as little of it as possible before I somehow caused a mess.

The Devil was dressed in white jeans and a blouse: different from the much darker image that had appeared to me in the water earlier. She almost appeared to be approachable, but something about the way she held her jaw said otherwise.

“Why do you fear me?” She stepped closer. “Is it what the others said?”

I looked down and rocked back and forth. *Maybe if I don’t answer she’ll just think I’m stupid and she’ll leave me alone.*

She didn’t. Instead, she strutted toward me, crouched down to my level, and put her face a few inches from mine.

“I know you can hear me.” She pulled my chin up toward her so that we were face-to-face. “What did they say to you? What lies did they tell you about me?”

My body tensed. My sternum started itching. My eyes hurt. *Please stop. I don’t like it when things touch my face.*

I closed my eyes to brace for impact, but nothing happened.

When I opened them, the Devil was standing, hand extended to help me up. I took her hand with caution.

Once up, she put a hand on my back and pressed me toward the couch. *Oh, no.*

“Sit here.” She practically forced me down. “And make sure you don’t get anything on the couch.”

I squirmed, trying not to touch anything if I didn’t have to. The Devil walked to a counter where she poured creamer in her coffee before rejoining me in a chair by the couch.

“Now, what terrible lies did they tell you about me?” I looked down, scratched my palms. “Did they even tell you my name?” *I guess they didn’t...*

“They...” I started, hesitating and trying to gather my words, “said that you like to be called The Devil.” Her expression didn’t change, but her eyes did. I saw the fury behind them.

“Is that what they told you?” She sipped her coffee. “A bunch of liars *and* hypocrites.”

She stared off into space for a moment. A look of sadness crossed her face, but it was soon replaced with disdain.

She cut her eyes over toward me, looking me up and down. Then, she gave out a contemptuous laugh and rolled her eyes.

“My name is Paige... and we’re pretty similar, you know.” She gave me a smile that could scare the hay out of a scarecrow with its bittersweetness. “You’re looking for treasure, are you not?”

“Yeah...” She looked at me with impatience, waiting for me to continue. “I’ve been looking for clues. Mothman said that I will find it if I ask other people for clues to how they once found *their* treasure.” She gave me a snarky look.

“Mothman isn’t real, dear.”

“Um—yes he is. I literally hung out with him,” I quipped back.

“Let me ask you something, Cricket.” She challenged me with her stare. “Do you have a lot of friends? Honestly.” A knot formed in my stomach. Shame welled in my eyes.

“No...”

“Do you think that it’s possible that you made Mothman up so that you could have friends?” She posed this question with false concern.

“No,” I cut back. “I’m not crazy. We were together not even an hour ago.”

“Then let’s say they’re real,” she posed, “When you’re desperate for friends, you’ll settle for, well, pretty much anything.

*I became friends with the first person I met. Was that coincidence? ...or is she right? What if I am desperate...*

“But I don’t think that you actually want my advice.” Her voice cut into my subconscious.

“Why not?”

“Because you haven’t asked.” *Why does she seem so insulted by that?* “And, considering how similar I used to be to you, it would only make sense that I would have the best advice.”

“What’s your story?” I took the bait.

“Are you sure? You can’t handle hard truths.” She challenged me with her eyes. “You’re not strong enough to deal with reality. I can tell by the way you stare at the floor.”

Well, of course that made me want to know even more. *Don’t you want to know? Just look at her. Prove that you can handle these things.* I gathered some courage and looked up.

“I *do* want to know,” I told her.

Paige and I stood on a hillside, looking off into the valleys below. Powerlines cut through the landscape, clearing a path that flowed up and down with the hills. In the distance, a tall, curving tower stood in silhouette against the moon.

“The Tower,” Paige pointed toward it. *That’s the name they came up with? Creative.*

I looked up at her, waiting for the punchline or some explanation. Instead, she huffed in frustration and sighed.

“Hello? Anyone in there?” She poked me in the neck. My sternum itched worse. “This is the part where you say, ‘what’s that?’”

“What’s that?” I gulped.

“That’s where your past, present, and future memories go to die.” Her eyes twinkled with excitement. “Your entire life is in there, locked away so that no one can change it.”

“All my memories?” I couldn’t grasp the enormity of it all.

“And at the very tippy top,” she pointed to a light at the top of the Tower, “is where your treasure awaits you.” *Surely, it’s not that easy.*

“Is it hard to get there?” I asked.

“Incredibly,” she said, “but the risk is worth it. The treasure you seek is invaluable.”

We sat for a moment in silence.

“What was yours?” I asked. This made Paige’s eyes soften. She looked across the landscape.

“To get to the top of the tower, you must pass through your entire life. Every memory. And in all of those memories, I found



something that made everything clear as day.” She faded off again.  
*Am I supposed to ask another question?*

“What did you find?” She sighed, smiled, and reached over to squeeze my hand.

“I learned that nobody will ever love you enough.” *What?? I hope that’s not true.* I searched my brain for the reasoning behind this.

“Can I fix that?” I asked her. She shook her head.

“You have to take what you can get, or you won’t get anything at all.” She stared off into the distance, as if rationalizing it herself. But her expression was firm and unchanging.

My stomach turned. *I always thought that I’d find someone, even if I have to change... There has to be someone.*

“That can’t be true,” I whispered. She turned to me and crouched down to my level.

“And above everything else, you have to put yourself first.”

# The Hanged Man

surrender, letting go, new perspectives

I started across the landscape, heading toward the horizon. The large path carved out by the powerlines was being swallowed up by more kudzu, but it was easy enough to cross... at first.

By the time I had gotten about halfway to the tower, the kudzu had become so tangled and thick that I was having a hard time seeing over or through it. I looked around. *What now?* I didn't want to lose sight of the tower by going through the forest that lined either side of the path. But the kudzu just got worse from there, and eventually I was at a part so thick that it would require a machete to get through. *I guess I'm going through the forest.*

The forest, like the others I had crossed in Kudzu, was dense and littered with rhododendron and smelled floral, earthy, and musty at the same time. *Okay, remember orienteering at camp? You have to stay in one straight line so that you don't get lost.*

I hiked the landscape, taking my time when going around trees and crossing rivers to make sure I stayed on track. *One foot, two foot, one foot, two foot.* I watched my feet walk one in front of the other, making sure I didn't get distracted by anything.

I kept my eyes trained on my shoes, not looking where I was going, when I ran smack into something, falling to the ground.

From the ground, I looked up to see what I had run into. Above me, a man hung by a noose, his body swinging back and forth. *Is... he dead?* I scuffled away a little.

"Oops... sorry about that," he said in a Scottish accent and tipped his hat at me. My heart skipped a beat. *Okay, so he's alive... somehow.*

"Are you... are you okay?" I asked.

"Me?" He swung himself back and forth with his legs. "I'm just hanging out."

"Doesn't that hurt?" I stood up to get a closer look. "Do you want me to help you get down?" I was hesitant to touch him.

"Not anymore," he said, "That's a huge perk of being dead." *Dead? Like, dead, dead?* I backed away again.

"No offense," I started, "but you don't seem very dead to me."

“Many things don’t appear as they seem.” He stretched his shoulders, cracked his neck, and continued. “But that’s enough about me. Where are you going, little sprog?”

“I’m headed to The Tower.” I brushed dirt off my pants.

“The Tower? Are you looking for treasure?” I nodded.

“Do you know if I’m going the right way? It’s really dark out.” The man swung his body around and pointed.

“The Tower is that way!”

“Thanks!”

“Don’t mention it, kiddo!” I started along, before something dawned on me. I turned back to him.

“Do you want me to cut you down? I have a knife.” I pulled the knife out to show him.

“Oh, you’re too kind!” The man looked at me, eyes slightly bulging out of his head, with a sad smile. *That’s what happens when you get hung... Usually your tongue comes out, too, though. That’s what it said in that book about witches...* “I’m afraid your tools are no good here.”

“Why not?” I put the knife back in my backpack.

“This rope is made out of something much stronger than hemp. It’s made out of suffering and entitlement.” *Entitlement? That’s a strange word to use for this. Suffering, maybe, but—*

“What do you mean it’s made out of that? Those aren’t... real things.” I thought on my wording choice for a moment. “They aren’t things you can make a noose out of.” The man looked at me with an understanding of my naïveté.

“Do you have time for a story?” he asked.

“I mean, it doesn’t seem like time has mattered up to this point...” I said, “So, shoot!”

“Do you see all the kudzu around us?” he asked. *Yeah, of course.*

“How could I not?” I snarked back.

“I’m the one who brought it here,” he replied. I thought back at what the Hermit had told me before. *The visitors... he said the visitors brought it here...*

“You were the one who brought it from far away?”

“I’m afraid so,” he sighed. “There were others, but none so devastating and destructive as I.”

“Why would you do that?” I anticipated his answer, but he hesitated.

“That’s a complicated question.” I stared up at his dangling body.

“Enlighten me.”

“A long, long time ago, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime—move to the new world and create a life for yourself—a life like you’ve never dreamed. How could I say no? So, I packed up my family and headed into the great unknown—”

“—is that here?” I cut in. He looked at me, impatient and in awe of the fact that someone just interrupted him.

“Yes. It’s here. But it was before Kudzu. It was when the world you know and this world were indistinguishable—”

“—understood.” I cut in again. He looked at me with another look of irritation.

“Could you please stop interrupting me?” I looked down. Nodded.

“Anyway! They said that Kudzu was the way to make money in the New World. We took it by the mass from other countries and imported it here. The others were doing it—so of course I thought it was okay!” He had worked himself up a bit with that last part, but he re-centered himself to start again. “Right? Wouldn’t you think that?” *Me? Does he want me to answer?* I shrugged.

“Yeah... I guess...”

“Where was I? Right—So, once I was in the New World and I was growing Kudzu, life started to get better. Before we knew it, the New World had become our home and we belonged here...” He trailed off a bit, gazing ahead, thinking deeply. “Unfortunately, the Kudzu was also feeling right at home. The people who lived here long ago, before any of my kind ever set foot on this land, feared the kudzu. They warned us.”

“It looks like you didn’t listen.” I interrupted without even thinking. *Crap.* But he didn’t seem to mind this time. Instead, he looked ahead as though he had forgotten the rest of the story and was trying to find it somewhere on the horizon.

“We didn’t listen.” He gave an irritated laugh. “They told us that it was unnatural and cruel to subject the wildlife and the lives of their people to this horrific, consuming plant. But at that point,

we were making money off of it and put blinders on to the effects it was having on others.”

“Did they kill you?” I pointed up to the noose.

“Nah.” He shook his head the best that he could. “I killed myself.” My jaw dropped. *Nice, Cricket. Now you look insensitive.*

“You committed suicide?”

“Essentially,” he started, “I allowed my entitlement to block out the cries of the suffering. I watched as the kudzu I brought here erased entire communities and people from history. Have you ever been to Lake Hartwell?” I nodded.

“My family goes there all the time.”

“Did you know that there is an entire city below the lake? People’s homes, stores, restaurants—even cemeteries! And those who couldn’t pay to have their loved ones dug up and moved can now only find solace on the bottom of the lake.”

“You mean all those times we went to the lake, I was swimming with dead bodies?” I shivered at the thought and scratched at my palms.

“Yes, but for more than one reason... Have you seen the people that frequent Lake Hartwell?” I shrugged and he rolled his eyes. “Someone in that crowd has had to hide a dead body at some point.” I searched my head for an explanation to what he was saying.

“Oh...”

“When they flooded that town, they covered up a whole lot that can never be replaced. Those people’s lives were quickly and thoroughly changed...” His demeanor changed, as if he was stifling back tears. “That’s what we did. That’s what the kudzu did. The people who loved this land before us... we destroyed their home. And we killed people in the process...” He breathed in and stopped, attempting to gather himself. I stepped closer.

“Are you okay?” I reached up to hand him a napkin from my backpack. He grabbed it with his feet and lifted it to his hands.

“This is quite the ab workout,” he tried to joke and wiped his eyes.

“I bet!” I waited for him to continue.

“But yeah... that’s how I met my fate. I let the kudzu get out of control. And the more people told me to change, the more I leaned into it. Even the others around me who had also started off by

growing kudzu were starting to change their minds. Even then, I couldn't be convinced to stop. I kept growing the kudzu, claiming that it was helping an erosion problem that had long since gone away—just hoping that I could find people to lure into my trap. Naïve people that needed something to believe in.” He stopped and looked at me. “Does that even make sense?”

“I... think so.” I shrugged.

“After a while, I was completely surrounded, but it had become a weird source of pride. I was the kudzu guy and come hell or high water—nobody could convince me to quit selling kudzu.”

“I never knew that kudzu was such a sought-after commodity...” I said.

“It wasn't. But I convinced people that their soil was in danger. That they would lose their house and lives if they didn't buy the kudzu to fix it.” He sighed again. “And that's why I deserved it. That's why one night, while I was sleeping, the kudzu wrapped around my neck and pulled me from my bed.” My jaw dropped.

“That's not a noose... that's kudzu???”

“Yep. And if you try to cut it, it just grows right back. My own pride's got me tied up to this tree.” He tugged on the vine to show that it wouldn't move. “But you know something? It was a miracle in disguise, really.”

“How's that?” *Cricket, stop interrupting him!* But he didn't seem to mind.

“When it pulled me up by my neck, it was the first time I had seen how vast the damage was that I had caused. From up here, you could see the entire valley... that is, until the kudzu swallowed up my view, too.”

“Now you can't see anything...” I said to myself. He nodded in agreement.

“My fate is my own design. And thousand years of me hanging up here will never make up for the suffering and destruction that I caused... So, I'm okay with it.”

“That's a sad story...” I said.

“It's a story that you must promise to tell once you're back in the real world,” he commanded. “It's a story that is relevant now more than ever! Go back! Look at your world. One day, when you are older, you are going to be given a choice: will you ignore it, or will you take up a machete and uncover what has been lost?”

I ruminated on this hefty task. *I can do that... I can definitely do that...*

“I promise to rid the world of kudzu.”

# The Tower

sudden change, revelation, *awakening*

I stood at the base of the hill that the Tower sat atop. A chaotic trail of different types of steps led up into a tangle of kudzu that I assumed would eventually get me up to the Tower. *I guess this is it?*

I began to climb the twisting, often unstable, stairs. The trail was the only thing that hadn't been completely swallowed up in the vines.

Toward the top, I started to be able to make out the landscape surrounding the Tower, but kudzu had overtaken most of it and the Tower in front of me was grasping for most of my attention. It twisted and turned, as if the bricks had shifted into place over time. One side hung off the hill a little, giving the Tower an even more dangerous presence.

As I approached the giant, wooden door, I had a thought that made me hesitate. *What if this is all a set-up? What if I can't get out? Mom told me that I shouldn't talk to strangers...*

I looked above me and saw what looked like storm clouds approaching, and out of nowhere, buckets of rain poured onto my head. *Crap!*

I knocked on the door, but nobody answered. *Well, I've gone this far. What, am I going to stop now?* I grabbed the handle and pushed my way inside.

The inside of the Tower was dimly lit with the light from torches on the walls. The stone walls seemed alive and dripped with water, making everything smell a little musty. The corridor twisted with the building, giving me one direction to go: up. I tiptoed around the first turn and what I saw nearly made me scream.

The hallway leading up was lined with dungeonesque prison cells. And inside of the first one, I saw my younger self and my mom. I watched as she berated Younger Cricket about not making eye contact with people we had seen at lunch. I was sitting on the ground, nervously rocking myself back and forth. I rushed to the next cell, anxious to get away from the scene I was looking at.

But the next cell wasn't much better. At first, I struggled to see what I was looking at. Then, I realized it was another memory: one



in which I sat in my backyard and listened as my neighbor, the most popular girl in school, had her tenth birthday party. I had been the only girl not invited (there weren't many of us in my school to begin with), and now I had the pleasure of listening in on a symbol of my own isolation.

The emotions behind these two scenes alone were enough to make me shake. I scratched at my palms, and then my arms, until I had come out of my shock and ran up the stairs, skipping past several cells that beckoned to me out of fear of something worse.

And then something caught my attention.

"What do you mean you can't have kids? Why didn't you tell me this until now?" A voice in one of the cells behind me caught me off guard. I stepped back to where it was coming from.

Within the scene, a tall, imposing man held a girl that I vaguely recognized by her arm. She winced and tried to pull away, but he seemed adamant.

"I think you're being a little unreasonable, don't you think?" She tried to pull away from him again, but he backed her into a corner even more. She began scratching her forearm. *Oh my god. Is that me??* I backed up a little.

"We date for four months before you decide to tell me this?" He stands over her.

"I didn't realize that you'd be this upset about it. It's not a big deal... and It's not guaranteed. Just with the endometriosis and—" She didn't finish before he had turned from her with a snarky laugh.

"Not a big deal?" Fire burned behind his eyes. "You're essentially worthless."

I let out an involuntary cry. I could feel where it hurt, as if that area in my conscience had been trampled and worn thin already.

At the sound of my squeak, the man looked up at me. *He can see me? Oh shit, he can see me!* I stood completely still.

Still, the man leaned against the bars of the cage, gave me an evil smile, and winked.

Something about it made me want to lean over and puke up my insides like a sea cucumber. It made me feel tiny.

"Go on," he said, nodding his head up the stairs. "It's not going to get better."

And so, I continued. *What's my other option?* And one after the other, it didn't get much better. I saw myself, older, graduating high school, going to college, and living in the real world. So much changed—my hair, my friends, the way that I dressed—but one thing didn't: the fact that my relationship with my parents was steadily becoming more hostile. I stopped in front of one cell in which the tension seemed to be particularly high.

Inside it, an older version of myself sat on a white couch in what appeared to be a living room. The décor was completely white, like everything had just been painted over. My parents stood, looking down at me with rage. Behind us, the TV played a video on loop: a man with a bad spray tan yelling and a Black man being suffocated by a police officer.

"How can you say that?" Older Me yelled at my parents, through tears. "I don't understand how you can claim to care about other people so much... and then say that shit!" My tears had turned to sobbing.

"I can't believe that we raised a child who can so blatantly shrug off the values that she was raised with!" my dad forced out, fury behind his voice.

"How can you be mad at me for this?" I broke down a little more and held my palms to my eyes. "How can you be mad at me for changing my mind when presented with new information?" My dad shook his head, disappointed.

"Grow up, Cricket." He walked to the other side of the room and sat down, excusing himself from the conversation, which made Older Me let out another cry of pain. My mom remained where she was. She rolled her eyes at my crying.

"I can't believe someone that prides herself on being so smart could get so easily hoodwinked by the media!" she laughed.

"Mom, I—" Older Me started.

"—I don't want to talk to you right now." She put her hand up to block my comment.

I felt that, myself, in a spot in my brain that stored rejection. It made my eyes well up. *You've got to make it to the top. Just keep going and don't stop or look.*

I looked at my feet and continued on. *One foot, two foot, one foot, two foot...* I hurried up the stairs, trying to distract myself from

the crying and strange noises coming from the other cells. *One foot, two foot, one foot, two foot...*

I was starting to lose breath, when I collided with something. I almost fell backward down the stairs, but something caught me. I looked up and gasped.

“The Devil—I mean, Paige!” She gave me a disappointed look.

“Going somewhere?” I peeked my head around her to see that she was standing in front of a large door where the stairs ended. *That must be where the treasure is!* I bit my lip.

“I need to get through there, please.” I pointed to the door.

“Did you even stop to look at everything? This was an opportunity that a lot of people would kill for.”

“I did at the beginning,” I said, looking down, “But it made me too sad.” Paige softened at this remark. She turned around and unlocked the door.

“That’s a big lesson you need to learn—how to handle disappointment and other overwhelming emotions. You need to learn how to process them.”

She opened the door and walked in. I followed.

“Didn’t you say that you couldn’t be in here?” I asked, suddenly suspicious.

“I didn’t say that,” she shot back.

“Yeah... you did. Because I asked you why you couldn’t come with me and you said that I was the only one who could enter.” I waited for her response.

“That never happened.” Before I could react, she was talking again. “You have two choices...” *I guess we’re moving on.*

She walked further into the room. It was like an observatory—a room at the tippy top, with a large bay window on one side. Paige walked to one side, where a massive lever stuck out of the wall.

“This lever,” she started, putting her hand on it, “will open the doors to all the cells, freeing every version of yourself that is trapped here. Or you can leave them here... which would mean that you must carry the baggage of all those horrible memories forever.” *Is that... even really a choice?*

“I mean, if you’re looking for my opinion,” I hesitated, worried I wouldn’t give the correct answer, “I would definitely free everyone.” Paige smiled with contempt.

“That answer is what shows me how little you know about the world,” she said, walking back to me so that she could crouch to my level and put her face near mine. “If you let all of those memories go, how are you going to remember how badly people treat you if you let them?” *Is she right?* I couldn’t decide.

Paige stood up and walked to the window, motioning for me to follow.

“And besides,” She looked at me, practically bursting with the information that she was withholding. “You don’t want to let all those *monsters* down there out into the world, do you? You’ve got to hold them close to you. That way, they can’t hurt you.”

I felt sadness sweep over me—the type of sadness that starts in your head and drips down to your eyes, before puddling up in your chest and making your heart heavy. *She’s right, you know. That’s your only option.*

Paige stroked my hair and waited for me to respond. After a moment, I did.

“I won’t let them out.” I wiped stray tears away. “Can you take me back to Mothman?”

# The Empress

feminine beauty, nurture, abundance

“Cricket? Cricket!” I began to open my eyes, letting them adjust to the light. Lilith crouched next to me, checking to make sure that I was alright. *Was that all a dream?*

“What happened?” I rubbed my eyes and sat up.

“It appears that you accidentally projected yourself somewhere else,” Mothman said. “You okay?”

“I went to the Tower.” My brain scrambled to recall everything that had happened. Mothman and Lilith looked at each other with concern.

“What happened there?” Mothman asked, his expression anxious for the answer.

“The Devil—whose name is Paige, by the way—showed me all the bad things that were going to happen one day.” Lilith let out a disappointed sigh.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I thought for a moment. “She helped me, actually. She taught me that all those bad things will still happen, but that if I hold them closely, they can’t hurt me.” Mothman and Lilith recoiled at this.

“That’s what she told you?” Lilith asked.

“That’s why we call her the Devil and not Paige,” Mothman muttered under his breath. Lilith jabbed him with her elbow.

“Quit,” she snapped at Mothman, who huffed, but conceded. Lilith looked back at me. “I think you ought to meet one of my neighbors.” I sighed.

“I’ve met a lot of people today,” I said.

“You’re right,” Lilith nodded, “Let’s hold off on that until tomorrow.”

“You’re probably exhausted,” Mothman said. I nodded. “How about a grilled pimento cheese sandwich and then off to bed?” I nodded again. *That sounds great.*

The next morning, I stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing my eyes. *Where is everyone?* Warm light came in through the window and a pot of grits sat on the stove.

Behind me, I heard whistling. I followed the sound to the front door, where Lilith sat on the steps. In front of her, half a dozen wolves sat, eager for the plate of food she had in her lap. She looked up at me.

“Good morning, sunshine!” She patted the spot next to her for me to sit. One of the wolves whimpered. Lilith looked back at them. “Be patient, Moses.” He quieted down. *Should you be scared of this? I don’t feel scared...* I sat down next to her.

“Can I feed one?” I asked her.

“Of course!” She offered me the plate and I grabbed one of the treats. I tossed it to the dog that had been whining, Moses. He caught it in his mouth.

“Good boy!” The wolf wagged his tail and sat back down.

“Do you still want to meet my neighbor?” Lilith asked. I looked at my feet.

“What’s she like?” I asked. *I’m tired of meeting new people.*

“She’s... wise. She’s the type of person who has seen so much that the new experiences she does have are already sort of woven into her perception of the world,” Lilith said.

“Okay... I think I understand what you’re saying.” I ran her words through my mind.

“I’m worried about what the Devil—I mean, Paige—said to you.” She thought on this a little more before continuing. “You don’t need to hold on to any of that stuff...”

“She told me that nobody will ever love you enough and that that’s the only way that you can protect yourself from getting hurt again.” I looked up at Lilith, anxious for her response. “Is that true?” I scratched at my palms.

Lilith hesitated to respond to this. Instead, she took my hands and gently unclasped them. The raw spots stung in the fresh air.

“Ask her—and tell me what she says. I’d like to know the same.” Lilith stood and pointed toward a gate on one side of the clearing covered in bushels of yellow flowers. *Carolina Jessamine.* “Follow the yellow flowers up that path and you’ll find her up at the top.”

The path in front of me looked like an old painting you’d find at an estate sale. The dirt path was a rich, chocolatey color, which made the light green ferns that blanketed the forest floor stand out

even more. Rhododendron bushes twisted out of the landscape, pink flowers spotting the leaves. The trees arched over me, forming a tunnel through the forest. On either side, the yellow flowers lined the path.

I hiked the rocky terrain up to a clearing where a blue cabin sat snugly into the hillside. The front porch was screened in and windchimes dangled from the ceiling, singing a song with the breeze.

I climbed the steps, where I found that there was an opening in the kudzu at just the right size and angle to have a beautiful view over the valley below. I watched storm clouds roll in from a distance.

From seemingly nowhere, a loud crash of thunder shook the landscape. I jumped and clenched my fists.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” a voice behind me said, “It’s only god moving her furniture around.” I whipped around to see who it was.

In the doorway, a weathered-looking old woman stood, smoking a cigarette. She stood behind a screened door that had a sticker that read “No Smoking—oxygen in use.” Her face was worn thin with wrinkles and her short, straight hair stuck out in a few places. She was imposing—the type of person that fires blanks at Jehovah’s Witnesses.

“Hi...” I felt my words rumbling to the tip of my tongue, ready to tumble out. “My name is Cricket and Lilith—I have a question—actually, both of us do—”

“—You like barbeque?” she asked me.

“Yes ma’am!” My stomach grumbled at the thought.

“Come on in, hun.” She held the door open for me long enough for me to grab it before walking back through the house. “You wanna Coke?”

“Yes, please.” I looked around the house. It was small, but cozy. Lighthouse figurines, paintings, and other memorabilia decorated most of the interior. I sat on the couch as she fixed us plates in the kitchen.

“I make the best damn barbeque on either side of the Mason Dixon.” She handed me a plate piled high with barbeque, baked beans, and pickles. “My name is Dorothy by the way, but you can call me Dot.”

“It looks really yummy,” I said.

“Oh, it’s fixin’ to be.” She waddled back over to the fridge. “Vinegar, red, or gold?”

“Gold, please!” She grabbed a bottle of mustard barbeque sauce and set it down in front of me.

“Good girl,” she winked. I covered my sandwich in gold sauce and took a bite. *Jesus, this is amazing.*

“You like lighthouses?” I asked her.

“Love ‘em.” She took a bite of her sandwich. “Don’t you ever wanna go out and just live on one—all to yourself?” I thought on this.

“Wouldn’t you get lonely?” I asked.

“I figure I would sometimes, but I think I might be getting past that these days. I’ve lived a lot and reckon I’ll live some more.” She thought on this. “I’ve experienced love and heartache and all of that and I’ll tell you one thing—ready for some wisdom?” I straightened up.

“I’m ready.”

“The seafood up here in the Upstate is good but, god in heaven, is it so much better down in the Lowcountry.” She gave me a snarky smile.

“Noted.” I took another huge bite of my sandwich.

“Now what did Lilith send you up here lookin’ for?” she asked.

“Well, you know the Devil? You might know her as Paige.” Dot smiled at me.

“I’ve heard a thing or two.” She re-lit her cigarette.

“Well, she told me something... and Lilith says that you might have something to add. Maybe you disagree or something—”

“—What did the Devil tell you?” she asked. I took a deep breath and looked at my feet.

“She said that the most important lesson she’s learned in life is that nobody will ever love you enough.” I paused, collecting my thoughts. “And when I went through the Tower, I saw so many bad things and I got kind of scared. But then, she told me that if I keep them locked up there, they can’t hurt me.” Dot’s eyes softened.

“What a bitch,” she said. *She really went for it...* Dot stood up and motioned for me to follow. “Come on outside. The storm’s rollin’ in and I’ve got a story to tell you.”



# The Lovers

harmony, value alignment, choices

“I think that one of the harder concepts to grasp when you’re a child is the truth about love and loss.” Dot sat next to me in a wood rocking chair. We watched the trees sway in anticipation of the enormous storm rolling in. “You start out thinkin’ that they’re separate entities—like there’s one and then the other.”

“It’s not like that?” I asked. Dot sat on this, searching for an easy answer.

“You ever heard of the Bell Witch?” My face lit up.

“I *love* the Bell Witch—I was just reading a story about her.” Dot chuckled.

“Well then today is your lucky day!” She stuck out her hand. “Bell Witch—nice to meet you!” *Surely, she doesn’t mean...*

“You’re the Bell Witch?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, ma’am.” Dot nodded. “The one and only.”

“Wasn’t that a super long time ago?”

“Have you met a single person here that wasn’t ancient?” Dot challenged me.

“To be fair... no.” *Had I really not? Does that make me the youngest person here? Ew, that sounds like I’m fresh blood surrounded by a bunch of zombies or something.*

“Then don’t call me old,” she laughed.

“I’m sorry. I won’t.” I shut my mouth tight, as to not offend her further. She smiled at me as if she wasn’t offended, but I wasn’t taking chances.

“Alright, now where was I?” She thought for a moment. “Right. It all started in—I don’t know—1815? Time is getting my memories all wonky.”

“According to my book, it was 1817,” I added. She smiled at me.

“I was living in Tennessee at the time. It was between spells of loneliness and anxiety that I met Lucy Bell—”

“—John Bell’s wife?”

“The same one!” she replied. “Our friendship started out with me bringing some supper over to their house with my dog,

Moonshine. John Bell—the fruitcake that he is—saw that Moonshine was so well behaved and suggested that I had bewitched him!”

“Because you trained him well?” I asked. She nodded.

“That was only the beginning. Over the next two years, Lucy and I got to know each other more and I got to know that family more than I cared to. I was heavily involved in their lives—made a cake for John Bell Jr. for his birthday once, and a doll for their daughter, Betsey. Of course—John Bell made this out to be some kind of witchcraft—he wasn’t ever too smart. Thought they were a witch’s cake and a voodoo doll.” She shook her head, drew from her cigarette.

“I mean, I’ve heard of those things before, but I feel like that’s a bit of a stretch...”

“Tell me about it,” she said. “Anyway, one day I walked in on Mr. and Mrs. Bell having a heated argument over their daughter, Betsey. Mr. Bell wanted to marry her off to a man that she didn’t know or love. Lucy begged him to wait—she was only fifteen, after all. The tension escalated until I saw John throw Lucy against a wall and assert that he was the man of the house and don’t argue and all that man shit that they always want to throw out there like it has any meaning at all.”

“He hurt her?” I asked. *This is news to me.*

“He did a lot more than that,” she sighed. “He was firm about marrying Betsey off because he had this weird obsession with the idea—that he completely made up, by the way—that Betsey was flirting with boys and that she was fast or something. After that day, I became more than just a friend to Lucy—it’s as if I had accidentally entered into rats’ nest of the family’s problems and accidentally gotten tangled up in it. John knew I had seen what he did to Lucy—and back then, that wasn’t something that other people cared about as much—but he also knew that I could varnish his reputation around town.”

“Is that why he said you’re a witch?” I asked.

“That’s part of it...” She gathered her words. “After years of being Lucy’s confidant and companion, we started feeling more and more comfortable with her until one day, she confessed her love for me.”

“Did you feel the same way?” I asked her.

“I was absolutely enamored.” Dot gave me a nostalgic smile. “We were inseparable, and John knew it. His abuse toward her got worse I was already a witch in his eyes, but now I was also taking what he considered to be his property.”

“What’d you do?” I waited as Dot thought on this.

“We started putting laxatives in his tea until he became so dehydrated and exhausted that he had to be bedridden. This meant that the house was getting no income, but it also meant that John couldn’t hurt his wife and children anymore.”

“Is that how he died?” I asked. Dot smiled and stifled a laugh.

“Son of a bitch squirted himself to death, yes.” We both laughed at the idea.

“What’d you all do for money?”

“We scraped together what we had or could find. Eventually, John Bell, Jr. stepped in and helped his mom and sister out,” she said.

“Did you all end up together?” I asked. This made Dot’s face grow dull.

“We did for a while—but after a few years, the town was starting to get suspicious of two women living together—especially since one was supposedly a witch.” She picked at her hands and looked forward into the storm. Thunder crashed in the distance. “Eventually, I moved here, changed my name.”

“What happened to Lucy?” My heart hurt at the idea.

“She got remarried to a wonderful man that could provide for all of them. She died in the 1800s, so I’ve had time to think on it,” she sighed. Her eyes were sad. *What do you do? She’s sad. When other people are sad, what do their friends do?* I reached over and put my hand on hers.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry, sugaree.” She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “There is so much more to life than the brief moments of happiness and pain. It’s what happens between those times that has real meaning. You know all of those memories you saw in the Tower?”

“Yeah, the bad stuff?” I asked.

“That’s not what life is. I know that the Devil probably said that, but life is so much more than those bad things.” She studied me to see if I understood. “If I hadn’t let all of that go, the only

memories I would have of Lucy are the bad ones. You have limited space up here.” She tapped me on the head. “Use to for things that make you happy, empowered, joyful.”

“Won’t those things just happen again if I let it all go?” I was confused. Dot thought on this and shook her head.

“For every bad memory in that Tower, there is a good one on the other side. Take Lucy, for example. When I think about her, I don’t focus on the fighting or the death or the laxatives, I think about the time we had her cousin take care of the kids and we went skinny dipping in the pond. Or the time we sat on the porch late at night and watched the rain and made stories about the stars.” She smiled at the thought. “The mix of the two are what makes life work.”

# Justice

fairness, truth, accountability

“I’ve got to get back to the Tower,” I told Dot. Rain poured overhead.

“This is a bit of a storm, don’t you think?” she replied.

*Something within me knotted up and held fast to my insides. .*

“If I don’t go now, I’m scared I never will,” I said. She nodded.

“I’m not letting you go alone. I’ll go with you, but I think that you’ll need all the support you can muster,” she said.

“Should we invite Lilith and Mothman?” I asked.

“Absolutely.”

I hiked with my small brigade to the base of the Tower. The lake that hugged the side of the hill that the Tower sat atop shone and sparkled in the moonlight.

I took a deep breath and mounted the first step.

“Wait!” Dot exclaimed. She pointed toward the water. Just as before, Selene began to materialize from the reflection of the moon on the water.

“Come, look.” She motioned to me to join her at the edge of the water. I crept to the lake’s edge and held my breath. “What do you see?” *Please don’t let it be the Devil again.*

But it wasn’t. Staring back at me, was a spitting image of myself. The only difference is that the “me” in the reflection appeared confident, happy. *Is that who I am when I’m not anxious all the time?*

“I see me,” I told her, “and I look like I’m going to be okay.” Selene smiled.

“Then it looks like you’re ready.” She gave me a reassuring smile. “We’ll be waiting for you at the water’s edge.” My stomach turned over. *This is it.* I looked to Mothman, tears welling in my eyes.

“Are you sure you can’t come with me?” I asked. Mothman wrapped me up in a fluffy hug. Lilith joined in. Dot put a hand on my shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay. You’re going to do great,” he reassured me. I kept my face buried in his fur.

“How is it that the Devil gets to be up there but you all can’t come with me?” I asked. The others exchanged glances.

“The Devil is there because she lives in your mind.” Lilith waited for me to react. I circulated this throughout my brain. *How? Is that possible?*

“Is that why she doesn’t want me to pull the lever and let everyone out?” I asked. They all nodded.

“Don’t let her win, Cricket. You have so much more to experience,” Mothman said as his big, red eyes looked into mine. I wiped my tears and looked at all my supporters around me.

“I won’t let you down,” I sniffled. “I’m going to free the people in the Tower and then I’m going to clear the kudzu away and make a better world. I promise.”

“I believe in you,” Mothman smiled at me. “Now go get ‘em.”

I climbed the steps of the Tower, ignoring, to the best of my ability, the weeping and gnashing of teeth on my way up. When I reached the large door at the top, I stopped to brace myself for what I might find inside. After a moment, I opened it.

Inside, I found Paige, but it was not how I had expected. She was slumped on the floor, head between her knees, crying.

“Are... you okay?” I asked, approaching her with caution.

“How could you do this to me?” she cried out. *What did I do? Did she hear us talking?*

“I’m sorry...” I sat down next to her. “What happened?” She looked up at me, anger burning behind her eyes.

“I know what you think about me—what you told the others,” she said, “but it isn’t true and you know that. I’ve been nothing but kind to you.”

“You were a little mean—”

“—No, I wasn’t!” she snapped at me. “You just can’t handle it. Those people out there are nice to you. They won’t say anything that will hurt you. I’m the only one that is going to do that. You *need* me.” I felt my body tense up, but not because I was scared. I was starting to become irritated. *Why does she keep talking to me like this? She’s acting like I’m stupid.*

“They supported me.” I raised my voice. “You’re just sitting here, telling me that I need you in order to make it in the world—

why? Is it because you think I'm unable to do basic things? Is that it?" She laughed at me, conceited.

"Do you really think that you can? Look at you—you're an immature, bumbling mess." This stung somewhere deep inside. "You can't handle loud noises or bright lights or social interaction without breaking down into a psychotic mess!" I looked at my feet.

"I know that I'm not perfect," I said, looking at the floor, "but I think that I'll be able to figure this out." I looked back up at her.

"You really think so?" She challenged me with her eyes.

"It's the only way I'm going to survive, I think." I scanned the room for the lever. It had been tied up to the rafters with rope, as if to keep it in an "up" position. "And honestly, Paige, I think that you could be the same way." The sound of her name and the words I said made her stop in her tracks and take a moment to regroup.

"The only place for me in the world is the ground that I fought for and forced my way onto." The eye contact she had been trying so hard to maintain was broken. "If you pull that lever, you're going to destroy everything I've built here for myself." I felt pity for her.

Still, I walked to the lever and pulled the knife out of my backpack. *Sometimes, you'll have to use your knife to protect your ability to use a flashlight.* I started cutting. Paige's sobbing became shrieking.

"How?" she cried. "How could you do this to me?" I rocked myself back and forth as I cut into the rope.

"I might be young and I could very well be stupid," I started, "but it just doesn't seem to me like everyone in the real world is bad."

"Do you realize," she sobbed, "that when you release the lever, you're going to have to go back home?" I froze and looked up at her, trying to conceal my panic. Still, she caught on.

"I don't believe you," I said, and continued cutting.

"They didn't tell you?" The thought of my panic and lack of knowledge amused her. "They just let you do this without any idea of the consequences?"

"I'm sure it was on purpose." I didn't look back at her this time, out of fear that her condescending look would force my panic over the edge. *One more rope to cut through.*

"It seems to me like your friends abandoned you," she laughed. "Oh, Cricket. I pity you."

I cut through the last rope and scrambled to remove them from around the lever. *You can do it, Cricket.* I turned back to the Devil once more.

“I’m not afraid of going back to the real world anymore,” I told her. “I have a job to do and a life to get back to. That isn’t a threat anymore.” The Devil sneered.

“I’ll never leave you. You can’t just get rid of me,” she snarled.

“That’s okay,” I said, “I figured that much. But now, I’m kicking you to the back of my mind.” I put my hand on the lever. “I hope that one day, you’re able to find people who love you the way that you want to be loved. I really believe it’s out there. I have to believe that.”

“Cricket, don’t—” I pulled the lever and the room began to shake. Below, the sounds of the cell doors opening echoed throughout the stone corridor. *They’re free.*

Suddenly, the sky lit up as a bolt of lightning hit the Tower. *Oh, fuck—I mean, shit.* The Tower swayed and rumbled. I ran to the window.

Outside, rain swirled and thunder crashed. I squinted to see Mothman, Lilith, Dot, and Selene all standing by the water’s edge, looking up at me.

“Jump!!!” Lilith yelled. My stomach dropped. *Surely, they don’t mean...*

“Jump into the water!” Mothman shouted.

“Help me!” Behind me, the Devil was sliding down the stairs, clearly not of her own choosing. “Cricket, why? I wanted to keep you safe!” My palms started itching. My sternum ached. I rocked myself back and forth and rubbed my eyes. *This isn’t real, is it?*

“Cricket! Hurry!” The shouting below caught my attention again.

“Trust us!” Mothman yelled. I wiped tears from my eyes and climbed up onto the ledge of the window. Below, the lake seemed miles away. *You can do this.*

I held my breath and jumped to the water below.



# The World

completion, integration, accomplishment

“Cricket?” A voice shouted at me, waking me up. “She’s over here, guys!” *Thomas, is that you?* I opened my eyes. Thomas was peering into the kudzu at me. He held it open, letting light in. My eyes stung.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“About noon.” He held out his hand to help me up. “We thought you went home already. We were just about to go back to the house to eat lunch, but I wanted to look for you one more time.” My heart melted a little.

“I must’ve fallen asleep,” I said. Max appeared from behind Thomas.

“Gracie says she wants to go home. Are you still coming over for dinner tonight?” Max asked Thomas. He looked to me before answering.

“Cricket isn’t feeling good. We’re going to go home first and then maybe later.” Max looked disappointed at Thomas’ answer.

“Oh, okay. See you tomorrow?” Max asked.

“See you tomorrow.”

Thomas and I walked home together through the woods.

“Where did you go?” Thomas asked.

“I ran into the woods because I was scared you were going to tell mom about me hitting Gracie,” I said. Thomas held out his pinky.

“I won’t. Pinky swear.” We shook pinkies. “Besides—don’t tell mom I said this, but—Gracie’s a stupid b-word.” I stifled laughter.

“Why’d you say that?” I asked. He looked at me as if it was obvious.

“I don’t like the way that she was talking to you. She was being mean.” I looked down. *I had no idea anyone else felt like that.* “But don’t worry—after you ran off, I yelled at Gracie for you.” I smiled to myself.

“You stood up for me?” I asked.

“Of course! That’s what brothers do!” This appeared to be obvious to him.

“You don’t think I’m weird and annoying?” He thought on this.

“Well... I think you’re weird and annoying—but in a cool way!” He smiled at me.

As we approached the house, I felt my stomach flip in anticipation. *You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.* Thomas swung the front door open and walked in.

“Hello?” he called out for our mom. I walked in behind him, less confident. My mom walked around the corner of the laundry room and wiped her hands on a dish towel.

“Are y’all here to grab lunch—?” she started.

“—Mom, I need to talk to you about something.” My mom stopped, confused, and looked to me for an answer.

“I am not picky with food and I completely understand that bringing chicken pot pie up here was easier for you. However, I do not like chicken pot pie. I have never liked chicken pot pie. And I will not be partaking in chicken pot pie for dinner. I don’t want you to think that I am being unappreciative of your cooking. I just can’t do it.” She stood, frozen. “For my mental health,” I added. She shook her head and rubbed her forehead.

“Okay, Cricket. If you don’t want to eat, you do not have to,” she conceded. “But why does it have to be so difficult all the time?” *Aaaaaand we are back at it, I see.*

“I eat everything else... for the most part!” I argued.

“Not just about this—about everything!” She rubbed her neck and forehead some more. “It’s everything—I feel like nothing I ever do will be good enough for you!” Then it dawned on me. *She thinks I don’t appreciate her. She feels like nobody loves her enough. What do I do? What do I say?*

I walked toward her and put my arms around her. She jumped back at first, surprised, but then embraced me back.

“Group hug!” Thomas screeched. I winced and shut my eyes to stop them from hurting. Noticing this, Thomas quieted down.

“Sorry—group hug!”

“I know that sometimes it seems like I don’t care... but I promise I do,” I told her.

“What’s your plan for when your dad gets home and you’re not eating dinner?”

“I’m just not going to eat.” I folded my arms. “And I don’t care if he’s mad. I don’t eat chicken pot pie.” She gave me a look of both annoyance and amusement.

“Alrighty, Cricket. We’ll see how that goes.” She ruffled my hair.

That night, I sat outside and looked up at the stars. *Where are you, Mothman? I wanted to say goodbye to you.* The night was completely still.

Then, from one of the trees, Mothman came swooping down, landing on a rock near me. He cocked his head to the side.

“You needed me?” he asked. My eyes widened.

“How’d you know?” I was shocked. He fluffed his wings.

“Come on, Cricket! I’ve got you.” I got an idea.

“Wanna meet my brother?” I asked, excited. I stood up, ready to go get him.

“No, no. Cricket—hold on.” I stopped in my tracks. “If he wants to find me, he will.”

“Oh, okay...” I sat back down.

“What happened with your mom?” he asked.

“Well, she got mad,” I said, “but then I realized that it’s just because she cares about me and doesn’t think I care back.”

“You stood up for yourself, though...” He hesitated. “Right?”

“Oh, yeah!” I said. “I told her that I will not be eating chicken pot pie for dinner tonight.”

“And how did that go?” he asked.

“I am...” I paused to think, “not getting dinner tonight.” I frowned and looked up at him.

“I’m proud of you, Cricket.” I was not expecting this. Something inside of me melted. I felt tears gather in my eyes.

“Thank you...” I ran to him for a hug and buried my face in his fur.

“You’ve just got to keep doing that. Stand up for yourself, okay?”

“I can do that.” My voice was stifled by his fur. “I’m gonna have to eat at some point, though.” Mothman laughed and released from the hug. I stood back.

“I think you’ll find that there are more people in your court than you think.” He winked at me— at the same time, I heard a honk from behind me.

I turned to see my dad’s jeep coming up the driveway and stood back for him. He pulled up next to me and rolled the window down.

“Hey, boogaboo!” He reached for something in the passengers’ seat.

“Hey, Dad! How was your day?” I asked.

“It was pretty good. Got the bacon. Brought it home.” He gave me a warm smile and handed me a sandwich, wrapped in a paper towel. “Eat this before you go inside, okay?” I unwrapped it. Inside, I found a grilled pimento cheese sandwich. I looked up at him.

“Thank you—”

“—I knew it was chicken pot pie night,” he winked at me and drove off into the gravel in front of our house to park.

I looked back up into the sky. *See you soon, Kudzu.*