

0 The Author

Zoe Leonard is a writer from Baltimore, Maryland. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College.

Zoe Leonard is an emerging writer and poet from Phoenix, Maryland. She graduated with her BFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in May 2023. She is a Kundiman fellow, and published her first novel [*this book's future title*], in [*future publication date*]. She has been writing since the third grade.

Zoe Tsi-Yu Leonard is a mixed race Taiwanese-American writer with a chronic mental illness. She would like to specify that “chronic” in this context means “recurring frequently,” not “really bad.” She would also like to clarify that this doesn’t mean it’s not really bad sometimes. Her tarot significator card is the Two of Swords.

Zoe Leonard is a liar and overachiever who puts on sweatpants to go to a party. She deals with episodes of gender dysphoria by throwing away her dresses and buying new ones for her female alter ego. She is a skeleton of her boyfriend and ghost of herself. Her dream in life is to grow larger.

Zoe Leonard is a straight cisgender white boy with every privilege in America. He has a track record of being “that guy” who won’t shut up even though he has nothing to add. On the weekends he enjoys abusing substances and driving up north to horse country Maryland where he once witnessed a man blow the front legs clean off a deer from less than ten feet away with a shotgun. He would describe the blood as more of a cloud than a splatter.

Zoe Leonard is a genderqueer beast woman with silver fangs and furry legs that can carry them speeds up to 30mph in order to catch prey. They live in Boston, Massachusetts with five human sized scarecrows and a ghost. They have never published anything but sometimes they nail their manifesto/suicide note to people’s front doors just to freak them out and also to force someone think about them, even if they’re a stranger.

II The Cast

NARRATOR (*any pronouns*) - see The Author.

GIRL (*she/her*) - One half of the pair of Lovers. Often wearing long skirts or dresses. Light complexion with long dark hair, possibly Asian though this never really comes up. Sometimes a stand in for the Author. Girl is also Wolf.

WOLF (*he/him*) - Appears as a North American Gray Wolf and sometimes a man with short cropped hair which he bleaches blonde. Yellow eyes and a vicious snarl. When wearing clothes they are always mundane men's clothing in dark or neutral colors. Wolf is also Girl.

GIRL/WOLF or WOLF/GIRL (*they/them*) - The split names used for Girl and Wolf once their bodies grotesquely combine into a single unsettling.

LOVER (*he/him*) - The other half of the pair of Lovers. Girl's Lover and the most important person in the world to her. Dark wavy hair, green eyed, and beautiful. Narrates chapters that reflect the Author's reality. Lover is also the cat.

THE MAGICIAN (*he/they*) - Girl's best friend and resident of The Big House alongside Girl, Lover, and the Knight. Appears as the friend closest to your heart. Always casting a spell.

THE KNIGHT (*he/him*) - Another housemate of The Big House and friend of the Lover. Believes in his own power to fix things and rescue damsels in distress.

CAT (*it*) - A black cat. See Lover.

THE MERCHANT (*it*) - Wretched little troll thing that lives under a bridge and pushes consumer goods on the rest of the characters. Occasionally helpful but stinky.

THE HUNTER (*she/her*) - A resident of the Woods who helps guide Girl and Wolf to their destination. Understanding of Girl/Wolf's duality due to personal history, or a past life.

THE READER (*you*) - Bearing with the Author as they untangle this story.

III The Big House

Narrator

Before her Lover disappears, or turns into a cat, he and Girl live on the third story of the Big House. Built over a hundred years ago on the edge of the city, the house lives tall and narrow, inviting sunlight through many windows and deflecting rain down a dark slate tile roof. Powerful, protective, and painted a welcoming shade of early spring yellow, the house scrapes a sunset sky. Below, a concrete basement storing food and livingstuff roots it to the earth. The hallways and kitchen glow in a hearth-loving orange while the living and dining room take a muter, cream tone of comfort. Up and down the house, the floor shines in a brightly renovated hardwood.

There are three bedrooms in the Big House—the other two are occupied by Girl and Lover’s housemates, the Magician and the Knight. The Knight’s room takes up the east wing of the second floor. Inside it, morning rises onto navy blue curtains and illuminates a thin layer of dust atop a massive oak bookshelf. The silver gray walls are covered in photos of famous knights—the Knight of Swords, the Knight of Wands, Lancelot, Arthur.

The Magician’s room, on the south side of the second floor, is painted dark green and bursts with life. Ivy frames the west wall window, which is almost always open to let in light and a birdsong. A corner shelf acts as a miniature garden for fungus and flowers alike. Dried baby’s breath hangs like a cloud above a desk littered with all sorts of tools—magical and mundane. There are his wands, of course—one topped with a quartz crystal and the other embedded with amethyst. Screwdrivers, a chalice, three coins, pens and a leatherbound journal, matches, and a half-repaired clock are chaotically organized for the next time the Magician might need them.

Girl and the Magician are best friends, and they have been entangled like vines over a lifetime. They climb up each other towards the sun. The same is true of the Knight and Lover, who have fought back to back against the tumult of life since boyhood. When Girl and her Lover fell into each other, it seemed only natural to combine their families and invite their friends into their new spacious home—the Big House. Their love flows freely through the space like a breeze. In the living room, a bookshelf altar stacked with colorful rocks and candles is centered by a photo of the housemates bunched together like a family.

On a typical Sunday night, Girl and her Lover cook dinner for everyone. Lover envisions a beef stroganoff. The Magician picks fresh woodsy mushrooms from his garden upstairs while Lover slices and sears the beef.

He sizzles and flips, dashing firework pinches of salt into the pan. On the counter across from the stove, Girl sings and rolls up a wet rag to cut onions—a spell to never cry. Lover sets the beef aside, melts butter in the pan, and Girl scrapes the slivers in. They brush shoulders and rotate clockwise around the kitchen, Girl now at the stove. She carmelizes. He spins, stoops, and kisses her hair. The Magician appears and flourishes out of the space between them, delivering the mushrooms in a basket.

“Would you cut those up, Lover?” Girl asks.

“Of course, lover,” he says. “You smell good.”

“It’s the onions.”

Off in a corner of the kitchen, the Magician stirs a potion with pomegranate juice and gin. He shakes it up with dried orange peels and cinnamon, then passes a glass to the Lovers for a sip.

“More orange,” says Lover.

“More gin,” says Girl, flashing a wolfish grin. She waterfalls the mushrooms and sizzles until golden. Soup, wine, cream, and a slurry of cornstarch to thicken the mix—each added ingredient bubbles and stews, shifts the color and consistency of the pan, and exhales an aromatic steam. Salt and pepper—more pepper, the way Girl likes it.

She stirs in heart shaped pasta dyed beet red. It matches the potion. The Magician calls up to the Knight while Girl casts servings into four shallow bowls. The housemates settle down at the dinner table, where a new tablecloth is splattered with sunflowers. Girl picked it out.

“It’s a full moon tonight,” says Lover. “The strawberry moon.”

“We should cast a spell,” says Girl. She sips the potion and puckers in delight.

“I am casting it,” says the Magician. They hold out their palms, and the housemates link hands. “We are enjoying this food. We are loving our house. We are sailing our lives towards paradise. We are together now, and together again.... A man.”

“A man?” echoes Girl.

The Magician gestures to a figure through the window, and there is a knock at the door.

“Oh,” says Lover. “I’ll get it.” He breaks the link to answer the door. A man hands him an envelope. Lover nods and thanks him. He sits back down, pinching the corners in his fingers like a crab. “I hope this is what I think it is.”

“You are receiving good news,” says the Magician.

Girl cranes her neck to peek at the letter as her Lover unfolds it. The words don’t make any sense.

“What is it?” she asks.

“I’ve been accepted,” says Lover, “to a new job in the palace. I’ll be paid royally.” He kisses Girl on the cheek. She’s still trying to make out the words, but they’re flying all around the page. “This is fantastic.”

“You are making millions,” says the Magician. “You are successful and happy.”

“I’ll bring back a golden goose,” says Lover.

Girl gives up on reading. She trusts that it’s good news and raises her glass. “Let’s cheers!”

Their glasses chime like bells ringing in a new age.

The Knight knows something that Girl does not. He speaks up, “How long will you be leaving us?”

The room sinks. Lover shoots him a look.

“I still have to figure that out,” says Lover. He catches Girl’s hand as it slides from her lap. “It won’t be forever.”

Girl swallows her drink a little too hard. “Did someone open a window?”

After dinner, the Lovers sit on their bed—the throne of the room. The comforter is embroidered with golden thread and patterned with blue and red songbirds. Otherwise, their bedroom is simple—painted a blank and quiet ivory. At the top of the house, their ceiling slopes down, and the last bits of evening light slip through westward facing windows. Girl wraps a

fluffy white blanket around her shoulders and winds her arms around her Lover's back. She pushes him over on the bed and sits atop him like a dollop of whipped cream.

"I'm happy for you," she says, and puts her lips on his nose. "But—"

"I want you to be happy when I'm not around," says Lover.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Girl whispers, searching deep into the heaven of his eyes.

"Did everyone else know? Where are you going?"

"I only mentioned it to the Knight," said Lover, casting his gaze downward. "I didn't know I'd be chosen, so I didn't want to worry you over nothing."

"You're really going to leave then?" she says.

"You're everything to me," he says, "and you deserve to be happy. Even when I'm not here."

"How can I be everything when I'm only half of us?" asks Girl. She wiggles her hips to shake off the creeping feeling, lays her mouth on his neck, and kisses him, drinking in his scent. Her body moves to distract from her mind, which is spinning with questions.

Desire rises like steam from his body. She sinks into his chest—focuses on his breathing. He rolls on top of her, and the blanket shrugs off into a puddle beneath them. But Girl shuts her eyes and sees the future gleaming darkness.

"Where are you?" she whispers.

"I'm here, Lover," he says, "I'm still here."

IV The Fall

Lover

We met when we were still in school. She spent the whole day at the mall looking for a dress to wear to the dance. It was not like the classics. She did not lay her eyes upon a beautiful blue ballgown, try it on, and dazzle around in circles until a carriage swept her away. No, not that, and there was no godmother to turn her rags into a gown and no friendly animal to offer up its hide that would carry her to heaven. Well, there was the wolf, but that's not what she wanted. She wanted to dance and to look like a girl.

Her friend, the Magician, was with her. They guided her towards the women's formal section and pointed to a dress that might look nice. That's what she was looking for, wasn't it? But when she squeezed her shoulders into that lacy black hole, she got stuck. The fabric coiled around her and strangled her like a snake—she panicked, sweat, flailed, tried to catch her breath. She wanted to rip it off but couldn't afford the damage. She walked out of the changing room half dressed with her arms twisted up in the air by a lace cast, tears running loose, embarrassed. The Magician helped her shimmy free.

They went to another store (one with looser fabric), and the girl was stunned by gracious women in floral skirts and long, silky hair. They skipped around her, smiling, and offered solutions to the young girl—flowing sleeves, high rising necklines, loose cloth that didn't stick to her skin. Maybe this could work?

But the zipper closed, and in the mirror, the wolf peered out of her eyes and saw a gangling beast—a hairy, ill-formed, bloodcurdling creature wearing a princess dress. She thought, there is no way this is how this is supposed to look. What made her so different? Why

was her body so wrong? The size was right, the length was appropriate—it was even the color she wanted. But still, she was a wolf in a girl’s skin. She was a four legged animal stuffed upright into the flesh of a teenage girl—bloody and ripping at the seams. It would be funny if it wasn’t so disgusting. The girl wouldn’t buy the dress, so the Magician took it off her hands. He didn’t know how else to help. He said he would keep it as a magic robe, but in the back of his mind he pictured a day when Girl would want it. He thought it dazzled her greatly.

The wolf made the decision—despite the girl’s disappointment—to skulk to the men’s section and buy a pair of black slacks. At home, she already had a formal shirt to wear, so no need for frivolities. At the dance, she panicked. She hid in the bathroom and stared at the floor of the stall until the Magician fetched her out. The night melted in her mind, and she forgot almost all of it, even me.

That was her side of the story. When I saw her at the dance she looked like she had been crying. She wasn’t fully there. But I had seen her before in a dream, and I knew who she was. She was the girl with sharp teeth and a strong jaw. She was loud and not afraid to bite. She was not afraid to wear the wolf’s skin—that was her. I saw right through the mask. Yes, she had a wolf wrapped around her, and he made her seem larger, stronger, but I wasn’t intimidated—I was intrigued.

The next day we ran into each other. She kicked open the door of her classroom and almost smacked me in the face. The glass of our eyes reflected one another, and suddenly we were familiar. We took a walk together. The wolf didn’t even bristle. It was my birthday the next week, and she baked me a cake. By the full moon we had fallen in love.

My friends warned me about her. They told me I was in love with a wolf. They laughed at me and asked if I wanted to sleep with a beast—if I'd let her climb on top of me. As if that would make me less of a man. She was worried too. She asked if I could love a wolf.

I said I could. I said, "You're a girl."

She said, "Am I? Or is that who you think I am?"

I said, "I'm in love with you. I don't care if you're a wolf, or a snake, or a man, or an alligator."

"I want to be a girl," she said. "I want to be yours."

As I wove into her life, the wolf receded. She didn't need him anymore. My presence protected her from other animals—from their hunger. She started to relax. She tried wearing beautiful things. She tried putting on makeup. Her body softened. She put on a dress. She became the girl I know. She is still that girl.

XIX The Hunter

Narrator

Girl gathers dandelion greens on the familiar path back towards the Hunter's house. Between kneeling for fresh bunches, she scans the landscape for other useful plants. Raspberry bushes bristle all along the way, and she pulls ripe fruit gently off their knobs, sampling as she works.

A woman's soft voice speaks, "I thought that was you."

Girl whips around—she had heard nothing approach. The Hunter is a master of moving silently through the Woods. They reflect each other's smiles.

"We found the house," says Girl. "Thank you for showing us the way."

"What do you think of it?" asks the Hunter. She settles beneath a raspberry bush, folding her legs to the side underneath her long green skirt. Girl sits beside her.

"It's...nice," Girl hesitates, "or, a little creepy. The oven was filled with childrens' bones. I assume the witch who lived there is gone?"

"She's long dead," says the Hunter. "I watched her die myself. But it seems a new witch has moved in."

Girl blushes. "I'm not very magical," she says, picking at the grass. "But then, you were one of the children in that house? You escaped?"

The Hunter nods and looks off into the tangle of green. "I assume you've heard the story of the brother and sister who escaped the witch."

"Led into the Woods by their parents and nearly eaten? Of course I've heard the story. You're the one who killed her, then?"

“My sister did,” says the Hunter. She picks a raspberry and crushes it with her tongue. “I was fat and trapped in a cage. She saved my life and led us back to my father’s house. We stayed there for a while, but once I was able to I picked up and left. Built my own life out here.” She gestures back to her cabin. “I love my sister, but I couldn’t stay. She was able to forgive my father, but I never could. He claimed to love us then tried to kill us.”

“Where is your sister now?” asks Girl.

The Hunter sighs. “I don’t know exactly. After my father died she picked up and moved to the city—closer to where you come from. She visits from time to time, but she doesn’t like to be reminded of this place.”

“And you? You still live nearby.”

“Yes, I think about that—why I didn’t leave like she did. I like to think that it’s because I changed so much. Maybe that’s all the change I needed.”

“You became the Hunter,” says Girl.

“And it’s lovely out here, isn’t it?”

The birds chirp in a choir—filling the canopy of the Woods with song. Two owls hoot a correspondence, and in the stillness Girl makes out rustling inside the underbrush. A rabbit pokes out just feet away from her, gnawing on a clover. The Hunter affixes raspberry hats on each of her fingers then sucks them off. A white cabbage butterfly flits between them.

“What about you?” asks the Hunter. “What will you become?”

“Me?” Girl blinks. “I don’t know. I didn’t come here to become anything. I’m searching for my Lover. But—”

“Do you know that he’s here?”

“No,” says Girl. “I have no idea where he is.”

“Then, do you know why *you’re* here?”

“No,” she says again. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe you know in your body,” says the Hunter, “but your mouth won’t admit it yet. I feel like I have an idea.”

Girl laughs. “Will you tell me?”

The Hunter smiles and shakes her head. “Like I said, you know already. But I think you’re like me. You’re looking for change.”

“Do you know where I can find it?” asks Girl.

“You’ll find it regardless—if you’re looking,” the Hunter advises. “But if you need help, there’s a Tower south of here that’s supposed to spur it on if you feel ready. And there’s me. I’m always here to help.”

“Thank you,” says Girl. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The Hunter stands. “It’s dinnertime soon,” she says. “Have you and your Wolf got enough to eat?”

Girl checks her basket, now full of bitter greens and juicy reds. “I think so. Wolf got some food from the Giant.”

“Oh yeah, that thing is a lifesaver,” says the Hunter, “even if it only comes around once a week. You can’t forage for seasonings out here. The only other place to buy things is that merchant, and that thing is slimy as wet flies.”

Girl grimaces. “I’m familiar.”

“I’ll let you get back to your gathering,” says the Hunter. “Come back if you need anything, alright? We’re kin. We help each other.”

“Thank you for everything,” says Girl. She wants to hug this woman, but senses the Hunter might not be the type. They wave goodbye, and the Hunter melts back into the green. Girl shakes a few more raspberries into her basket, then moves on back to the witch’s house. Back to Wolf—her Wolf, as the Hunter had called him.

XXIIX The Mirror

Narrator

They rush back to the witch's house on all fours then on two legs and all fours again until they burst through the door, tearing off one of the licorice hinges, and grip the ledge of the sink.

They stare into Mirror.

All at once it's them, but they take it in turns.

Girl's hair has sheared into a flaky, spiked mane haloing out from her back like it's electrified. Half of it is Wolf's bleach blonde. The hair on her face, too, is darker, thicker, eyes shadowed by thick slug eyebrows, a thin growth across her upper lip and hair sprouting down the side of her face across her sharpened jaw, reaching to touch but separated by an empty patch on her chin.

Wolf notices the body first—he had felt the weight swinging below him as he sprinted, tried to ignore it but here they are, hanging sacks of useless flesh, dead weight. He spins around, stares at his legs, thighs now wider, supple, some hair still, but bare in comparison to his pelt. He has lost muscle in his arms. He is shorter.

Girl reaches for a razor.

“Don't,” barks Wolf.

“I'm shaving it,” says Girl.

“Get rid of *these things*,” he snarls, gripping claws onto his chest.

“My breasts?” asks Girl, “I can't, they're stuck to me.”

She aches the razor towards her chin and Wolf jerks her hand, slicing them across the face.

“*Fuck!*” shouts Wolf/Girl.

They slap a palm across the cut, search for a rag to press against it. Wolf rips a towel in half and presses one half to their jaw while shimmying Girl's shirt off with the other. She drops the bloody rag as Wolf ties the other half of the towel across their chest, tighter, pulling tighter, binding her. Blood drools down their neck.

"Stop it," Girl shrieks, "it hurts!"

"What have you done?" howls Wolf, "Trapped me?"

"You trapped *me!*" says Girl/Wolf.

Girl picks up the rag again, presses it against the cut, looks for another shirt. Wolf puts on three. Girl sobs and Wolf drags the bloody rag across their face. They look up, see themselves again, grotesquely mismatched and blood-smeared. Wolf/Girl shatter the Mirror with their fist.

They sit down and scream. They howl. They shout everything. They shake and spit and kick and yell. When there's nothing left to scream, they fall asleep on the bathroom floor amidst a disco sea of shattered faces that look just like them, but unrecognizable.

XXXI Bite

Narrator

Wolf/Girl take it slowly. It's been a long time since they've done this. They start with a spell—in their mind they see it clearly. Their chest smoothed into a slab of stone slate. Their breasts malleable like sand, willing to be flattened by bandages and hands. The mirror shows them what they want. The mounds melting away, their collarbones sharp as teeth. They wrap. Around, around, and around. And breathe. Around, around, and around. Adjusting. Pushing each nipple towards an armpit. Tightening. Breathing. Around once more for good measure.

They run their hands from their heart to their stomach, satisfied by the flatness—by the muteness of the curve. They are confident in the choice of pants with pockets and a shirt that covers their shoulders. In the mirror, Wolf/Girl comb back their mane with their fingers. The T-shirt they couldn't stand yesterday now feels just right. They spin their Lover's ring and decide that today they will visit the Hunter. There are so many things they want to tell her.

As they step outside into the blazing sun, Wolf/Girl remembers their promise to bring something back in exchange for the Hunter's help. They shuffle back inside and consider the whiskey bottle, though it's been half emptied and would make for a shoddy gift. There's been no sign of the merchant or the Giant today, so Wolf/Girl strap the knife to their belt to look for a better offering.

Stalking down the path, they turn towards the river, thinking there may be some prey animals stopping for a drink. If not, maybe a fish. If they can't catch anything, then perhaps they can find a particularly shiny rock to present to their friend.

Just as the trickling of water comes into earshot, another sound—a rhythmic clunking and clanking of metal—rises in the distance. The cadence points to someone on a horse. Girl/Wolf’s blood freezes. It couldn’t be.

The clunking becomes imminent, and once the click of a horse’s shoes rings clear, Girl/Wolf duck behind a shaded tree trunk.

“*Girl!*” shouts the Knight, his voice hollow inside a helmet. Girl/Wolf try not to breathe. Has he spotted them?

He yells for Girl again, in a searching rather than spotting tone. Girl/Wolf peek out at the swaying rump of a white horse as the Knight clank-clunks past them. They loosen their breathing and sink to the ground.

But it’s unlike Wolf to be afraid. He takes charge and pushes them back onto their feet. They remember their last interaction with the Knight and a fire in their stomach churns them out into the lighted path.

“Knight,” they call.

He swings his head back, and it takes his horse a moment to tap a clumsy semicircle and turn around. He approaches with a hand on his sword hilt and his helmet visor drawn low.

“Are you a man or a beast?” he asks.

“Knight, it’s me,” says Wolf/Girl.

“A beast?” the Knight shouts.

“*It’s me, Girl,*” Wolf/Girl shout back. “Take off that damn helmet so you can hear me.”

The Knight obliges and lifts off the helmet. His yellow brown hair is plastered to his head, and his forehead looks like it’s been raining. Though they didn’t leave on good terms, it’s still somewhat comforting to see a familiar face from the Big House.

“Oh my God, Girl,” the Knight gasps, dismounting, “what happened to you?” He takes wide metallic steps towards her, and Wolf/Girl put their hands up for space.

“Has my Lover come home?” Girl/Wolf asks.

“No—it’s been too quiet,” says the Knight. “I’m glad I found you. Come on, I’ll help you up onto Lady. I’m sure the Magician will be able to fix you.” He takes another step towards them and clunks right into Wolf/Girl’s defensive hands.

Lady the horse snorts.

“Fix what?” asks Wolf/Girl.

The Knight steps back and opens his mouth, but only air comes out. He gestures towards Lady as if he hadn’t heard the question.

“I’m not getting on that horse with you,” says Wolf/Girl. “Just spit it out. I know I look different.”

“You do,” says the Knight, “but like I said, I’m sure the Magician can help reverse whatever curse you’ve been afflicted with.”

“It’s not a curse,” says Wolf/Girl.

The Knight slides his hand to the hilt of his sword. “Then your mind must be poisoned too. You can’t see yourself. If you could, you’d know it’s a curse.”

“I’ve looked in the mirror,” they say. “I know what I look like. I have a cut on my face. Half my hair is blonde. I’ve got...more hair.”

“You look *beastly*,” says the Knight. “You’re entirely ungroomed. And for God’s sake, your body! What happened to it? I know you Girl, you’re beautiful, but right now you’re hardly a woman. I don’t know what you are. Human, still? You have to get out of this place before it destroys you.”

His words tear a fresh hole into Girl/Wolf. They stand for a moment with their lips parted, conflicted because Girl wants to run off crying and Wolf wants to kill him. Reasoning with each other, they say, “Your mouth is *bestly*. Go home, asshole. I’ll go back when I’m ready.”

Bristling with hatred, Wolf/Girl stalk off towards the forest.

“What is your Lover going to say? How will I tell him that his woman is feral? That she no longer loves him—that she lays with beasts in the Woods.”

These words bring about the wonderful revelation that Wolf/Girl still have the ability to transform into a wolf—teeth, claws, and all. In two wide bounds they leap up and close their jaws on the Knight’s neck—too fast for him to draw his sword.

The next thing they know, the Knight’s armor clatters into a pile on the ground. As if his body was a mirage, he’s disintegrated. The helmet rolls down the bank of the river and clunks to a stop against a piece of driftwood.

Lady whinnies. The cat perches atop the horse’s saddle.

“I was really beginning to have second thoughts about that guy,” it says. “He never behaves like that around me, but jeez, what a dick.”

Girl/Wolf rise, human again. They sidle up to Lady, and she doesn’t seem to mind. She leans her head into Girl/Wolf’s hand for a scratch behind the ears.

“Oh lover, are you crying?” asks the cat.

Girl/Wolf gasp out a sob. They sink to the ground, and Lady lowers her nose to them. The cat jumps off the saddle and crawls into Girl/Wolf’s lap.

“What the Knight said was evil,” says the cat. “You’re beautiful. More beautiful than ever because I know you’re whole.”

Girl/Wolf pick up the cat and hug it against their breastbone. They're crying too hard to respond.

"I won't forget the first time I saw you," coos the cat. "You remember—I saw straight into the face of the wolf. This is no surprise. I know who you are, lover."

Wolf/Girl swallow their sob and unclench their jaw to breathe.

The cat wiggles out of their arms and marches over to the pile of discarded metal armor, inspecting it for signs of the Knight. "He definitely deserved that," it says. "Don't let him ruin your plans. Go see the Hunter. Take his horse."

Girl/Wolf look up at Lady, who taps her front hoof impatiently. It seems the perfect gift has fallen into their lap, but they don't know how to ride a horse.

Wolf/Girl stand and brush off their pants. They suck up snot and put a hand on Lady's shoulder, praying that she will be forgiving. They step a foot into the stirrup.

The cat circles around the horse as Wolf/Girl pull themselves up onto the saddle. "I think you're supposed to mount on the left," it says.

"What?"

Lady bucks violently. Wolf/Girl catch grab the horses's neck to catch themselves, but she sends the cat's body flying cartwheels. It plunks into the river.

Wolf/Girl sigh but don't look back. They know the way to the Hunter's house from here.

XXXIV Two of Swords

Lover

She pulls her card and tells me what it means. A blindfolded woman with long black hair sits on a pillar, holding two swords in an X across her chest. The moon hangs above a still ocean behind her. Her mouth is drawn in a line but hints at a smile.

On its surface, the card represents a blockage—a stalemate between two choices. An inability to choose. Her sight is obscured, though the moon rises with new possibility. She's taken this card as herself. She feels the weight of a sword in each hand. The back and forth swaying of indecision, the feeling of moving around in the dark.

But she tells me that the swords are not so much a blockage as they are two separate paths. The blockage comes from your own indecision. The power rises from your ability to choose.

Her power comes from being more than one thing, from being multiple, from traversing two paths at once. Her heart between two swords is a fulcrum—the central point of movement, of sway. She doesn't have to choose. She only has to move between what feels right.

She says we all wield these swords in different ways. She tells me to consider confusion an adventure. To see the unknown as an infinite possibility. I ask her what she wants to do next, and she says, I don't know—and smiles.