

OFF WITH  
THEIR HEADS

ZOE HANA MIKUTA

**HYPERION**

Los Angeles New York

Copyright © 2024 by Zoe Hana Mikuta

All rights reserved. Published by Hyperion, an imprint of Buena Vista Books, Inc. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023.

First Edition, April 2024

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FAC-004510-24060

Printed in the United States of America

This book is set in Walbaum MT Pro/Monotype

Designed by Zareen Johnson

Stock image: birds 214,1171219/Shutterstock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mikuta, Zoe Hana, 2000- author.

Title: Off with their heads/Zoe Hana Mikuta.

Description: First edition. • Los Angeles ; New York : Hyperion, 2024. • Audience: Ages 12-18. • Audience: Grades 7-9. • Summary: Witches and lovers Caro Rabbit and Iccadora Alice Sickle's twisted past comes to light as they are once again thrust into each other's lives and beckoned back to Wonderland, the dark, monster-filled forest where it all began.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023029414 • ISBN 9781368099066 (hardcover) •

ISBN 9781368099141 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Witches—Fiction. • Magic—Fiction. • Kings, queens, rulers, etc.—Fiction. • Lesbians—Fiction. • Fantasy. • LCGFT: Lesbian fiction. • Fantasy fiction. • Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M5554 Of 2024 • DDC [E]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023029414>

Reinforced binding

Visit [www.HyperionTeens.com](http://www.HyperionTeens.com)

*For the girls going stranger and stranger...*

*We grow. It hurts at first.*

SYLVIA PLATH, "WITCH BURNING" C. OCTOBER 1961

*How much can you change and get away with it, before you turn into  
someone else, before it's some kind of murder?*

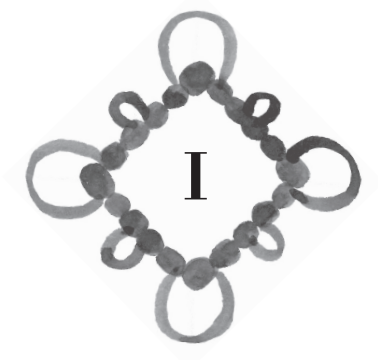
RICHARD SIKEN, *WAR OF THE FOXES*,  
"PORTRAIT OF FRYDERYK IN SHIFTING LIGHT"



Well, since you're already here, dear readers, past the middle of this sentence, at its frayed end . . .

Humor a faceless narrator for a moment? Suppose, a nasty little fairy tale, and— Oh! Oh! How brave a reader is! Still directly here, again, and again . . . That deserves a treat, a comfort, a familiar start, to start it all off, and so:

**ONCE UPON A TIME**, in a Saint-stricken world, there were two horrible girls in love. . . .



ONE



**THERE EXISTS AN OLD CREATION TALE** that they tell in the country of Isanghan: a girl asleep in a flower field, who dreams up the world. Carousel and Iccadora always liked this guess at existence especially. Of some sickly little witch they were tucked away in, dreaming up dark things.


Dreaming up them.

Dreaming up Wonderland.

# TWO

YEAR ZERO ZERO NINETY-FOUR, WINTER SEASON

THERE ARE 1006 REMAINING SAINTS



**“LIKELY DRAWN TO THE SCENT OF MOURNING,** *the Saint Dorma Ouse was seen in the southern district of the Yuhwa Ward, late at night the eighth day of the Winter season. Imprints of bare feet and fingers were discovered pressed into the mud of the river bordering the southern Wall. It should be reasonably believed the Saint has returned to Wonderland.*

*“It was reported that after scaling the cobbles of the forgery wall, the Saint tore back the shutters of the attic room (where only two of the four beds remained occupied following another rampage of saltfever) and rolling head over hips over floor; shot under the bed, where it crouched to await the arrival of the blacksmith Dak Merryweather and his wife, Rana Merryweather, both drawn hastily by the shrieks of their youngest daughter. The Saint then skittered out from beneath the bed, felled and devoured the blacksmith, the blacksmith’s wife, and the littlest child, and, taking ahold of the skeletal necks of all three between its teeth, darted backward on hands and feet,*



## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

*departing out the window from which it had arrived. Eyewitness account was provided by eleven-year-old Ren Merryweather, the only surviving member of the Merryweather family.*

*“It is predicted that the Saint has returned to its nest, and may be distracted for a time with either feeding or necromantic spellwork. Regardless, it is recommended that the river be avoided until such a time it is deemed—”*

Caro rapped her knuckles on the edge of the bar, pausing the reading. She rose from her seat but stilled a moment to waver in place, then dragged her wrist to the remaining slick of liquor on her lip.

“Should I keep going, noonah?” queried the paperboy, the story wilting over his knuckles.

Caro stared, then clasped the boy as if to shake him, decided against it, and instead dropped a kiss to his brow just to startle him, and took the story from his hand and held it up to the tavern lanterns.

She couldn’t read more than a lick, and was momentarily drunk enough to forget that, watching the small mouths of the candle flames breathe faintly behind the dashes of ink for a few seconds before she re-collected herself and crushed up the paper in her hands.

“Yeah, I’ll take it,” she said, without slurring, she was almost sure. Then she did shake the boy a little, thinking the wideness of his eyes marked disbelief. “Ya, geokjeongma, o-kay? Noonah will take it. Don’t worry.”

“Take *what?*”

But Caro had already released him and punted out the tavern doors, their handles bundled up in red ribbons to mark the approaching holiday—the Saints’ Races. It was pouring rain. Caro ambled on the open street for a few minutes with her hood down, singing and shaking her fist violently at passersby to send them ping-pong out of her way, eventually kneeling in a gravel puddle to murmur sweet nothings to her chosen gods, and afterward, got up to vomit at the base of the willow tree bowing over the road. A crow, stubbornly indifferent to the downpour, cocked its head from its watching roost.

“Take what?” asked the paperboy again, watching the ordeal from the tavern window.

“The head,” responded the barkeep.

“The head?”

“Do you know who that was, boy?”

“No, adjeossi.”

“Fortunate. That there was Carousel Rabbit.”

They watched as Caro gave a sharp salute to the willow tree and then strutted out of sight, chin tilted high, rain slicking her blond locks to her temples.

The paperboy winced. “Who?”

The barkeep leaned over the countertop. The paperboy leaned in, too, sensing a conspiratorial moment.

“Carousel Rabbit,” said the barkeep, “takes the heads from Saints.”

Then he smacked his large hand down next to the boy’s shoulder, and the boy yelped, and the barkeep barked a chuckle, and neither saw the crow outside, interested in Carousel Rabbit as crows tended to be, falling from its perch and circling the road.

---

*One of the skeptical ones*, thought Caro distantly, as the bird finished examining her and dropped onto her shoulder. She snapped her teeth at it when the talons curled, then threw her head back and laughed.

The sound was barbed; perhaps this was why the bird tried to get away. More likely he saw the magic weeping from her back molars when she opened her mouth.

## *OFF WITH THEIR HEADS*


Either way, Carousel spat on him before he could lift his wings, and then he tried to lift his wings, and he fell apart.

Feathers sloughed. Sinew went slack, unraveled from bone. Caro batted the mess off her shoulder, already bored. Already thinking of Wonderland.

# THREE

YEAR ZERO ZERO EIGHTY-NINE, WINTER SEASON

THERE ARE 1104 REMAINING SAINTS



**UNDER THE COVER** of the gazebo, Carousel Rabbit put a hand under her girlfriend's dress and squinted out into the misted courtyard. It was before first bell and it had rained the night prior, the grass choked under gray mud sloshing against gray stone bordering the lawn. The covered gallery that connected Empathy's two buildings was abandoned, diamond alcoves sticky with frost—Icca's next cutting breath came out in a cloud against the shell of Caro's ear.

She felt a stab of triumph, biting down on the flash of the smile underneath the dip of her hood. *I am so viciously real*, Caro thought to herself, in the dramatic fashion she relished, sought after. Carousel Rabbit and Iccadora Alice Sickle—they were teeming flesh and bone and magic in their pinprick corner of existence, and that corner was fucking boring; it was *paper*; Caro rambled in her head, this world was paper and when some enormous flame came to swallow it up, Caro would burn down nice and slow.

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

Icea shoved Caro away, wiping her thin, sharp mouth with the back of her hand as the bells began to shriek across the courtyard. They were leaned up in the corner of the gazebo with the least amount of spiders, which was still a lot of spiders, and Icea crushed a sorry arachnid that had gone to chew on her temple under her thumb. She wiped the legs against Caro's skirt, and Caro let her, then caught Icea's wrist when she tried to pull away.

"Ya, ya, Icky. Let's ditch," said Carousel. Icea ignored her, freeing her hand and then ducking under the arm Caro planted across her path, black, silky hair brushing Caro's sleeve.

"Tecca," shot the other witch harshly, as Caro trailed her through the mud and into the gallery, and then left into the south wing. All of Icea's words, so very harsh. Caro wanted to devour each of them down until her throat split from all the barbs.

"She's usually here by now," Caro mused, and tried to run her hand around Icea's waist again. Icea batted her away as their feet moved over the black-bricked floors that shot through Our Blessed Lady of Divine Empathy Parish Academy for Young Ladies. Straggling students hurried soundlessly around them, and Caro scanned them for Tecca's dark brown curls. "Maybe she's already in class, being a good academic..."

A joke. Tecca would cut class with Caro as soon as it was suggested. It was Icea who was such a stickler for the books. Icky Sickie and her books and the way she furrowed her black brows as she read... she deserved a better place than this. She deserved some pretentious academy in some distant, glittering Ward, and Caro deserved to trail her there, trail her everywhere... Was that all that Caro wanted from her life? She looked around the dim hall, Icea glaring at her from the middle of it. Perhaps. Maybe it was all she could hope for, what with the Saints in Wonderland Forest that would keep her in this Ward for all her life, but Caro thought that she might think, regardless of all of it: perhaps, perhaps...

Caro also thought, one, really, it was quite bold for their school to be such a pretentious mouthful while amounting to absolutely nothing, and

two, that she'd rather walk into Wonderland Forest, in search of a louder life than this one, and instantly get gobbled down by a Saint than have to listen to Madam Killington again squawk about geometric runework for the next hour of her existence.

Empathy was the only girls' school in Astara and the surrounding villages clustered within the Mugunghwa Ward, so the class pool consisted of both wisteria farmers' daughters and the orphans from the conservatory just up the dirt road, the latter being, for the sake of putting it simply, from where Icca and Caro hailed. Thus, Icca and Caro hadn't been very far past the one street itself in their sixteen years, except when they visited Tecca Moore's home and her family's orchard.

There, under the sweet wisteria trees, they practiced their little, painful magics; sometimes they tried to find new gods; sometimes they talked of killing the White Queen, Delcorta October Kkul, and the Red Princess, Hattie November Kkul, and taking the throne for themselves. For they were so powerful already, certainly, certainly, the greatest witches of their age.

Caro hummed, snatching Icca's wrist again before the girl could make it around the classroom doorway. She put her lips right to Icca's ear and breathed, "Let's go smoke in the bell tower, Icky. We have much to discuss—royalty's in town, after all. It's high time for an assassination, don'tcha think?"

"Hajima. You are so *irritating*," Icca returned, which made more words than she'd usually utter by this time of day, which meant it was a good day—it was usually noon before she'd open her mouth. *To say something*, Caro added in her head, and chuckled to herself; Icca thought she was being laughed at. She snapped her body away and the words off her tongue, "And you didn't even ask Tecca."

Caro tsked, pouting. "Why are you so sour, Icky? On the *holiday*, too!"

"What holiday?" scoffed Icca bitterly, though they both knew. It'd been in the papers all week—it was that time of year for the Saints' Races again. It was the only time royalty stepped foot outside of the capital, besides for

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

funeral processions for their bloodline, for a tour around the lesser Wards. “There’s no holiday.”

It would be a particularly brutal day of parties and games at the White Queen’s discretion—worse, her imagination. The revelries would be taking place in a larger village on the opposite side of the Mugunghwa Ward; Astara always remained the same. Some traveled to go watch the Saints that Delcorta had brought along with her go through the trials she’d designed for the day—Caro peeked into the classroom and saw a handful of empty desks. Lucky little girls, off to watch the carnage.

Kat Pillar—that was the Saint slated for the day’s festivities, according to the papers. The White Queen’s caravan had probably arrived in the Ward in the wee hours of the morning—she’d be gone before the next, leaving the ground stained. Was it just a rumor, that she sometimes enjoyed selecting certain people in the crowd to race the Saints? The contenders were only supposed to be reaped from the criminal population, but everyone had heard the stories. How Delcorta would allow the contestants to live, or leave them to die, depending on her mood. How Hattie, the blank-faced Princess, would fold and unfold her hands on her hanbok skirts, never once flinching when the blood started to spray. And every year when the Saints’ Races were happening and people tied white ribbons to their front doors to show their support—after all, the Queen would always slay the Saint at the end of the game, reducing the overall count—Caro and Icca and Tecca would talk of putting an end to all of it. An end to royalty. An end to all the fun. People shouldn’t be scared of the Queen. They should only be scared of them.

Was it all talk? Well, well. The important thing was passing the time. . . .

Caro sulked into the classroom after Icca and deposited herself in the seat behind her, next to the window painting the hills piss yellow with its warbled glass. It seemed impossible that the light managed to claw inside at all, gray streaks cutting across the desk surfaces and scrubbing away color. Caro threw a look around the half-empty room of bored students

and waited for Killington to turn to the board before leaning to hiss into the back of Icca's head, "Tec's not even here."

She was probably already up in the bell tower, feet kicked up on their usual perch, shoving back the bricks where Caro had stashed their contraband and the matchbook.

Icca tilted her chin on her hand, her soft, wide nose sloping into her knuckles as she glanced back at the empty seat at the end of the desk row. Normally it went Icca-Caro-Tecca; *Shut up and let me focus, Let's leave immediately and never return, Let's burn down the building first*, respectively.

Such was the common tone of the trio's conversations, these glorious, brutal musings. It made Caro feel wicked and grand for it, and, after the best of them, vaguely nauseous. She knew Icca felt some similar way, as after classes, when they wandered back to the orphanage with their own words and dreams stuck in their stomachs like pins, they could hardly stay for very long before they were pushing out the windows of the sleeping room—reminding the other orphans of the usual consequences should any of them squeal—climbing out, away, dashing toward Tecca's home.

One night in particular, as Caro and Icca ran back and found Tecca with her hip checked against the front gate at the border of her family's farm, awaiting them, she greeted them with her brash smile and stated firmly, "The moon is as fat and round and pale as a wedding cake, and thus I believe we should all get married. What say you, darlings?"

"I say," Caro said, snatching one of Tecca's hands, and, flashing her own rictus grin, regardless of the fact that there was never a moon to be seen past the thick of the clouds, declared, "I do, darling."

But Icca drew her skinny arms around herself and glared at them. "We've no rings."

"My, you do love to be spoiled," cooed Tecca, and both she and Caro closed around Icca. One of their hands in her black hair, one poking at her ribs; it was strange, how Caro often couldn't differentiate herself from



## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

Tecca, but this could be because she never cared to. Icca batted out of the loops of their arms, claiming the fence post Tecca'd been leaning against with her spine.

Caro watched the shadows briefly bend toward Icca's feet, before they remembered themselves and straightened back.

"What's got you in a mood?" Caro queried, stamping her feet against the bottom post to lift herself from the ground. She watched Tecca swirl a lock of her brown hair around her forefinger as she touched the toes of her boots against Icca's.

"Yes, Alice," Tecca said, those sharp brown eyes slicing through Icca. "Or is it cold feet? You're breaking our hearts."

"Black, black hearts," chattered Caro.

Icca spat, "I don't want it just in my head."

Above them, the sky and the clouds and the rays that surely bled from the wedding-cake moon were blotted out by the quiet movement of the wisteria branches, their sticky-sweet perfume already stuck in every thread of Caro's clothes. For Tecca, it was always in her hair, too.

"What's the matter with that?" Caro asked sincerely. She scrubbed a knuckle at her temple. Weren't they in each other's heads anyway?

"Are we so easy to forget, Alice?" Tecca laughed, putting her chin on the top of Icca's head—she was by far the tallest of the three. "Worried you'll wake up and it'll all have been a dream? That's okay. Here. I thought you'd say something like this. Give me your hand. I brought a knife."

The older they grew in this nothing Ward, the more the three of them believed they would find nothing of themselves in other people, and only in each other. Because of this diagnosis, they would be doomed to rot if they were ever separated. They would wither and, without the other two as mirrors, they would forget themselves, and be ridiculous, clueless beings; they would misplace being wicked, and alive for it; their magic would dry up in their veins and be useless.

And to be known by other people! *Other* people? No, no, it would never work. Caro knew she'd just end up destroying them.

She was possessed of sharp bits, of something dark and restless she could feel sitting in her chest, primed to explode all over the world like shrapnel, if she could ever get out of this place. Icca and Tecca saw it in her; they did not flinch away, and instead were fascinated, and Caro saw it in them, too, the little jagged bombs hung up in their ribs like mistletoe, and often had the thought that if one of them went off, so must the other two, a chain reaction. So, maybe someday . . .

An affectionate narrator would be doing a grave injustice to act as if these girls did not have a hearty sadism set fast in their pretty little heads, which they hid lazily under a false guise of masochism—their affinity for the agony that came with doing their natural magic did separate them from most of the population, certainly from their peers.

In earlier years, they would even have been called Saints: a term for people who had practiced and honed their magic—even though it corroded them, even though it was painful—to fight off the swarms of fanatics during the plague raids. But Caro and Icca and Tecca had grown up in an era where Saints weren't the righteous any longer; they were the deformed, starved beasts that skittered around in the Wonderland Forest past the Wall. Hardly anyone used their natural-born abilities—the world ate at them enough as it was.

The fact that the trio did indulge in their powers ostracized them, and on this Carousel often thought—what luck! Everyone else should just stay far away and not ever think of bothering them.



“Miss Rabbit,” came a voice like a whip from the front of the classroom, and both girls straightened in their seats. Killington was staring down Caro with flaming eyes. “Remove your hood.”

“Sorry, seonsaengnim,” Caro said, mumbling both apology and honorific, and dusted her cloak off her shoulders and onto the back of her seat.

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

She scrubbed at the blond curls on her crown and looked up at the lesson. Holy shit. She had no clue what was going on.

But it didn't really matter. The only good university was in the Petra Ward, miles outside the Mugunghwa Ward Wall. Caro could forget shucking it through Wonderland to make the entrance exams—going on foot meant Saints, or Jabberwockies, so that wasn't an option, and she'd never make enough to pay for passage on an armored caravan. Graduating—if she graduated—didn't mean anything; she was just going to end up some farmhand in some patch drying up inside the same Wall that she saw licking the landscape outside her window every night; didn't matter much that she was getting better at the bird-magic stuff every day.

Didn't matter, and so Caro didn't really care.

Icea and Tecca were stuck here, too.

With her.

Caro often mused that if she were rich—or if she were a more powerful witch, one who could do more than mess around in the orphanage basement, magic webbing her fingertips in sickly, auroral strands as she wove some shitty enchantment over the crow she'd stoned off the fence posts—she would be quite a cruel girl.

Caro tugged at her ring finger, thumbing the thin scar that encircled it. Icea and Tecca wore the same. They weren't just married. They were bound by blood, by pain.

Caro snapped her head up at the screech of a chair against the bricks.

Icea was standing, hands braced on her desk. Her fine eyes narrowed as they focused on something out the glass.

*"Iccadora Alice Sickle,"* Killington shrieked. "What do you—"

It should've irked Caro—Tecca was the only one who was allowed to call Icea *Alice* out loud—but she didn't hear the rest. She was seeing what Icea was looking at, and then Caro was standing, too. Icea took her wrist; it surprised Caro, and she was lucky for it, because she sucked in a breath before Icea stepped forward into the shadows slanting under the wire windowsill, and then they were nothing and nowhere at all.

And then they were outside. Stepping out from the dark spots strained from the foliage of the garbled willow that bowed over Empathy's gallery, and they were running up the road and toward the smoke curling from the Moores' farm.

It was raining ash and wisteria petals, which were still burning around their silken edges as they streaked the wind. Icca paused them a few dozen paces away from the mouth of the burning grove, and Caro was thinking *Not Tecca, not Tecca* as she looked into those lively, gasping flames, and then up, at the black body of a crow circling far above.

Magic welled in her eyes, the work excessively rich, hot, electric sap that webbed her eyelashes together but then it wasn't anything at all—she blinked in the bright fluid and blew the enchantment outward, and upward, and then she had snatched the crow's form as her own.

She didn't know how to fly, of course, so then she was barreling wings-over-talons toward the ignited ground, taking in everything she could before she hit the flames, and burned alive.

Carousel jerked back into her body, which had collapsed on the dirt and was being mercilessly joggled by Icca's grip. The other witch was kneeling beside Caro, her teeth clenched and stained silver from her own magic. Caro shoved her away and vomited on the ashen road. Heaving, she scraped the gummy mess of the magic from her eyes, and it stung where it met the back of her knuckles.

"I saw someone in the house," Caro rasped out of the bile between her teeth, and coughed as she sucked down smoke. "Someone moving—"

Icca wrenched Carousel to her feet. "Tecca?"

"Don't know . . ."

Icca squinted down the orchard lane again. Countless afternoons had been spent between the wisteria trunks, the perpetual gray light of the perpetually pathetic weather softened by the lavender canopy, Tecca Moore down in the roots enchanting the mice to eat one another as Icca and Caro watched, revulsion and fascination twined in their guts.

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

“I don’t know if I can,” moaned Caro, poisoned with her own magic—she’d brought it on too fast, sick in the excess of it. A headache pulsed in her temples in staccato flashes of fever, vision spasming. It was a hundred times worse than the worst hangover she’d ever had. *Just end me*, she prayed sloppily, as her stomach twitched around its acrid hollowness. *Refracted gods— Oh my gods justendme*. “Icca, I don’t think I can—”

“Carousel Rabbit,” hissed Icca, with her gloves wrapping in Caro’s cloak. Her eyes singed Caro’s, glittering from the burn of the air. There was a lot in that stare. A lot of afternoons leeching into cold dusks and the three of them talking about the worst kinds of things: horrible, delicious kinds of things, like Sainthood, like death.

And none of them ever said it aloud, but it was there in their clasped fingertips, the hush and awe at the laughs they shot at one another. *I can’t imagine a world without you in it*.

*So when we die—let’s do it together.*

*I’ll kill you if we don’t go together.*

Caro drew in another pinched breath, and shoved it all back. “The kitchen,” she gritted out. “No fire yet.”


Icca’s grip tightened on Caro.

Then she fell back, spine barreling toward the road and Caro barreling toward Icca, into the flickering press of their own shadows drawn faintly against the dirt.

# FOUR

YEAR ZERO ZERO NINETY-FOUR, WINTER SEASON

THERE ARE 1006 REMAINING SAINTS



**CROUCHED IN THE WONDERLAND MUD**, Carousel put a hand on the back of a crow's sleek neck and squinted out over the misted river. Her hood hid the light of the magic bubbling in her eyes; it dripped in blue beads off her chin, streaking out thinner and thinner in the water as it left her behind. Intently, she stared at the waterfall that slid over the stone quarry of the opposite shore, as if divining arcane truths from its froth.

Caro was not. Caro was hunting.

She pinched the back of the crow's neck, then dropped her chin further and spat on it; it didn't like it, the Birds never liked it, black feathers rising as it twisted to bite off her thumb, which was a mistake—Carousel met its eyes, and then they were her eyes, and she lifted her wings and flew off into the direction of the waterfall. To be exact, the cavern spiraling behind it.

Caro prayed as she drifted. She did not ask her gods to watch over her, to protect her. She asked for power.

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

She always asked for power.

The gods in her head were, of course, disparate from the gods in other people's heads. Now, in Religion, there were stories, not scripture choking out paths of morality like there had been in the Pallid Ages—the question that guided Religion was: Where, and in what, did one, as an individual knot of consciousness, feel the gods here?

All of them—people, Caro, history—had always been trying to guess at Divinity. In this moment in time, most of them—at least in Isanghan—acknowledged Divinity as the whole tableau of reality, but common practice was to select particular elements as personal gods, to play favorites—picking threads out of the fabric, so to speak. The gods were nature, the night sky and the winter season and wildfires, and rot. The gods were forces, love and cruelty and dreams—but Caro found that people were forces, too, and thought, perhaps like a heretic, that she had seen Divinity worn into the edges of those she had attached a fondness to, and that these gods were so much more startling than all the others because, simply, they were close.

There weren't exact names for the pieces of Divinity Caro had found in the twenty-one years she'd been alive, except maybe Cold, or Mist, or Birds, or Dawn—with its rose-frayed stare, there, always, after Caro was certain she wouldn't live through the night—these were what Carousel prayed to when she did pray, how she termed her deities in her head.

Maybe, at some point or other—but a long time ago, oh, too long ago for it to mean anything now, actually, certainly—smudged, maybe between Cold and Birds, there had been Icca.

And it wasn't until after Icca, perhaps even the very first moment after Icca, that Carousel remembered. She didn't know how she could have misplaced the truth of the world within which she'd been born.

Divinity was not only dangerous—it was hungry.

Why, just look at the state of the Saints (Caro always found this funny, that when old King Min Titus Kkul, the Red Queen's great-uncle, infused the Saints' magic with his own to stop the plague raids, he'd brushed

whatever nasty spell that'd been with the intention of Isanghan's *protection*. The particularities of how exactly the King had created his spell remained a mystery, a secret of the bloodline, perhaps to stave off embarrassment or unsavory association—but clearly, Caro knew, he'd done a truly shitty job of it. The spell *had* worked, technically—the bolstered Saints had wholly vanquished the plague raiders' numbers—and some crueler, cleverer souls would argue that it was still working, even after the initial improvement the Saints' magic turned them into starved abominations after a handful of weeks. The King's intention still teemed within them, but the raiders were all dead and gone, and the Saints' own minds went with them, leaving them instead with the sole purpose of purging all the morose traits of humanity: grief and blood and anger and guilt and fear, all things they could smell as easily as a pie set to cool on a windowsill. But none they could sniff out so easily as a death trace, which was not an emotion, but an aura that attached to one's self upon committing a murder. And perhaps that also turned out for the best—after all, murderers would be sent out into Wonderland Forest to either butcher or sate the Saints, thus providing the Wards with some semblance of protection both from the beasts and from the killers, who deserved it, after all, even if they were small, terrified girls who hadn't truly meant it, and vowed one day to make everyone regret it, if they did indeed survive.)!

What had Caro been going on and on about in her head? If she still had fingers she'd strike them against her temples. Ah, yes. She'd been thinking about being devoured by the thing that made her feel the most herself.

Look how her magic—just a droplet of Divinity—still sought to corrode its vessel. Look at Icca—no, actually, don't look at Icca, Carousel snapped at herself. Look *here*. What was that, scuttling around in the dark throat of the expanse sheathed behind the sheet of the water? Was it possibly the Saint, on all fours in the teeth of the dripping stalactites, still biting the necks of the Merryweathers, scuttling around with the family's skeletal ankles clacking on the stone floor? Yes, Carousel mused. That was exactly what it was.



## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

She coasted close to the drop, folded her wings, and dropped onto the slick stone alongside the waterfall's sheet edge. She tottered along its length and peered into the cavern, noted the Saint—who some had called Killian Tuttle, but who Caro currently called *very ugly*—skillfully disassembling the skeletons, lining up upon the floor a line of ribs here, a twisting path of finger bones there. From the Saint's cuticles, its black magic wept, smearing the white of the bones it had so precisely set.

It was calling upon something. Or maybe it was just decorating—Carousel didn't like to assume. She'd seen a Saint planting a garden once; Carousel would've thought it just a young girl, if it hadn't been in the middle of Wonderland Forest, if she hadn't looked closer and realized it was burying teeth instead of seeds, and, of course, if the Saint hadn't then caught her scent and dove down into the earth as if through a pond surface.

What she *could* assume about Saints without the fear of being a pompous ass when doing so was that, eventually, they would go along and try to eat someone. That and, of course—now having long claimed four heads and thus clearing her life sentence—her being paid for their heads by Hattie November Kkul, the young Red Queen of Isanghan, her dearest unnie.

Caro coughed back into her own body, grinning when she had teeth again, and tangled her fingers as she stood. Hell *yes*; Carousel loved this job, because Carousel loved *money*. She loved *things*, especially if they were shiny, or if they had some weight to them—metal rings, boots with good, thick soles and bronze buckles, sweaters stripped from entire lambs, cloaks and hoods that pressed her into the mud. And she loved her apartment in the Petra Ward, when she was there, and the iron balcony that looked out over the sleek spires of the Petra University campus. It was all so distant from the orphanage in Astara she'd been left at as an infant, owning nothing but the clothes on her body. Imagine how much prouder she could've been, growing up with tons of glittery stuff! Even the pathetic little knives that had been provided to her and Icca when

they'd been sentenced to Wonderland had worn some glint of excitement into Caro's heart.

"Now," she whispered, the word wetted by the glow of the magic bubbling from her mouth, and threw back her head and thus her hood, her tangle of blond hair scraping the river bush curling around her. Caro had painted the lids of her eyes black, lined their fine edges, and shot the lashes through in red—she did like to decorate herself on hunting days—and under these black lids and through this sticky crimson thicket she peered down the riverside, and she felt the magic in her young, young veins sing. She was twenty-one years old, and her power still stung—but pain was like everything else. It was something she could best. "Now is such a good night."