

It wasn't a sound that woke her this time, nor the soft slow lights that came dancing through the curtains. She thought in that first waking haze that it might be a scent, like the "bad air" her mother had talked about, creeping in to announce their presence. Then full wakefulness and knowledge struck her, and her only thought was Not yet.

Laura rolled out of bed, making sure not to disturb Jenny, who'd crawled in about an hour after bedtime. Toby, in the crib, slept like a swaddled stone. The nightlight cast a weak gold glow over them, but the first hints of blue had begun to creep in, cool and unfriendly. She glanced back once at the sound of Jenny's whimper, then turned her back on her sleeping children.

At least their father wasn't here.

It was an old bargain, old as the Hollow at least. With bargains you had to uphold your side; she'd learned that early, probably before she even knew about the Gentlemen.

Her bedroom in her parents' house had faced the street, and when she was five the changing shapes of headlights across the far wall had fascinated her. One night she woke to see a block of light against the far wall, flickering in all the colors of frost. When the light stayed put, as if the car that cast it had parked outside, she sat up in bed, then turned to the window.

The light was just outside, on the strip of green that her father liked to call the lawn. She crawled out of bed, dropping the last couple of inches to the floor, and reached for the curtain.

"Don't look."

Laura turned to see her mother standing in the doorway. "Mumma?"

Her mother crossed the room in two strides and took Laura into her arms, cradling her head against her shoulder. "Don't look, baby, don't look."

Obediently, Laura laid her head against her mother's shoulder and listened as something huge or a hundred smaller somethings passed by with a thunderous shush. Her mother's eyes were closed tight, and she rocked Laura as if she were an infant again, even though Laura had two little brothers and hadn't been rocked since the first one was born. The sleeve of her mother's bathrobe was damp with a thousand tiny droplets.

In the morning, she tried to talk about it. "I had a dream last night --" she said at the breakfast table.

"I expect we all had dreams," her mother said, pouring milk over her Cheerios. "What with all that pizza last night. Bet you had them worst of all, right, Kyle?"

Her brother Kyle, six years old and indeed the one who'd eaten the most, shook his head and began to cough.

The light was stronger in the living room. Soon it would be strong enough for her to read by, if she'd ever had the urge to do so. Laura closed the bedroom door behind her, making sure it latched, and picked her way through the maze of toys that covered the carpet. She watched the blue-edged shadows rise over the edge of the couch and drew a deep breath. I wonder what they'll bring, she made herself think over the rising dread in the back of her mind. And to whom they'll bring it.

They bring gifts. I have to remember that. They bring gifts too.

It wasn't till she reached second grade, just after Kyle's funeral, that she found a name for them. It was in a book of children's poems, the old kind that usually read as if they'd been dipped in Karo syrup. But this one, "The Smuggler's Song," wasn't like that at all. It made the room seem darker when she read it, and darker still when she thought about it. Even after she learned that the poet hadn't ever set foot in Brooks' Hollow, she still secretly called them the Gentlemen, after the poem.

Five and twenty ponies/ trotting through the dark...

She waited until her father took her remaining brother out to play baseball before talking to her mother about it. "Mumma," she asked as they washed dishes together, "why did Kyle get sick?"

Her mother's hands paused, wrist-deep in sudsy water. "Well," she said after a moment, in that careful voice adults used when they didn't know how to say something, "people in the Hollow get sick sometimes. It's just something in the air."

"Oh."

"You don't need to worry, sweetie. I won't let anything –" She stopped, her lips pressed together, and went on in a different tone. "You know what the pioneers used to say about our land? Good land, bad air. They might have been right about the air, but we had the best farms for miles. Still do. The Hollow's a good place, Laura. I want you to remember that."

Later that evening, after the boys had settled in to watch football, her mother took her by the hand and led her upstairs, where she rummaged in the back of the closet until she found an old cardboard box. "I thought you might want to try this on," she said, and took out a fragile crown, woven out of hair-thin wire and stones like gleaming ice, so delicate it chimed in her hands. She set it on Laura's head and held up a mirror. "Don't you look just like a princess, now."

Laura caught her breath. "I do! Mumma, I do!"

"I thought you might." Her mother smiled.

Laura shivered to remember that crown. It was here somewhere, in the boxes she'd packed up after her mother's death, but she hadn't ever gone looking for it. She sometimes dreamed of wearing it, and woke up with bile in her throat.

She reached up and took down the little blue notebook from its place above the television. It had pages of notes about the sound the Gentlemen made: pines in the wind, highway traffic very far away, heavy rain, but none of them quite caught it. She'd been keeping the notes ever since she could write, first on what it looked like when the Gentlemen went by, then – later, as she grew up and began to understand – the annotations.

And the more she watched the indistinct shapes through the curtain, the more she felt as if her whole life became only watching. Her second brother's death, her graduation, the strikes at the cabinet factory – all images apart from her. Even now, she was at a distance, watching herself sitting huddled wrong-way-round on the couch, a patch of drying formula stiff and sticky under her left forearm.

Sometimes they brought things, she told herself again. A crown, a song, a

whisper in someone's ear. And their trail was thick with flowers, even when they passed by late in October.

And the Hollow was a friendly place, after all. It seemed there was always a family to bring a casserole; it seemed there was always a service "for those taken from us" at the little church that was the only official marker of Brooks' Hollow, and the pews were always full.

But you didn't talk about it. You shrugged, and blamed bad air, and made sure your child's last months were comfortable, treating them like a stranger the whole time, and then you buried them in the good rich earth of the Hollow.

The light grew, shimmering like opals, and with it came a faint scent: greenery, growing things. But there was an edge to it as well, something like grass clippings left in the rain and then rotting in the sun. Something green gone wrong. Laura held the book tight against her chest, as if it might hide her, her and her children. "The Smuggler's Song" was inked in blue on the inside flap, an addition she'd made just after her wedding.

Them that asks no questions isn't told a lie./ Watch the wall, my darling, when the Gentlemen go by!

In her senior year at the county high she met Rich. Rich came from the north of the county, and he played guitar, and when he smiled at her Laura felt her heart come unstuck. For the first time in ages she felt as if she could be part of the world again.

She was worried at first what her parents would say. Some of her girlfriends had had to move out of the Hollow because their parents had kicked them out for any number of reasons – going out with boys, going out with only one boy, getting pregnant, not staying pregnant. Her parents turned out to like Rich, though, and they even helped them find a place to live.

They got married on the hottest day of the year. But the sky was clear, the beer was cold, and Rich looked at her like she was the sun come to earth. At the reception, she tore her hem dancing and had to go looking for her mother. She finally thought to look for her in the bathroom, only to find her talking to an old friend. "Rich tells me they've bought a trailer down in the Hollow," said Laura's old babysitter.

"It's a nice little place," Laura's mother said. Laura shrank back against the door.

"That ain't right, Missy. Bringing someone new into the Hollow ain't right, especially not a good sort like Rich. Why didn't you send her away?"

Laura held her breath. "She's all I got," her mother said after a moment. "I can't send her away."

"Oh, Missy. That's no way to treat a good girl. You know what the Hollow's like – that's why we've been sending our girls out. I know. You get sent or you get taken, and that's it."

"Or maybe you spend a good long life in the Hollow, like me and Bobby." Laura's mother sniffed. "Maybe that's what I want for my girl. You think of that? Besides, the way you keep sending your girls out, there won't be hardly any families left, and it'll be harder for anyone who stays. You think you're doing it for the whole Hollow, but it's just for yourself."

"That's not it," Laura's babysitter insisted. "That's not why. There's things

a girl should know, if she's going to be a mother in the Hollow. You think she can handle that? I can't handle that, and I'm twice her age. It's not worth it."

". . . she's all I got."

The other woman sighed. "Well, God keep you both."

Laura hesitated a moment longer, then thumped the door as if she'd just opened it. "Mumma?" she called. "I need some help with my dress."

"Be there in a moment," her mother said.

Not worth it. She formed the words, but couldn't make herself push the breath behind them. It was easy to forget, sometimes, amid the gifts tangible and intangible. No woman in the Hollow ever miscarried. No plants died in the ground, no house ever caught fire, no one ever quite starved. When you looked at the uncertain world, you could be forgiven for thinking that maybe Kyle's life had been a good trade.

At least Laura hoped you could be forgiven.

What was it the union man had said, just before she'd had to leave for Toby's birth? "The contracts need to be renegotiated," he'd said, and there was more. Most of it she hadn't paid attention to, being nine months pregnant and having what her friend Charlene called "baby brain." She'd thought it was dumb at the time — you make a bargain, you stick with it — but that had been before Rich came back.

Maybe bargains went bad, sometimes. Maybe they went bad and there wasn't anything you could do but stick with it and hope for the best.

The closest anyone ever came to saying anything out loud was just after her mother's death (no Gentlemen, just three packs of Marlboros every day for twenty years). A lawyer in a rumpled blue suit had arranged for a big town meeting, and he'd gotten nearly the whole Hollow to attend on the promise of free barbecue. He had charts, and maps, and he talked excitedly about disease clusters and the factory up the road. And after half an hour of silence from the good folks of the Hollow, he'd asked them to join in a class action suit.

The minister of First Church, acting for all of them, had smiled and nodded and escorted him to the door. "A lawsuit can't help us," he'd said, "even if you knew who to sue."

It was right after he closed the door that someone could have spoken, could have broken that throat-tightening silence and actually said who was to blame. But the lawyer drove off, the silence won out, and the minister shrugged and sighed.

Rich went to the war. Rich came back. Laura had written him about Toby's birth, and it made her heart fly free again to see him smile. But the look he turned out the windows was haunted, and with more than just wartime ghosts. He couldn't drive any more, not without pulling over and putting his head down every few miles. So he spent more time in the Hollow, and the Hollow clotted around him.

In April, after the Gentlemen's spring visit (which would later be annotated with Ashley Irvine, 6, 4 mos. after G.), they had a fight. It wasn't even a real fight; she'd dropped a glass, and he'd charged into the kitchen so fast he almost knocked over Toby. He yelled at her, she yelled back, both scared

and angry at each other for being scared, and Laura didn't even see the slap coming until her cheek was already burning with it. She raised a hand to her face, disbelieving. Rich stared at her as if she'd grown horns, then turned and ran out the door, heedless of Toby's yowls.

Laura didn't go after him, even when dinner and sunset passed without his return. She took extra time putting the kids to bed, and didn't get up when she heard the front door open.

When she came out from the bedroom, she found him sitting at the kitchen table, staring at his hands. She sat down across from him, and after a while, he began to talk.

"They told me I might have trouble, coming back," he said, and this time he didn't move away when Laura took his hands in hers. "And I think I was okay, for a little while . . . But something about here, it's like, like I keep seeing things I oughtn't, and it just keeps getting worse. Like something keeps poking at my head." He glanced out the window, as if something was watching him.

Laura said nothing, only thought of how smart Rich had been in high school, how quickly he saw things that it took her ages to notice, and how she should have known that wouldn't change.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and kissed her fingers. "I don't know where just yet, but we can live with my folks a while."

Laura unknotted her hands from his and went to stand by the window. "This is my home," she said.

Rich's eyes went wide and broken. "I know, babe, but it's not a good place. We need to get out."

I do. But you get sent or you get taken, and that's it. "So," she said, "either I go with you, or you go alone."

"What? No, that's not —"

"I know." She turned and smiled at him, blinking back tears. "I'm sending you away, Rich. I'm sending you out of my life." And out of the Hollow.

The divorce wasn't been pretty — it couldn't have been, with the two of them still in love. Rich called her and left messages, angry or maudlin or pleading, and she'd listened to them all, hugging herself so tight there would be white marks in her arms when the message ended. Toby began to fuss more, and Jenny started to crawl into bed with her at night.

But Rich was free. Rich was out of it, and she could never, ever hand him over to them. Even if she sometimes woke and cried over the cold side of the bed. Even if she was back watching her life again.

The lights hadn't changed, and the whispering had stilled. And now Laura had to admit it, had to see that the Gentlemen had come to her house. Oh, I tried, I tried, she thought. I could have sent the kids away, I could . . .

But would it have done anything? The old women, like Lara's babysitter, had sent their kids away. And some had then died alone and unnoticed, so successful at cutting the ties between their loved ones and the Hollow that they'd cut their own lifelines. Even that wouldn't have been enough.

She'd gotten as far as the border of the Hollow, car packed to the gills and kids in the backseat, before the strength left her limbs and she found herself unable to leave. She'd even thought about ringing the house with iron and salt, the way one woman had back in '09, but that woman's family had all died in a gas explosion two months after. The Gentlemen took their claim. You had to carry out a life to them, and you had to let them carry that life away.

It was an old bargain, old as the Hollow at least. And you had to keep bargains.

A soft trill shook the window panes, traveling from them down to the tips of her fingers through some malign conduction. Her first instinct was to categorize it, and she thought of flutes, screech owls, mourning doves, before she quite heard it, and hearing it was lost.

This was right, the cry said. Children die, and if one of them had to, who better to choose than their mother? She sat up – looking, had she known it, very like her mother – then got to her feet.

She ghosted into the bedroom and gazed at her children. Toby, she thought, he's too young to really understand about being sick. No, Jenny, because she's had at least some time. No . . .

Something burred against her consciousness, a wrong note in the Gentlemen's music.

Decide. You have time. Just decide.

But the burr remained, coming through in bursts like – like a phone, she realized, and glanced over her shoulder in time to see the harsh red light of the answering machine flick on.

"Uh. Hi. It's me," Rich's voice said, crackling over the tape. "Look, I know you're not awake – Jesus, I hope I didn't wake the kids, I'm sorry – but I had to talk to you." He went on, but Laura was no longer paying attention. His voice was harsh and ragged and so unlike the Rich she'd known, but it was enough to drown out the Gentlemen's echoes.

Laura looked back at her children. She could let herself walk into the room, as she was doing now, let herself pick up a child and go outside. And she could tell herself later, when her child died, that she hadn't really done it, that she'd just watched herself do it.

She thought of the crown, and of Kyle.

Jenny shifted, putting out a hand to the empty space where Laura had slept, and sat up. "Mumma?"

"Stay inside, sweetie," Laura said. She crossed her arms, denying herself a last hug in case her resolve failed. "Stay inside and under the covers. I'll be back –" She caught the lie between her teeth and shook her head. "Sleep tight, sweetie. Love you."

She turned her back, ignoring Jenny's scared squeak, and closed the door. The last moments of Rich's message cut off, cut short by the tape, and Laura touched the answering machine as she passed. "Love you too."

Finally she closed her eyes, opened the front door, and stepped out into light. The trill sounded again, closer, all around her, and she opened her eyes with a gasp. Two dozen sets of eyes regarded her, wide and unblinking.

They didn't ride horses, of course; at the back of her mind she was proud of herself for having figured that out. They rode owls, giant white faces staring at her without curiosity. That was the only thing recognizable about them; it was as if the owls, strange and gigantic as they were, were a concession to reality.

They were made of light, and they shone, oh they shone. For a second she thought they could be angels, but the memory of the little blue notebook tainted that thought. One of the riders – white and blue, and human only in shape – leaned over his reins toward her and gestured toward the house.

"No," she said aloud. "You didn't get Rich. You don't get them. You get me."

The rider slashed one hand across his chest: rejection. Others agreed, some agitating their mounts so that the huge birds hopped from one foot to the other.

She shook her head. "I don't care what you want. You don't get to choose. And I choose this. I choose me." She leaned forward, and was rewarded by the sight of the head rider leaning away from her.

You think you're doing it for the Hollow, but it's just for yourself. The words were her mother's, but the head of one of the Gentlemen moved, as if speaking her thoughts.

Laura shook her head. "No. For the Hollow. For the dead of the Hollow." All the services, all the casseroles, all the dead then and now.

There came a familiar prickling on the back of her neck. If she turned now, she knew, she'd be able to see Jenny at the window, nose mashed up against the glass, mouth open in the beginning of a sob.

She didn't turn, not even to say goodbye. Watch, darling. Watch. "This bargain is ended," she said. "We will not be renegotiating."

The head rider motioned to the others, and they advanced on her, cruel hooked beaks clashing. Laura held her ground. It always hurt to break a bargain; there was always something that got lost. But it was worth it, if the contract was no good.

The owls took her by hand and foot and hair, and their beaks were sharp. The first cut came, and with it a rending deeper than her skin, deeper than her heart: the Hollow breaking, breaking so that it could never be repaired, and her blood turning the rich soil to useless swamp.

Watch. Oh, watch.