

The Binding

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*Okay, here we go, baby. Listen:
Once upon a time, there was a story about the end of the world.
No, let's try this again.
This is a fairy tale about how the world ended.
No, that's not it either. I'm sorry, my baby girl. I'm no good at this.
And anyway, the world didn't end. It just changed.*

The highway leading into the city from the west is jammed full of abandoned cars. Manoeuvring the cumbersome Hyundai around them has been difficult for some time, but now Maria has to leave the car to shut doors and move other cars out of the way every twenty meters. She's finally forced to stop. The lines of cars stretch as far as she can see, baking under the unforgiving northern Greek sun, hazard lights flashing. Some of the engines are still on, purring softly or gasping on fumes.

There are no humans in sight. She wonders where all these people were trying to go, why they needed to get to the city. Were they looking for their families, trying to get back to their homes, like herself? Did they think they would be safer there?

A flock of birds passes overhead, casting their brief shadows on the highway. She doesn't look up fast enough to see what kind they were. An unkindness of ravens, perhaps. A dissimulation of birds. Don't think of him among them, she tells herself, don't, don't.

She switches off the engine, puts a hand on her swollen belly and rests her forehead on the steering wheel for a moment. She breathes in, then out, listening to the bird sounds outside, the flapping, the chirping, the song, ever-present, invasive.

"Snap out of it," she says loudly. She regrets it immediately and caresses her small bump. "Sorry, baby," she says. "It's okay. We're okay." Then, she adds: "We'll find him, baby. We will."

She turns to her dad. He's sitting in the back, staring vacantly ahead, looking at nothing. His skin is flaking. His lungs whistle every time he draws a breath.

"I'm going out, daddy," she says. "I need to find us a place to stay, something to eat and drink. I'll be back soon, okay?"

The old man turns his head—a slow, tired movement. For a moment, she thinks he'll actually look at her, but he doesn't. He stares at something past her, beyond her. He lifts an arm and scratches absently at the soft white down growing on his neck.

She takes one last look at him and then faces the windshield again. Still no people out there, just the birds and the heat trembling on the asphalt. She opens the glove compartment and pulls out a fresh surgical mask to replace the one she's wearing before heading out. Just in case.

Outside, the world is loud with the chatter of birds perched on trees and on the electrical wires overhead. She looks around, trying to orientate herself. She checks her phone for signal, even though that gave out a while ago, early on the way back from the capital—the government killed telecommunications when the riots got out of hand, just before the power grid failed. And when the riots finally died down, there was no one left to bring it all back up. She glances at the picture of Simos on the screen before putting the phone away. How quickly it all falls apart, she thinks as she gazes at the glistening highways in the distance. How quickly our phones and computers and cars go silent the moment we look away.

Maria spots the half-finished National Highway Bridge they've been constructing for years. The city has been expanding rapidly, and the bridge was supposed to help with the terrible traffic jam that always threatened those trying to enter. She's still a long way from the city centre—from home—but one of the sprawling westernmost districts is visible in the distance, beyond the bridge. An hour's walk, maybe, if her body cooperates.

She hoists her rucksack onto her shoulder and gives her belly a brief rub.

"Here we go, baby," she says, pushing down the white-hot panic alarm rising in her chest, going this-is-not-safe, this-is-not-safe. As she's done every minute since it all started. "Here we go."

This neighbourhood is as deserted as any she's come across in the smaller towns between Athens and Thessaloniki. People here must have tried to leave their homes and flee the city earlier, must have come to terms with what was happening faster than people down in the capital. Perhaps it was easier for them. There are more folk tales here. More superstitions.

It still wasn't enough.

She walks down the main street, keeping an eye on the birds that fly in circles above her. Much of the desolation here predates the plague. Shattered

shops, bankrupt and closed. Peeling walls, crumbling buildings. Cars without plates, abandoned because of earlier disasters of a different kind. She passes a gaggle of geese rummaging for food in a massive rubbish bin. They stop and regard her for a moment, their beady eyes appraising her, shiny and unknowable.

A familiar thud accompanied by the flutter of wings breaks their mutual concentration. The geese go back to their scavenging. Two more thuds and she spots a couple of pigeons through the front window of a second-floor apartment. They bang against the glass, then flutter away, then throw themselves against the glass again, frantic, desperate. She runs towards the building, hoping the door's unlocked.

The apartment is dusty and dark—all the curtains drawn shut. She uses her phone's flashlight to make her way down the corridor and starts at a mirror covered with a white sheet. Either someone in the family died recently, or the people who lived here could no longer stand to look at their new selves.

The living room is crammed with old-fashioned furniture and the relics of a long life: a green velvet sofa, both its seats sagged; hand-crocheted doilies on every surface; vases with plastic flowers; little porcelain figurines. It could have been her grandparents' home were it not for the swaths of skin here and there, the discarded tissue and bone. The sofa's velvet is strewn with feathers and down, the coffee table covered with bird droppings.

On top of the bulky TV set, there is a photo of an elderly couple hugging, smiling at the camera. Are these the people who are now throwing themselves against the balcony windows? They probably are, but she pushes the thought out of her head. The birds settle on the wooden curtain rail as soon as they spot her. She wonders if they know why she's there.

Maria puts her hand on her surgical mask and presses it against her nose and mouth before approaching the birds. This-is-not-safe, the alarm goes, this-is-not-safe. She opens the balcony window and steps back. The birds fly off the curtain rail and circle around the living room, one, two, three times, side by side, before darting out. Was that a goodbye? She follows them onto the balcony. Watches them fly away.

The sun is coming down. Soon it will be time for her to go back, even if she finds nothing of use. She leans against the railing and scans the neighbourhood for supermarkets or convenience stores. Most of them have been broken into and ransacked, but she can usually find what she needs. There wasn't enough time for people to take everything. Clean, bottled water is the thing she needs most. Everyone went for that first, because a lot of people feared that fresh water was to blame for the infection, for how quickly it spread. Others thought it was a curse, or the final punishment for some sin passed down from one generation to the next, to the next. Who knows.

A movement catches her eye. A hooded figure is watching her from the street, two blocks away. Is that a gas mask? Her heart skips a beat, and the baby gives her a strong kick, making her gasp.

"Hey!" she shouts as soon as she catches her breath, but the figure has already turned the corner and disappeared without a word.

She did spot a supermarket though, a few blocks away.

She takes care approaching. Supermarkets are always dangerous, even the ones that are mostly ransacked. People flock to them the way animals are drawn to fresh water.

Hidden behind a truck in the parking lot, she watches the building for a few minutes. She has that prickly feeling at the back of her neck, like she's being watched. But there is no sign of humans, either healthy or infected, coming in or out of the building. The inside is dark. There could be someone hiding inside, but there is no way of knowing for sure. She will have to take her chances.

She grabs a trolley and heads in.

There are signs of struggle by the entrance. Blood on the floor. A woman's handbag, its strap cut and the contents spilled out. No sign of the woman.

Did the plague do this to us, she wonders, or have we always been like this? She pushes her trolley past the blood, looking for anything of use left on the shelves. Water first of all. Canned food. Candles. Batteries. Anything at all.

Her trolley half-filled, she stashes what she found in the old couple's apartment and goes back to the car. She takes the trolley with her.

Her dad is right where she left him, still staring blankly into the dimming light.

She opens the door to the back seat and slips in.

"Hey, daddy," she says. She takes a cereal bar out of her pocket and offers it to him. "Want something to eat?" The old man blinks slowly, but he doesn't turn to look at her. Something in his eyes catches Maria's attention, and she switches on the roof light to take a closer look.

She slides next to her father, her face so close to his that she can smell him, the musty, familiar scent of him mixed with something new, something dusty and animal.

She focuses on his left eye. The thing that looked off to her before is clear now: his irises are larger. A new, inky hue is overtaking the old green like an oil slick spreading through a lake. She's seen it before, of course, the dark eyes on faces barely human anymore, but she hasn't watched the transformation happen so closely, so painstakingly, never witnessed each stage in all its absurd detail.

"Are you in there, dad?" she asks. "Do you remember me? Do you remember anything?" She waits, despite her certainty that he's not going to answer. "Do you remember mom?" She pauses. "Or just your birds?" Another pause. "Are you happy now, daddy?" she asks softly. "Happier than before?"

Her father draws in a breath and then lets out a long, whistling sigh.

Maria moves back and gets out of the car slowly. The snack bar is still in her hand. She unwraps it and eats it, choosing to trust the promise of nutrients on the pack. Then, she moves the supermarket trolley to the other side of the car and opens the door.

"Can you come out, dad, please?" she tries, even though she knows it's no good.

When he doesn't respond, she wraps her arms around his torso and pulls him out. She gasps at his lightness; it's as if his body has lost all its density, his bones hollowing out. Lifting him takes so little effort it numbs her. This shouldn't be so easy, she thinks. It shouldn't be this easy. She stands there for a moment, with her father in her arms, light as a bird, foreign as a bird. Then, she puts him in the trolley and heads back to the apartment.

By the time they get there, his skin is coming off in long strips, revealing goseflesh underneath, covered in the softest down.

The sky is dark. She parks the trolley by the main entrance and carries her dad up the stairs. She clears the sofa and places him on the soft cushion gently, afraid she might break his bones with even the slightest pressure.

For herself, she chooses a smaller room in the back. It has a single bed covered with a handmade quilt. There is a photo of a young boy smiling at the camera against a bucolic, painted backdrop—a school photo, probably, of a child long grown. She remembers those photos; both her parents had the same from when they were growing up. She uses the flashlight to study the boy's face: a wide forehead, a long, thin nose. Are you a bird now, she wants to ask. What kind of bird might you be? How kind a bird?

So this is how the story goes, baby:

Once upon a time, there was a young Queen. She was a kind Queen, who had gone away to visit a magician on the other side of her queendom, because she was with child, and she wanted the magician's help to make sure her child would be born healthy, unburdened by parental sins. In the end, it didn't matter. Because while she was away, a plague fell upon her land, a magical plague that turned almost all of her subjects into birds. And the Queen didn't know what to do. She travelled back to her castle looking for her husband, who had stayed behind. They hadn't spoken since the plague started.

The Queen also had her father, the Old King, with her, because they had travelled to visit the magician together. And she kept him in a supermarket trolley because he was sick and she didn't know where else to put him.

I'm sorry, baby. I'm shit at making up fairy tales. We'll try again some other night, okay?

In the morning, there is no white left in her father's eyes and his nose has grown long and hard, like the top part of a beak. She approaches him carefully, because she's seen people become aggressive at this stage. Getting yourself scratched or bitten is a sure way to get infected, but her father shows no intention of doing her harm. He lets himself be lifted off the sofa and carried down the stairs, his thin, feathery arms wrapped loosely around his daughter's neck.

She loads him into the trolley, together with their provisions of water, batteries, flashlights, and dry food, and heads towards the city centre.

The streets are more crowded with cars in both directions the closer she gets to the centre. Marks of destruction are more prominent too; burnt buildings, some still creaking with low-burning fires, leave the distinct scent of smoke in the air. It stings her nostrils, makes it hard to breathe. There are more birds here too—walking on the streets, flying overhead, or simply sitting on the wires, inert, staring down at her, letting out a stream of birdsong now and then. Maria looks at her father, crumpled inside the trolley, silent, breathing heavily. Should she be afraid of them? Should she fear him? She stares back at the crows perched on a balcony above her. She recounts the names she knows to describe a group of crows. A parcel of crows, a mob, a parliament. A murder, a horde. And her favourite, a storytelling of crows.

“What are you looking at?” she yells. “What the fuck do you want?”

They croak at her and fly away, indignant.

That's when she sees the woman in the window. She's looking at something across the street, both her palms pressed against the glass, her skin covered with black feathers. At first, Maria thinks she's staring at nothing, like her

father, but then she follows the trajectory of the woman's stare. There is a school down the street.

She pushes the trolley further, until she's by the school's side wall. She can hear it now, the frantic fluttering, the sound of small bodies throwing themselves at the windows.

"Stay here," she tells her dad, as if he could suddenly decide to up and leave. Fly away, just like he did in her dreams when she was little. Perhaps soon. But not yet. "I'll try to let them out."

She circles to the front of the school yard but finds the entrance chained shut from the outside. Someone locked these children in. She stays still, contemplating that fact. Someone locked all these children in. What did they think they were doing? Keeping them safe, maybe. Hopefully.

She makes her way around the block, looking for something she can use to break the windows. There is a pile of bricks by a building site that will do just fine. She fills her rucksack and circles back to the side of the school, weighing one of the bricks in her hand. She turns the corner, and then she freezes.

The hooded figure she saw earlier is standing next to her trolley holding a plastic bag filled with something lumpy. Looking at Maria's father.

"Don't hurt him!" Maria yells. Her fingers clench around the brick in her hand.

The hooded figure looks at her and then turns towards the school windows, swings the bag in circles high up in the air and then lets it fly towards the windows, breaking them.

A flight of swallows storms out of the school, a black-and-white, winged classroom taking to the sky.

When Maria looks back down, the hooded figure is gone.

She walks until her feet swell and she cannot push the trolley any further. An empty garage is just fine for the night since the weather is still mild. She thinks of all the newly turned birds—especially the small ones, the robins and the wrens. How many of them will survive the coming winter.

She pushes her father's trolley next to the back wall and makes a nest out of cardboard boxes for herself. While drifting into sleep, she listens to her father's breath growing less and less familiar.

She dreams of Simos. He's standing at the edge of a vast lake, its waters calm and green. He has his back turned to her, his arms open as if he's about to take flight.

"Simo?" she asks, her heart aching in her chest.

He doesn't turn around. Instead, he looks up, and so does she.

A lamentation of swans soars above them, heading west towards the setting sun.

"Are you joining them?" she asks him, her tall, white swan of a husband.

Instead of answering her, he lets out a long, bleating cry and bends his knees, curls his arms.

She wakes up before he takes off.

The sound of someone rummaging through her rucksack draws her out of sleep.

Maria springs out of her nest as quickly as her belly allows and turns on her phone's flashlight. The hooded figure is crouched over her rucksack. She's a girl. She turns to look at Maria, holding her sonogram in one gloved hand, the other raised to shield her eyes from the light.

“Is this yours?” the girl asks. Her voice is muffled behind her gas mask, but she sounds young. Her frame is slender. She can’t be more than eighteen.

Maria lowers her phone so she doesn’t blind the girl. “Yes,” she says.

“How far along are you?”

Maria’s hand flies to her belly, meant to protect. She could scream at this girl, chase her off, punish her for trying to steal from her. She doesn’t. “Twenty-three weeks,” she says, then corrects herself. “Twenty-four now.”

The girl nods. She puts the sonogram carefully back in the rucksack and stands up. She lets her hood drop back and reaches out her hand.

“I’m Elena,” she says. “El.”

Maria takes a step closer, hesitates for a moment, but then she squeezes El’s hand. “Maria,” she says. “The most common name there is.”

El lets out a short, anxious laugh.

“Are you hungry?” Maria asks, motioning towards the cardboard boxes. “I can spare some drink and food, if that’s what you were looking for.”

El nods again but says nothing. She walks over to Maria’s nest and sits cross-legged on the cardboard. Maria takes two candy bars and two energy drinks out of the trolley and sets them in front of El.

Neither of them speaks for a while. El lifts her gas mask just enough to sip her drink or smuggle small pieces of food into her mouth. She is studying Maria’s father.

He looks smaller and smaller with every hour that passes—bits of his old self discarded, making way for the new.

“What happened to him?” El asks.

“He got scratched a few days ago. We were in Athens together, visiting a specialist for the baby, when the worst of the riots happened.”

“Why do you keep him around?”

“He’s my dad.”

The bird man turns his head slowly, as if to look at them. His neck is now covered with white feathers, his nose and chin merged into a long, dark orange beak. “I think he’s turning into a white stork. It was his favourite bird.” He will need to migrate for the winter, she wants to say, cross the Strait of Gibraltar in the west, or else the Levant in the east, on his way to warmer climates. She doesn’t say anything.

“Do you think he understands what we’re saying?”

Maria takes a moment sipping her drink. “I don’t know,” she says after a while. “He stopped making sense the day after he was infected. The fever didn’t last long. When it was gone, he stopped speaking altogether. I expect it won’t be long now.”

“Shouldn’t he have turned completely by now?”

Maria shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s fighting it.”

“Maybe it just takes longer for old people,” El says.

“Maybe.”

“Some people change very fast. Like that TV presenter who turned into a seagull live, in front of everyone. Did you see it?”

“Everyone saw that. It was what started the riots in Athens.” Maria looks at her father. She wonders whether it would be better if he changed fast. She wonders if it hurts.

“I’m sorry for going through your stuff,” El says. “I wasn’t trying to steal your supplies. I was looking for weapons.”

Maria looks at her sharply. “To take?”

“No. To decide whether I should stay away from you.”

Maria lets a moment pass before she speaks again. “Are you from around here?” she asks. “Do you have anyone?”

El stares at a dark patch on the floor but doesn't reply.

Maria's father makes a faint hissing sound and clatters his beak.

“Why does he do that?” El asks. “Can't he sing?” She pauses. There's an edge in her voice. “I've seen others that sounded like fucking songbirds,” she adds.

“Storks are voiceless, or almost voiceless, because they lack a fully developed syrinx,” Maria says. “That's what the vocal organ of birds is called. It's like a human larynx, but positioned in the chest, and it's double-barrelled.” El gives her a look. She can hardly see the girl's eyes behind her gas mask, but she can tell it's one of puzzlement. “Imagine a person who has two flutes connecting their lips to their lungs, and they could play one with one lung, and the other with the air from the second lung.”

“How do you know all that stuff? Are you a biologist or something?”

Maria laughs. “No,” she says. “But my dad was. An ornithologist. I just liked birds.”

The sun emerges over the buildings across the street, its light splintering into the garage.

“I should go soon,” Maria says, standing up.

El nods and stands up too. She looks across the street, silent.

“Where are you going to go?” Maria asks her.

El shrugs. “I dunno,” she says.

“Would you like to come with me?”

“Where?”

“Home. I'm trying to get to my husband. He was busy when I left. That's why I went with my father. I don't know where he is now.”

“Is that who you were dreaming about earlier?” El asks. “When I woke you up?”

“Why? Did I say something?”

El hesitates. “No,” she says after a moment. “You just sounded like you were dreaming of someone you care about. Someone who's gone.”

They walk for a long time, without speaking. They run into more and more half-turned ones the closer they get to the centre. Maria makes sure they give them a wide berth, to avoid provoking any kind of aggression. But it's the unturned ones she worries about the most. Now and then, they see corpses: people stabbed to death, or their heads cracked open, abandoned on the streets like they were nothing. No, it's not the plague that made us this way, she thinks. This is who we've always been.

El breaks the silence. “So did you walk all the way from Athens? That must have been hard, in your condition.” She sounds impressed and suspicious at the same time.

“No. I had a car. Cars, actually—I had to switch several times on the way, and only covered part of the distance on foot.”

El's face settles on impressed. “Still,” she says. “Badass.”

Maria laughs. She turns to look at the girl. Her hair is dark and tangled, but the ends curl into big ringlets, just like her own. She could have been her daughter, in another life, another world.

“I wish I could see your face,” she says. “But don't take off the mask!” she hurries to add. “It's good that you have it. We can't be sure how that thing spreads, or how it might mutate.”

El doesn't respond. She runs her fingers through her hair, untangling some of the curls. She's looking at the buildings around them as if scanning the area for something.

"Where did you get it, anyway?" Maria asks. "The mask."

"My dad was a survivalist," El says. She seems distracted. "I think it's from WWI, or so he claimed. I don't even know if it works."

Maria inhales sharply, trying to find something comforting to say, but El intercepts her sympathy. "Oh, no, it's not like that. He died when I was little, years ago."

"I see," Maria says. "And your mom?"

El suddenly stops walking. She looks at an alley to her left and says, very quietly: "She wasn't around. I grew up with my uncle. Left when I was fifteen."

Maria stops pushing the trolley and looks in the same direction. "What's wrong?" she whispers.

"We're actually very close to where my uncle lived," El says. She raises her arm and points at the alley. "It's two streets down that way." She seems to waver for a moment, trying to make a decision. "I'll go take a look," she says finally. She glances at Maria. "You don't have to come."

"I know," Maria says. "But I'm coming."

They hear the hawk before they see it. It screeches and hurls itself against the glass door that leads to the verandah. Its sound is hoarse and alarming—like the scream of something that shouldn't be able to scream.

"That must be my uncle," El says.

Maria puts her hand on the girl's shoulder. She doesn't shrug it off. "I'm sorry," Maria says.

"Don't be," El replies. She stands still, keeping her eyes on the bird.

"Should we free him?" Maria asks.

El takes a while to tear her gaze from that screaming bird. "No," she says. Her voice is firm. "He was not a good person. Let him be."

Maria nods. "I'm sorry."

"You said that before," El snaps and starts walking away. Then, she turns to Maria, her voice softer this time: "Come on. There used to be a pharmacy around the corner here. We should check it out."

The pharmacy is a block further away than El remembered, but it's still there. The door is bolted shut, but someone has cut a hole through the metallic shutters and broken the shop window. The place has clearly been ransacked, like everything else.

El slips carefully through the broken window and calls for Maria to follow her. Maria stays still for a second, closes her eyes and breathes in as deeply as she can. An image from long ago flashes in her mind: her father, much younger, splashing through the shallows of a lake rimmed with tall, yellow reeds. He's trying to get to a wounded bird. An ibis with a broken leg, most likely hit by a motorboat that wasn't supposed to be there. Her father used to say that people bring destruction to everything they touch. The lake is teeming with all kinds of birds, larks and flamingoes and storks, and it's loud, it's so loud. She's standing at the edge of the water, struck speechless by the intensity of that sound. Her father reaches the bird and picks it up, and it doesn't even flap its wings, it shows no sign of resistance. It just hangs there, limp in his arms. Light and broken.

Maria pulls a flashlight out of her rucksack and follows El into the pharmacy.

The place is still surprisingly full, despite having been broken into. El is already rummaging through the shelves and drawers in the back when Maria lets out a scream and drops her flashlight.

El rushes back to the main space, her blouse turned into a pouch and filled with small boxes. "What is it?" she asks.

Maria slowly crouches to the floor and picks up her flashlight. "Don't speak," she whispers. "Walk very slowly towards me."

Then the hissing and the clicking start. Maria shines a light on the three round faces staring at them. The owls spread their wings and sway their heads back and forth in unison. Their hissing sends a chill down Maria's spine, and her knees almost buckle. "We have to get out of here," she says. "They will attack."

El's face looks pale in the half dark of the pharmacy. "Okay," she whispers. "Okay, we're going."

They back away towards the hole in the window. El slips out first, then Maria makes her way through the hole backwards, shining her flashlight on the hissing owls the whole time.

They put some distance between themselves and the pharmacy before speaking again.

El is panting. Maria finds herself letting out a breath she's been holding since she saw those otherworldly faces looking at her, their black eyes burrowing into her skin.

"Jesus fucking Christ," El says.

"Those were barn owls," Maria says. "That's how they react to intruders. They would have attacked any minute."

El shakes her head, and then, out of the blue, bursts out laughing. It's a high-pitched, shrill laugh. "It's like the fucking zombie apocalypse," she says, fighting to breathe, "only with birds."

Maria laughs too, even though her skin is still crawling.

When El has calmed down a little, Maria asks her what she found.

"Oh, you're gonna love this," El says. She empties her pouch onto the trolley. There's ibuprofen, antibiotics, clear alcohol, gauze. Then she pauses for effect before producing another box out of her back pocket. "Tada!" she says.

It's prenatal vitamins. Maria repeats that to herself slowly, her brain fighting to reconcile with the absurdity of this luxury. Her eyes fill with tears.

"Here," the girl says, extending the arm holding the vitamins.

Instead of taking them, Maria envelops the girl into a hug. The gas mask is hard against her shoulder, El's body stiff in her arms. But soon, the stiffness melts away, and El hugs her back.

"Thank you," Maria says.

Then, the moment passes, and they start walking again. Above them, on the wires, on the balconies, on the roofs, thousands of birds stare at them, their cries piercing, their minds unreachable.

They cover the distance towards the centre of the city steadily, stopping to rest only when necessary, freeing trapped birds on the way whenever they can. Maria's father has almost rid himself of his human exterior and emerged, it seems to her, as that which he's always been. He's standing in the trolley now, clattering his beak at any humans they come across, shrieking menacingly, as if to protect them. The song of a nightingale seems to be following them, has been with them for hours, sweet and melodic but slightly off-pitch, as if it's still learning, still getting accustomed to its new voice.

“Where did you go after you stopped living with your uncle?” Maria asks El as they pass under a highway bridge. “You were so young.”

El takes her time before answering. “I was homeless for some time,” she says then. “This ...” She makes a sweeping motion with her arm, showing the desolation that surrounds them—the corpses, the half-turned wretches breathing heavily, slumped against crumbling walls, all bird heads, bird eyes, uncertain wings. “This is not so different from before, for me.” She pauses. “Then I met the girl I loved, and I was happy for a long time, so don’t feel sorry for me. I’m one of the lucky ones. Her name was Iris.”

“Like the rainbow?”

“Yeah,” El says. “Like the rainbow.”

“What happened to her?”

El shrugs. “What do you think?” She faces Maria, her eyes behind her gas mask as inscrutable as that of birds. “She turned early on, into a tiny thing. A lark, I think.”

“That’s a songbird,” Maria says softly.

“Yeah,” El replies. “I know.”

Maria stays silent. El walks ahead, quickening her pace as if trying to run away. She doesn’t, though. Eventually, she stops and turns around, facing Maria again.

“We’re entering the centre soon,” El says.

“I know.”

“Are we close to your house?”

“Yes.”

El looks away. A murmuration of starlings passes overhead. “Do you miss him, your husband?” she asks.

Maria thumbs her phone, dead in her pocket. My bones ache from how much I miss him, she wants to say. She nods.

“I miss Iris too,” El says.

Maria looks up at the birds, their flight like a living cloud blotting out the sun. “I know,” she says.

Not too long to go now. Here in the city centre, entire blocks of buildings are completely burnt down. The whole place reeks of burnt tires and smoke. Maria’s calves ache from walking, even though El has taken over pushing the trolley. She manoeuvres it around upturned bins and abandoned cars. There is an open truck loaded with supplies—gallons of water and whole stacks of cans just left there, like an unfinished thought. A dog passes in front of them, holding a limp heron in its mouth. Maria shivers. Her head feels light, her face hot, as if tiny stingers are threading themselves through her skin. She stops, leans against the husk of a car. Her breathing is shallow and quick, her vision blurred.

“Hey,” El says, coming to stand next to her. “Hey, what is it?”

Maria pushes her hand against her chest, trying to keep something from spilling out of her, once and for all. Her throat feels tight, and yet she manages to speak. “What if he’s not there,” she says. “What if the house has burnt down, what if he’s...” Her voice breaks.

The girl pulls her into a hug with one quick, sure movement. “It’s okay,” she says. “You’re okay. I’m here with you.”

Maria lets herself be held until her breathing slows again, her vision clears.

The nightingale sings.

The building is still standing, the front door intact. El tries to open it.

“It’s locked,” she says. “Someone defended this place.” She smiles, making Maria’s heart flutter with something hot and terrifying like hope.

Maria fishes her keys out of her rucksack and unlocks the door. They push the trolley past the entrance and make their way up to Maria’s apartment on the third floor.

Everything is as she left it. The curtains are open, the place clean and tidy. It smells the same as always, feels the same as always. But Simos is not there.

He’s left a note on the fridge, like they used to, as if this were like any other time, as if this were just another sweet little note to brighten the other’s day, saying “Good morning, my bird” (yes, they used to call each other that, of all things, they did), or “Remember to take out the trash” followed by a scribbled, lopsided heart. But this note says:

Maria, my darling, my life,
I’m catching the first train to Athens. I’m coming to find you.
If you come home before I do, know this: I love you, forever and always.
Simos

It’s dated ten days ago, back when the news and the plague burnt through the country like wildfire. When things fell apart far more quickly than anyone could imagine.

A lot may have happened in ten days. A lot has.

Maria rests her head against the fridge door. She had thought about the possibility of not finding Simos, of never finding him. She had thought it would make her wail and cry, but now all she can feel is empty, drained of all that has carried her all the way from Athens back home.

El finds her like that and puts an arm around her shoulders.

“He’s not here,” Maria says. She hands her the note.

El nods. “Come on,” she says. “You need to rest.”

Maria refuses to lie in their bed. Instead, she collapses on the sofa and falls into a deep sleep that feels like nothing.

When she wakes, it’s dark. El is nowhere in sight.

“El?” she cries out, something frantic rising in her chest.

“Next door!” the girl calls back.

She finds her at her neighbours’ apartment, petting their cat—it used to be a majestic, fluffy thing, its pelvic bones now sticking out. The cat purrs, rubbing against El’s calf.

“I think she ate her owners,” El says, pointing at a small pile of feathers and bones a few meters away.

“That was Mr. and Mrs. Anastasiou,” Maria says, crouching to pet the cat herself.

“Should we let her out?”

Maria nods. She finds the cat food in the kitchen, fills a small tub with fresh water. “Let’s go back,” she says. “We’ll come back to look for things we can use in the morning, let her out then.”

Back in Maria’s apartment, they light the fireplace and boil water to bathe. They find clean clothes for both of them to change into. Then, Maria makes them tea and a simple meal of boiled potatoes. It’s the first warm food either of them has had in days.

They eat in silence, watching the flames.

“Were you close with your dad?” El asks when the fire has almost died down.

Maria rubs her eyes. "We were working on it," she says. "We were not close when I was growing up. He spent way more time with his birds than he did with us. Sometimes he was violent. He had a few affairs. My mother was a deeply unhappy woman. She passed away without ever saying a word." She pauses. "We have both been trying to make things better since then; it was too late, though. I love him, but there was not enough time to forgive him. I don't know if I ever will."

"I'm sorry," El says. She has removed her gas mask for the first time since they met. Her eyes are dark brown, gleaming in the fire's dying light.

"Sometimes I think it's all our fault, this whole bird plague," Maria says. "My family's. As if it was our unspoken darkness that infected everyone."

El looks at her, her gaze a mystery.

"I know it's silly," Maria says. "Self-centred."

"I don't think it's silly," El says. "I used to think Iris was the source of every rainbow on Earth."

Maria smiles. "This is one of the sweetest things I've ever heard," she says.

"I've been looking for a rainbow ever since she turned. I've never wished so hard for rain before."

Maria scoots over close to El and wraps her arms around her. They stay like that, looking at the embers for a long time.

So, baby, let's see if I'm getting any better at this.

Listen. I'll start again. Are you listening?

Once upon a time, there was a King who loved birds so much he wanted to take one as his bride. And so he went to the Queen of the Birds in the sky and begged her to give him one of her daughters to marry. The Bird Queen accepted, but said that there would be a price to pay. And the price was that the King would have to give his firstborn daughter to the Bird Queen in exchange for the one she had given up.

Years passed, and the King was happy with his bird bride, but then she laid an egg, and sat on it for a long time, and didn't let him near her egg until it hatched. And when it hatched, out came a beautiful baby girl with perfect human eyes and the softest of wings. And the King knew that he had to give that baby up to the Bird Queen as he'd promised, but his bride begged him not to take her daughter away. And so the King, soft-willed as he was when it came to his wife and daughter, let them be. They named their daughter Maria, the most common name there is, to make it harder for the Bird Queen to find her. And the Bird Queen did not find out that the King had broken his promise to her, until the girl had grown up and become a Queen herself, and the King was now an Old King, unable to take care of himself. Then the Bird Queen grew so furious that she cursed the whole Kingdom, for she had been cheated out of a daughter. And if she couldn't have her promised daughter back, she would have them all.

And this, baby, is why there are so many birds in this world.

In the morning, they drink instant coffee and have breakfast and vitamins and change into fresh clothes simply because they can.

"Now what?" El asks, looking out the window.

Maria keeps silent, packing a bag full of essentials.

“I know you want to find him...” El starts, but Maria gives her a sharp look and she stops, her phrase hanging in the air, unfinished but clear. “We could stay here,” El says.

“You can stay here for as long as you like,” Maria says. She looks out the window too. “I have to look for him. But first I want to go somewhere high up. Somewhere I can see the city from above.”

El takes a few moments before she speaks again. “All right,” she says. “Let’s go.”

They make their way up to the old castles, the Byzantine walls that used to mark the outer edge of the city, long ago. Maria’s father is now entirely a white stork. She can’t take her eyes off him, studying him with an intensity that makes the rest of the world around her nothing but a blur. She observes his dark orange beak on his white head, the white-feathered body ending in silky-black plumage, his long, thin legs. His eyes have taken on a new shine, and he spends more and more time staring up at the sky.

What are you looking at, daddy? Maria asks silently. What passes through your mind? My father is a stork, she thinks, and there’s nothing about him that would make someone say: that is not a bird like any other bird in the world, that is a man who turned into a stork.

El didn’t put her gas mask back on when they left the house this morning. When Maria asked her about it, she shrugged her shoulders in a way that frightened her, but she didn’t press it further.

Maria runs her palm down the curve of her belly as they settle on a gently sloping terrace in front of the old wall, overlooking the city. She can see everything from up here, all the way to the sea: the countless churches, their bells now mute, the cemetery next to the St. Dimitrios Hospital, the jumble of multistorey buildings and the old train station, the cranes at the city port—the machines, not the birds, their beaks dipped low near the surface of the water. And further out, beyond the sea, she can even make out Mt. Olympus, its peak perpetually covered in snow.

A phalanx of storks rises from the city centre and flies towards them, their mighty wings flapping.

“Do you think they were humans, once, these groups of birds, all of them?” El asks. “Like whole villages or neighbourhoods or something? Or are they just birds?”

Maria shields her eyes from the rising sun, the storks’ V shape etched on her vision in reverse. A city emptied out. A country that flew away. “Is there a difference anymore?”

Then, when the birds have almost reached the walls, her father lets out a high-pitched croak and takes off. He glides for a minute, uncertain, but then he gains height, rising up higher and higher, until he reaches the rest of the birds and joins their phalanx. They fly away towards the west, all of them, Maria’s father now completely indistinguishable from any other stork.

A knot rises in her throat. She covers her face with her palms and breathes.

“Are you okay?” El asks.

Maria is about to answer that no, she’s not, when someone lunges at her from behind, knocking her down. She catches a glimpse of the man’s black eyes before her chin hits the ground. He turns her around and presses her against the dirt, trying to rip her rucksack off her back. She can hear El trying to tear him from her, and she wants to shout, but all the air has escaped her lungs.

Then there's a thud, and the man rolls away from her body. He staggers for a moment, holding the side of his head with a feathered arm.

El is holding a large, bloodied rock. She lets it drop to the ground when the man turns around and runs away.

El rushes to Maria's side and helps her up.

"I'm okay," Maria says, rubbing her shoulder.

"No," El says. Her face is pale, her eyes rimmed with red. "No," she says again. She grabs Maria's arm and twists it gently so she can see her elbow. "He scratched you," she says. "He scratched you."

The fever comes to her like a wave, warming and soft, almost comforting. It envelops her body, every inch of it, burning away her fear, silencing her alarm. And so, she welcomes it. It shows her visions that remind her of herself when she was young, on her few trips with her father when he took her with him to work: the singing reeds, the mother ducks, the overcast skies, the lovely mud teeming with tadpoles and tiny, shiny life. It speaks to her too; it speaks the language of rustling leaves, of raining clouds and of waves crested with foam.

El is by her side the whole time.

"Leave," Maria begs her. "Leave, leave." But she doesn't.

Then, the skin on her belly feels like it is being stung from the inside, and there is the terrible certainty of something leaving her body that can never come back. There is warmth between her legs. She sits up, leans against the castle wall and looks down, reaching with her hand at her crotch. She finds tiny feathers and blood.

Behind her eyelids, Simos is taking flight.

When the fever starts to wane, Maria holds up her hands in front of her, expects to find them covered in feathers, but her fingers are still as she knows them, her skin, her wrist, her wedding ring.

"My hands are trembling," she says.

El takes them in hers, holds them, steadies them.

"It's okay," she says.

"What are you going to do?" Maria asks.

El's dark eyes are moist, overcast. You smell like a cloud, Maria wants to say.

"I don't know," El says. "I might go back to your place, if that's okay. Stay for a while. See if the cat comes back."

Maria smiles. "Okay," she says. "Okay." Her skin feels soft. Her bones light. She's sinking into something old and without a name.

El snaps her fingers, trying to get her attention. "Hey," she says. "That fairy tale you've been telling every night since we met. How does it end?"

"I don't know." The air. The air.

"Come on," El says. "Make it up."

Her head is swimming in air, her gaze long, the horizon close, so close. "I can't," she says.

"Please," El begs. "I want to hear it."

"I can't," Maria whispers.

"Try? For me?"

"Okay," Maria says.

"Make it a happy one," El says. Her eyes are full of rain.

"Okay. I'll try."

Once upon a time, after the Old King was long gone, and the Bird Queen had flown away, and the young Queen had withered and died, there was

a kingdom without a king, and a queendom without a queen, and it was known around the world as the land with the most beautiful birds.

A sharp pain in her lung, a long whistle.

There were very few people living in this land. But there was a girl, a strong girl, who lived by a lake and liked to watch the larks fly off every morning and come back every night. And she was happy, because she got to watch this exaltation of larks every day. And when they weren't flying, the larks sang the wisest of songs. And so one day the girl fell in love with a lark.

The lark loved her back. And then one day the lark gave her.

The lark gave her a kiss.

And the girl said, "I didn't know larks could kiss." But they could, they could.

And the lark said, "Are you ready to fly?"

Long lost lips. A flutter of inner wings.

And then she. And then I.

Her thoughts trail into song.

