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## IGNITE, SMOLDER, REPEAT

by Tasha Fierce

*Firebug*, the kids call you to your face, *Black pyro bitch*, once they think you're out of earshot. But your ears are keen, your range further than they'd expect, and whoever said it gets a ferocious look the next time you happen across their path. You don't appreciate them calling you out your name, no matter how apt it might be. And you really don't appreciate the way they say *Black*, like they themselves aren't dark as midnight, like they don't disappear along with you after the sun goes down. You're *Benni*, or *B*, if they're familiar—but few are, as strange a

creature as you've become.

# 1

It's a balmy July afternoon, the day before your birthday. On your walk home from the corner store with Keisha, you lick an ice cream cone while she grumbles nonstop about the wine-colored fruit squishing beneath your sandals. She ain't lying. The shade offered by these massive laurel figs lining the boulevard comes at a messy price. You offer a muffled *mmhmm* in agreement as you slurp a stray drop of fake vanilla cream from the rim of your cone.

"Hey *Firebug*, what the fuck's wrong wit 'cho arms?" One of the neighborhood kids whoops and speeds past you towards a group of kids gathered up the street. "Ol' Black-ass pyro *bitch*," one of them spits as they pedal off.

You slide your sleeves down, a lump forming in your throat. Keisha rests her hand on your shoulder.

"So ignorant," she says.

You glare into the distance. "I know."

"Hey, it's okay," she says, stopping you in mid-stride and wiping a tear from your cheek. She follows her fingers with a light kiss. You feel silly. You've heard

worse before, but for some reason you're tender today.

She steps in front of you and holds your gaze with her hazel-flecked brown eyes. "Have you told your mama yet?"

"Are you for real?"

She sighs and brushes a braid out of her face. "I'm just saying. Maybe you should."

"Yeah, maybe." But I won't, you think, as you rub your arm under your sleeve absently.

"Maybe you should ease up on all that, too," she says, gesturing towards your arm. "It worries me, B. You could get infected if a burn don't heal right."

"I haven't been doing it so much lately," you say.

"Why, 'cause you don't got the room?" Her nose wrinkles.

"Ha, ha. No. 'Cause I haven't been, is all. Haven't felt like it. Maybe 'cause I'm spending more time with you." You turn to her and beam, hoping to change the subject.

"Mmm. Well, I hope you stop. Completely. I know why you do it, but still... I hate to see you hurt yourself worse than he hurts you."

You snort. “It couldn’t hurt worse than he hurts me.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant—”

“You mean what he’s doing to me, you can’t see on the outside. But this you can. And it makes you uncomfortable.”

She sighs. “No. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I just want it to stop. All of it. I want him to stop, and I want you to stop feeling like you gotta burn yourself to feel better.”

“I know, baby,” you say. “But I don’t know if that’s gonna happen.”

“You could make it happen,” she says. “By telling.”

“And make a lot of other shit happen, too,” you say. “Make my mama’s life harder, not to mention my own. She already works too damn hard as it is.”

“Yeah, but—”

“K, your parents got a little something of they own. It’s easy for you. My mama got nothing to fall back on since my granny sold the ranch. At least Philip has his own house, so when she’s too old to work anymore she’ll have someplace to stay.”

“It’s not easy for me. We both live here,” she says, gesturing at the

dilapidated houses surrounding you. “We both Black. But I get it. It is easier when you got both parents. I remember when you had to move to the projects for a while when your granddad died. It was a lot rougher than all this. No two ways.”

“And it’s not like my real dad is gonna suddenly step up if she divorces him,” you mutter. “He hasn’t even tried to meet me.”

“Doesn’t he think you’re not his? I thought I overheard your mama say that once.” Keisha makes a noise. “Ain’t shit.”

“Yeah, he wants to act like my mama cheated and I might be that nigga’s baby. But she would never,” you say, looking off towards the horizon. The sun is hanging low in the sky. “Anyway. I gotta get back. It’s getting late.”

She nods and grabs your hand, which is by now sticky with the ice cream you were distracted from finishing. She doesn’t seem to notice. You toss the rest of the cone in an adjacent trash can, and the two of you make your way home together, wrapped in the safety of silence.

Later you and Keisha head to the park, because neither of you want to be at home, where the air conditioner barely lowers the temperature below 80 degrees. Here

by the willow tree, the full moon gleaming through its weeping branches, you can breathe easier.

And burn easier.

Keisha looks like a goddess—or a witch—with her dark braids winding around her head like a crown, full lips pursing as she shows you how to drizzle alcohol into a two-liter bottle just right. So it coats the sides but not the mouth. So when you drop the match in, you'll have time to get back before the flame kisses you.

She finishes and steps back, tossing the match in with a flourish. Fire illuminates her eyes and you feel a tingle between your legs that makes you squirm a bit. She's gorgeous. You've never *really* appreciated that before, despite being best friends since you were six and dating for a year now. Maybe turning sixteen brings with it a certain sophistication about such things.

Because she knows you, she walks to the other side of the park before she lets you give it a try yourself.

You pour alcohol in the bottle, letting a bit of it—just a drop—spill onto the rim. Set the bottle on the grass, braced by two large rocks. Strike the match, dangle it between two fingers, and drop it into the bottle. But when the flame erupts from below, you—as you are wont to do when it comes to fire—crowd in too close, losing an eyelash or two in the process.

*Oh, but it was worth it.*

Keisha howls as she dashes across the grass towards you. “Benni, what the actual fuck! I told you to be careful!” Worry is heavy in her tone. Playing with fire isn't

something she normally sanctions, but you've been begging her to show you this trick since she told you about it a week ago.

"I'm good," you say when she reaches you, and grin up at her with the singed eye closed. "Better than."

She shakes her head. "Lord only knows what's going through that head of yours. Scared me half to death."

"Even He don't wanna know what's going through this head of mine," you murmur. When she asks you to repeat what you said, you wave her away.

Before you part, Keisha gifts you her father's lighter—with your name engraved on it—as a birthday present. She snatched it when he wasn't looking, hoping she could inspire him to quit smoking. You don't mind; it's sleek and silver and stays lit on its own. You practice snap-starting it until you can do it in one try.

"Look at you. Gimme that back," she says, swiping at you. "Why did I think this was a good idea? You wild as hell."

"C'mon, baby, I'm fine. I'll be careful," you say, and by her face you can tell she knows it's a lie. Lucky for you, she loves you in part because you're crazy, in that way only someone who's their own kind of crazy can.

## 2

Outside your mama's house, the scent of garlic sweetens the humid air. You can see Philip laid out on the couch, a tumbler of bourbon balanced on top of his

undershirt-clad belly, his balding head tilted towards the TV. The game is on. USC must be losing, because you can hear him all the way from the sidewalk.

“See you tomorrow,” Keisha calls, blowing you a kiss from her open window. Her tires screech as she takes off down the street with music bumping.

“Be careful!” *Speed is her fire*, you think, then shake your head. She’s nowhere near as intense about it as you are.

You trot up the steps and through the screen door. It rattles shut behind you.

Philip barks at the noise. “Benni! Where you been?”

You finger the metal lighter in your jeans pocket. “Out.”

“Is that a tone?”

Yes. “No, sir.”

He grunts and sets the tumbler on the coffee table, sitting up to glower at you. He’s more drunk than usual, you think, because his lazy eye looks even lazier, and his pink cheeks are an angry red. You can hear your mama on the phone in the kitchen—it sounds like she’s talking to someone from work.

“It’s late. Ain’t you supposed to be doing homework? Your mama said your



grades are slipping.” He licks his lips, looking you up and down. “You close to grown. Start acting like it. Ain’t no school gonna give a scholarship to a D student.”

You almost roll your eyes but stop yourself. Since when has he cared about your grades, much less your future? He doesn’t even know it’s your birthday. (Honestly, you’re not sure your mama does either, but you love her, and you know she’s tired.)

“Yes, sir,” you say, turning down the hall towards your room.

“Dinner’s been ready, Benni,” your mama calls from the kitchen. You keep walking. Keisha took you to get a burger on the way home. She’s got a job, so she likes to treat you, even when it isn’t your birthday. She knows how much you hate having to sit at the table across from him while he stuffs his face.

“That girl crazy, Betty, no two ways,” you hear him mutter as you shut your bedroom door behind you. This time you let your eyes go wild.

Long after your parents go to bed, you’re still up writing, every so often glancing at your clock radio to see the segmented digits flicker and then change:

11:30, 11:50, 12:00. Errant thoughts stalk the halls of your mind when he makes you wait up like this. You can never fall asleep before he comes in—*what is taking him so long, anyway*—so you don't even bother trying. You flit from what-if to what-was, the future and the past equally troubling to the silty waters of your consciousness.

A couple weeks ago, you saw this old TV movie from the nineteen-eighties where a sleeping boy's father set his bed on fire. Every night since, you've been dreaming that you were the boy. Your other recurring dream starts up right after: the one you've had for as long as you can remember, with the violet sea and the dancers wearing red and gold feathers.

*We are the envy of Death. We are the fire of Creation.*

That's what the bald woman with the peacock headdress says in your second dream. It gives you chills. She looks kinda like you, you think—if your skin was a little darker, your nose a little narrower, your eyes a little fiercer. Right before she says that, everyone stops dancing and turns to you with their arms thrown wide. You're running towards them, but before you can get there, before you can get *free*, they burn. They burn until nothing remains but pile after pile of twinkling gray ash.

There's something magical about that place. It makes you feel more real than you've ever felt. Its energy hums inside you during the day and pulls you closer to every fire you light. More than your next breath, more than anything you can imagine, you want to dance and sing and burn to ash along with them.

You open your nightstand's top drawer, trade your notebook and pen for the metal lighter, and flip it open as you settle back onto the bed. The fire flickers and sways to attention; you coax it into a steady flame.

A noise echoes down the hall. You hear the door opening—not your door, your parents' bedroom door—and footsteps getting closer.

Bedding is made flame resistant nowadays. You think too many folk fell asleep smoking and burnt their houses down. Or maybe it's because of people like that boy's father—except he used kerosene, so it didn't matter how resistant the sheets were. If you throw the lighter down, even if you can keep its flame lit, there's no way you'll die before he gets here. Carpet, though, might be a little more flammable than bedding. Probably not, but yo, you're a headcase, right? Not like, a traumatized teenage girl trying to cope under impossible circumstances or anything. Whatever goes down, you're just staying true to type.

You crawl out of bed, lighter clasped firmly in hand, and arrange your

pillow under your sheets so it looks like you're still in them. Then you crouch behind the door, clutching the carpet with your toes to steady yourself.

The bedroom door creaks open; your stepfather enters the room. The smell of bourbon makes your nostrils twitch. *Jesus, you think, it's like he bathes in that shit.*

"Heeey, sugar," he drawls as he creeps towards the bed. "Sorry I'm late."

A bit of vomit tickles the back of your throat and you grip the lighter. *We are the envy of Death.*

"I got wrapped up with your mama," he says, and then he pats the end of the blanket-covered pillow passing for your body. "The fuck—?"

You flip the lighter open, striking the flint wheel with your thumb.

He whirls around. "What the hell, girl?"

"We are the fire of Creation," you say, your gaze level, your tone barbed.

You drop the lighter on the floor.

What *should* happen—the flame going out a second before, or maybe a second after—does not.

What does happen: a roaring blaze leaps up all around you—both of you.

He starts screaming so loud you think his vocal cords must be tearing. The flesh starts cooking, *cooking* off his bones. You start screaming, too. You look down and your own flesh begins to shimmer. It's turning to amethyst—*no*, citrine—*no*, ruby—it's peeling away in layers, revealing iridescent, scale-like feathers—

And then you feel your eyes roll back into your skull, feel reality melting away around you, feel yourself made dead to this world.

In the other world—the real world—you stand underneath a royal sky, at the peak of a red clay island, amid a calm violet sea.

Directly ahead, dancers stomp their feet, creating a nebula of rust. A few of them have eyes folded into smooth yellow-toned skin, or hooded and nestled in burnished red. Most have faces like your kin: broad noses, full lips, brown skin. Their hair is in locs, braids, or mountains of coils—except for one woman with a peacock headdress, whose bald head glistens in the sun.

Red, violet, and gold feathers are tied to their ankles; their faces are streaked with the same colors of paint. As they dance, they are singing, holding their arms up towards the sun. Their voices are rich, sweet. Your heart beats to the rhythm, every molecule vibrating on pitch.

Sing to the sea, the rocks, the breeze  
Sing to the sun, the beasts, the trees  
Minions of Death, fear our cry  
We are your envy; unable to die  
Fires of Creation, we summon you  
Fashion us a world anew!

You recognize this as the part of the dream where you usually run to them, so you start, a trot at first, then a full-on gallop. You shake off your scarf, shake out your twists, throw off your nightclothes; naked, you're faster, naked, you might reach them before they start to burn.

They turn to you with arms open. You're home, the song brays. You've made it. The wind whips your skin, the clay stings the soles of your feet, but you don't care—you run faster.

The woman with the peacock headdress steps forward. *Faster faster faster it's only a lil further*

"We are the envy of Death," she begins.

"Wait!" you shout. This is new, you haven't tried this before. "Wait for me!"

*Why am I farther away than I was?* At pace with your speed, the distance between you and her seems to have doubled. Now you're no closer to her than

when you started. Desperation seeps through the veil, an unwelcome visitor from the waking world. *It's not going to work. I'm not going to make it.*

“We are the fire of Creation.” She smiles at you, the saddest smile you’ve seen.

A spark flashes at her feet. Flames lap her ankles and leap up her calves, her feathers are engulfed, her flesh snaps and sizzles—

and you’re back.

### 3

Five years pass, though when you consider how much you changed during that time you think it might have been five hundred. Dying will do that to you. Shit, any of what you went through will do that to you.

Luckily, the stars align, or rather, your mama aligns them. She raises the money to get you a real lawyer, who convinces the jury that you’re not guilty by reason of insanity. You’re tracked into the psychiatric system instead of the correctional one, trading one kind of incarceration for another.

You spend a year in a state mental hospital. A year where you can’t go where you want, eat what you want, or do jack without being monitored; nothing

but schoolwork, group therapy, and movie nights on Fridays. It feels like absolute hell. You play along with their rules, express mealy-mouthed remorse for *accidentally* killing your stepfather, but you tell them nothing about the dreams. Nothing about seeing your skin turn to scales and feathers while you were caught in that blaze, nothing about your theory as to why you survived unscathed.

With the specter of your stepfather's late-night visits vanquished, you channel your rage into becoming an overachiever upon your release. By the time you graduate from high school, you're on varsity song, varsity softball, and the dean's list. Both you and Keisha win full rides to UCLA, her for psychology and you for dance; you find an apartment together, off Slauson and Sepulveda, so you'll only have to catch three buses to get to school if she takes the car. You're both set to graduate next year, expecting full honors.

All that Firebug mess is a thing of the past. Since you got out of the hospital, you haven't burned yourself or anything else. More important than that, you haven't wanted to.

But this summer, you became a dynamo. You started composing routines into the early morning, unable to slow your lurching movement towards a destiny unseen but acutely felt. Keisha moved in with a friend to escape your manic



choreography spree. You ache for her, but you still can't stop. You are a rickety scaffolding taped together with momentum. If you're still, if your head is emptied of tasks to mind, you might just fall apart.

You started having the dream again, too. Not the one with you as the boy whose father killed him, just the one with the feathered dancers. Your doctor's estimation of your precise diagnosis vacillates between *bipolar I disorder, mixed, with psychotic features* and *schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type*. Neither feels enough to describe the breadth and depth of your being, but Keisha says she feels the same way about *generalized anxiety* and *panic disorder*. Her attacks got so bad recently that you were both worried she'd need to drop out of school. She just switched meds, which inspired her to pester you about keeping up with your own. You did, for a while. But they make your head swim and your limbs spasm, so it wasn't long before you were skipping days again.

More and more, you feel like you're holding something wild and ferocious at bay.

It's your twenty-first birthday. All you've done today is sit in your room, eating butter pecan ice cream. You were supposed to meet Keisha an hour ago for

dinner—she promised to come home tonight as her gift to you. This morning you told her you would be there.

She's been blowing up your phone for the past thirty minute and you have yet to respond. You imagine she's pretty pissed at you.

Nothing excites you. The ice cream was more distracting than satisfying. Even the thought of frolicking in Keisha's soft, fleshy wetness didn't lure you out of bed. Your mama came by a bit earlier, sensing by your slowness to respond to her own texts that you might be slipping into one of your funks. At least, that's what she calls it; you call it crushing depression. She brought you your favorite: chicken and grits from Roscoe's. The food sits untouched in its Styrofoam container on your desk.

Joy, desire, appetite, all these are abandoning you. In their place, the urge sits coiled in your stomach, ready to strike. You want to burn again.

You leap out of bed and start searching Keisha's dresser drawers. She smokes weed, so she should have a lighter in here you can use, a matchbook, a stick and a rock, whatever. As you throw clothes out of the drawers and onto the ground, you're almost frothing at the mouth thinking about how it will feel when your skin starts to peel away.

*There*—you see it, at the bottom: the silver lighter. It found its way home to her after the incident, but it's happy as can be to be back in your hands, held so reverently. It's ready and willing to give you the fire you crave with one flip of the lid, one strike of the flint wheel. Should you try to find an accelerant, or trust that what happened before will repeat itself?

*Wait*, you think. Maybe it's all related—the dreams, the vision, the urge—maybe you really are a headcase, in a way you haven't considered before. Maybe you should call your doctor—no, you don't want to get declared a danger to yourself or others. But Keisha wants to be a therapist; why don't you tell her about the dreams, about the vision, about the urge? She loves you, and you her, in ways that grow deeper by the day. She can help you figure out what this is.

You don't want to burn—not yet. Not until you talk to her.

But *oh*, you need music. There was no music playing last time, and nothing under you, no books or clothes or jewelry or pictures of you and Keisha or the one picture you like of you and your mama when you were a kid. So, you stream your favorite playlist on your laptop, pile all your stuff on the bed, and arrange yourself into a perch atop the pile. Then you call Keisha.

The phone rings a few times and your eyes start to glaze over. What was it

you were calling for again? Oh right, the dream. Or was it to—

“Hello?”

“We are the envy of Death.” That wasn’t what you meant to say at all. You feel your cheeks flush; you’re mortified, but you couldn’t stop yourself from saying it.

“Excuse me? Benni?” Keisha sounds like warmed-over furious with a healthy pinch of worried. Of course she does, you think, she’s been texting you and you’ve been ignoring her in favor of ice cream and potential self-immolation.

But you must keep going.

“We are the fire of Creation,” you say.

Her voice turns small and tinny as you pull the phone away from your ear.

“Benni, babe, where have you been? I’ve been trying—”

*And I’ve been trying, you think, but now I’m done. It’s too much, all this trying.* You press the red button on your phone to end the call.

Remember when you used to visit your grandparents on the ranch and sit right at the edge of their gilded fire pit? Fire was just fascinating then. It was only after they died, after your mother married Philip, that fire became a refuge.

You'd imagine expanding it into a force that could change the world.

But since Philip died—since you killed him—you've been suppressing the cleansing fire you felt raging within you. You tamped it down, kept it small, contained, safe. You worked hard and got good grades. You forgave your mama even though you're not sure she deserves it, forgave your stepfather even though you know he doesn't. For a time, the fire was calm in you. A fragile sort of peace. Now the memories are roaring back, sucking all the oxygen from the room. You feel like you're about to explode.

You flip the lighter open and hit the flint wheel with your thumb. Then you move your hand into the flame.

What you *expect*—to see your skin snap and curl away from the heat, turning gray at the edges—does not happen. But you are not disappointed. What you want is at hand.

Everything you're perched on is ablaze, with you inside of the fire. The heat is overwhelming—you think most would say excruciating—and the smoke, black and thick, begins to creep under your front door. Keisha disabled the detector because she smokes inside, but you know if the conflagration goes on much longer the fire alarm in the hall will go off. *That can't happen before—*

You look down, and see it, again. Skin peeling back. Iridescent scales shimmering atop muscle.

In a frenzy you start digging at your arm, ripping off strips of browned flesh with your teeth, trying to get to the meat of you. Underneath this artifice is who you truly are, and in this moment, you want nothing more than to know yourself.

But before you can, the door starts to rattle, as if someone is throwing their weight against it. Someone's noticed the smoke, or maybe the alarm is sounding—you can't tell, the crackling of the fire is too loud—and you're running out of time. You use your hands now. Your nails, pointed like claws, tear easily through your charring skin.

*Fires of Creation, we summon you  
Fashion us a world anew!*

By the time you hear the door fly open, you're already dead, though they probably couldn't tell by the smile on your face.

## 4

*Dead* is perhaps too strong a word, but it's the only one you know that

describes what you are when the world melts away.

The fire department is none too happy about the little bonfire you started on your bed. The landlord is even less pleased. All the psychiatric history in the world won't convince him to let you two stay in the apartment. Only Keisha's crying persuades him not to press charges. (Which feels like a miracle—a queer Black woman's tears moving a granite-faced white mountain.)

In exchange for humbling herself at the feet of the landlord, Keisha wants you to promise that you'll go to inpatient treatment for a few months after you graduate. You agree.

You tell them about the dreams this time. You don't tell them about seeing yourself change—the part about wanting to—when you're on fire. *Out of sight, out of mind*, you think. *No use making myself seem more insane than I already do*. Besides, you don't feel like all that stuff is related to your craziness—in fact, you're almost positive it isn't. And the dreams are only disturbing because they tend to be harbingers of doom.

The urge grants you a truce, at least for the next five years, allowing you to write and dance, Keisha to prosper in grad school, and your new landlord to remain happy. But now you've started having the dream again.

*Sing to the sea, the rocks, the breeze  
Sing to the sun, the beasts, the trees*

You duck into various Anonymous meetings sometimes, thinking maybe those in the throes of addiction might see something familiar. They don't. But you can't even recognize yourself, so you don't blame them. At your favorite bipolar support group—the only one you've found where the Black count exceeds two—you start to feel like a stranger. An unbridgeable gap is yawning between you and this world, your every breath thick with regret. Countless times throughout the day you find yourself wishing you'd died along with your stepfather.

And still, there is the dream. You escape to it at night, trying different strategies to reach the dancers before they burn. Every time failing.

Tonight you and Keisha are headed to dinner to celebrate your twenty-sixth birthday, along with the premiere of a choreopoem that you've been nursing since junior year. The whole thing feels impossible yet exhilarating. You've been working on the final draft of the script nonstop for the past few weeks, forgoing sleep in favor of churning out page after page of what you can only assume is brilliant poetry.

You wouldn't know; your eyes cross whenever you try to read it, and your



thoughts are a montage of scenes from your dream. Sometimes you wonder if the piece isn't just a lengthy reenactment.

You're watching the blur of neon lights off the highway when you think to ask.

"Did you finish reading those scenes yet?" You turn to look at Keisha. Her braided hair is in a high bun, her full lips painted red. Silver hoops dangle from her ears. She has such immaculate brown skin, so perfectly smooth, that you still can't decide if what you're feeling is lust or envy. God can damn you for both, then.

She nods, keeping her eyes on the road. "Yeah."

"Well?"

"It's good, B. Just weird as fuck. But, I mean, you weird as fuck too." She smiles, then her nose wrinkles, as it does when she's about to complain. "Speaking of, you gonna let your hair grow back or—" She leaves the question open. You think she must not want to vocalize the alternative—you, bald as a cue ball, on into the foreseeable future—what with her *whatever you speak into the world becomes reality* philosophy.

“Nah, babe, probably not gonna grow my hair back. I love you, though.”

You brace for impact.

You see her grip the wheel a little tighter, feel the car accelerate a bit, but she replies: “I love you, too.” You know she isn’t a huge fan of your current cyberhippieafropunk aesthetic, but you’re not a huge fan of the stick she’s got wedged up her ass since she started grad school, so that makes you about even.

You grin to yourself. You can never really be mad at her, nor she at you. The two of you, thick as thieves, made it out alive from the hood, pried yourselves from the jaws of a trap which sought to hold you trodden underfoot forever. Now you both burn bright as the stars up in the cloudless velvet sky.

Only you want to burn a bit brighter.

The café is bigger than you’d like, and too cold—you shiver a bit and hug your silk scarf closer, thinking you shouldn’t have worn a sleeveless dress. At the back, there’s a stage with a few amps and guitars strewn about it roughly, as if a band had played a couple songs and then walked off in disgust. Empty tables take up the rest of the room. Aside from the waitstaff and baristas, you and Keisha are the only people in here.

“Damn, this place is dead,” you say.

“At least there’s plenty of seats,” Keisha replies. “Over here.” She points to a table near the stage.

The two of you sit down. She starts talking and her words blur together. All you can think of is the dream, the dancers, the violet sea. You feel its energy humming within you, your molecules vibrating faster and faster as it radiates throughout your body.

“Anyway, happy birthday. I’m so fuckin’ proud of you.” She leans over and kisses you, softly parting your lips with her tongue. You feel the fire begin to lap at your feet. *No, no, no*

You pull away and push your chair back. “I have to go.”

“What? Why?” Her voice drips with panic.

“It’s nothing, I dunno. I just need to get out of here.” You turn to run out the door. She stands up and grabs your hand—*fuck*, it’s like velvet, you would stay if not for the heat rising inside you—but you pull it away without looking at her face.

“Benni, wait!”

It's too late. You're already gone.

The door flies open, you follow, your scarf and purse flapping in the wind, your lungs hungry for air. People mill around the entrance to the café, most in shorts and tank tops, jeans and t-shirts adorning the masculine types. It's sweltering here, at the edge of downtown L.A. on a summer night, and your chest sears with each breath. Is that smoke or steam you're exhaling? It's steam, you realize. It's hot outside, but you're even hotter.

Heat—waves of it, and the snapping and popping of fire—carries you in stumbles to a spot seven blocks away, to a group of rangy-looking kin standing around a trash bin, cackling. Flames dance through its wire slats, mesmerizing you with their come-hither undulations. Your vision starts to get hazy.

“What’choo want,” one of them slobbers, with nary a tooth in his mouth as far as you can tell. He scratches his arm and you glimpse what you think might be burn scars. Normally you might be put off, you might turn back. But there is the fire, and you need to get closer to it while getting them further away. They aren't yours to burn.

“I need this,” you croak, realizing this sounds ridiculous to everyone but you. The group erupts.

A second man jumps into the fray. “Well look at this, y’all,” he says with a grin. His teeth are all you can see of him. He’s laughing amongst shadows thrown by the skyscraper looming behind him. “Lil’ ho done up and lost her way.” He sounds vaguely menacing; you can feel your stomach twist, but there is the fire, so you keep inching towards it, though that brings him closer too.

“Please,” you say, and when you are finally upon them you start climbing into the bin, which cuts the laughter off abruptly.

“Holy shit,” one of them yells, as they scatter in any direction, all of them being as far as possible away from the crazy bitch who just jumped into a trash fire. They were bold when they thought you were just some meek thing, which makes you so angry your next words can only be a scream.

“We are the envy of Death!” The fire eggs you on, snapping at every syllable. It’s so luxuriously, delectably hot in here—you think some might say it’s blistering—that you feel like you could just curl up and fall asleep.

But you can’t. You must start digging. You don’t have much time.

The bones in your arms feel like they’re changing, hollowing. The scale-feathers shimmer underneath your skin. You dig your nails into your wrist and tug the flesh away from the bone until feathers start to poke out.

*Minions of Death, fear our cry  
We are your envy; unable to die*

Amid all this, it occurs to you that you should just wait for the fire to consume you, rather than peeling off this form like some petty barbarian. Just curl up into a little ball right here on top of this flaming pile of garbage and wait for the fire to reduce you to ash.

“We are the fire of Creation,” you whisper, to the empty street. Its emptiness gives you pause. Your determination wavers. There’s something missing here, something vital to the process, and you’re suddenly unsure you shouldn’t climb out of the bin instead.

Then you see Keisha rounding the corner down the block.

“Benni!” She shouts as she breaks into a run.

It’s safe to let go.

## 5

What’s dead can be brought back, with enough warmth and light and love. At least, that is, when you are what you think you might be, which you still haven’t told anyone else yet.

You spend a good three months in the hospital before returning to your condo with Keisha. Your mama visits you two every so often, bringing home-cooked meals. Keisha finishes grad school and opens her own private practice. For the most part, the next five years pass peacefully. You don't get the urge. No visions of yourself with scale-feathers, no dreams of running towards burning dancers.

There is still a part of you that sometimes asks why—rather, why not. Why not just immolate yourself once and for all? Why not leave this realm to all its troubles and toils, when you know, at your molten core, that you are meant for something greater than quotidian suffering and inevitable death?

On these bad days, you have worse thoughts. This world is an actual garbage fire, and we are all enveloped in it, though for once you wish not to be. The climate is teetering on the brink of catastrophe, people are suffering for lack of food, dying for lack of medical care, for lack of care, period. You wait, expectant, wanting nothing more than to watch the world burn to ash and be reborn anew.

On better days, though, you create choreography like greased lightning. You've been dancing with a company and getting rave reviews. You're performing

one of your own pieces in few months. And you write. You pen two novels about a firebird saving the world from apocalypse; you have a publishing deal for the first, the second is in the works.

But then your mama passed, and you broke. You got wrapped up in the unjustness of her death to cancer, how the doctors used her dark skin and her breasts as an excuse to brush her symptoms aside, like she was a bad memory they hoped would fade into history if they just looked away long enough. The funks became longer, the depths of your despair, cavernous. After her funeral, the dreams started up again. You fear the urge isn't far behind.

It's another sultry summer in L.A., and tonight is your thirty-first birthday. You and Keisha are meeting some friends at a bar to celebrate. You're late, but she's later. Another thing you love about her.

"Almost done," she says, singsong, as she puts on a third coat of mascara in front of the bedroom mirror.

"You don't need all that," you say, slipping your hands around her waist from behind, careful not to bump her elbow. She's stunning tonight, wearing a jacketless tuxedo, her hair swept up in a cascade of curled braids.



She smirks a bit but says nothing. You both know it doesn't matter what you think she needs. You, with your half-shaved head and freestyle locs, your myriad face piercings and burned limbs. Who in their right mind would take your beauty tips seriously? (If they need style advice, though, you've got this.)

And even those not in their right mind—like you sometimes worry she might be, for staying with you—might balk at following makeup advice from someone whose idea of subtle liner puts the eye of Horus to shame.

“Let's bounce.” She turns and kisses you, stroking the downy gray hair coating the side of your head. Your keys jangle as she grabs them off the hook and slips them into the pocket of her pants.

She opens the car door for you. You slide into the front seat, she takes the wheel. The bar is in Echo Park, twenty minutes or so from downtown, and the two of you reminisce along the way. These milestones always bring up past maladaptive highjinks—yours in particular, since no one else she knows has accomplished such spectacular fuck-ups as you.

“Babe, when you told me that shit on the phone that one day, I was like, what? I text you fiftyseven times, no response, and then you call and tell me Death is jealous of your ass?” Keisha laughs. “If you hadn't tried to kill yourself,

girl, I would have!”

You suck your teeth at first, but then you laugh too. “Yeah, I was pretty extra back then.”

“Back then? Shit, you still extra,” she says. “But I tell you what, I thank my lucky stars every fucking day that you’re still here.” She glances at you and grins. The moonlight is hitting her eyes just right; they look like twinkling yellow stars nestled in the brown velvet of her face. Your heart flutters.

People part like the Red Sea as the two of you walk across the crowded parking lot to the entrance of the bar, holding hands. There’s some art festival going on nearby, so the air is thick with weed smoke and the nasal intonations of gentrifiers. Keisha’s hand is sweaty. She’s probably anxious, you think, because she’s been getting more so around white folk as she gets older.

She lets go of your hand to open the door and you cross the threshold into the noisy bar, adjusting your spaghetti straps.

You see your friends huddled around a couple tables in the corner, away from the rowdy, ruddy frat boys perched on stools facing the TV. She leads you towards them, maneuvering around the bodies stretched far into the aisle.

A man leers at the two of you as you approach. He's tow-headed and flush-faced, wearing a USC sweatshirt—everything you're not looking for and probably never will be. When you brush by him, you shudder at the memory that your stepfather's favorite team was 'SC; when they were on a losing streak, he'd be yelling for them to get their shit together, looking at you in a way that reminded you where he wanted to seed his anger. He even smells like him. Soaked in bourbon.

Another memory washes over you like a balm, warm and familiar. The fire.  
*Oh, no*

You squeeze Keisha's hand and pull away slowly, not wanting to cause alarm. "Where's the bathroom?" The bar is packed, your mind is roiling, and you can't spot any restroom arrows along the walls.

"It's in the back, on the left." She points and turns you in that direction, her brow furrowed. "You okay?"

"Fine. I just gotta pee. I forgot to go before we left." A lie, but the truth would see you committed. You are so tired of fighting this, so tired of swinging from sanity to insanity, with an ever-shrinking normalcy in between. You've aged five hundred years in five, your hair almost completely gray at thirty-one. It's the

fight that drains the pigment from your hair, drains the joy from every second it continues.

Your mission now is to stop fighting, finally, this time for good. So you fold her hand between yours, kiss her gently, and start towards the bathroom.

The metal sink is cold to the touch—or you’re hot, you can’t tell the difference anymore. You lean into the peeling mirror, trying to see past your eyes into whatever smolders behind them. It’s vacant, evacuated. Nothing there but a cold stare and swirling thoughts, seething and snapping at the edges of your sanity. No reason at all for you to feel this way, when things are going so well for you, when you have the partner of your dreams—your best friend—standing beside you come hell or high water. No reason, when you are at the precipice of a promising career, at the fertile expanse of your midlife.

Yet here you are, fingering the old metal friend you stashed in your purse. *In case of emergency*, you said, but emergencies are subjective, coming in different forms. Is a crisis of faith an emergency? Is a trigger, a glimpse of a sweatshirt, a whiff of a putrid memory—are these, too, emergencies? Yes, you think, as you pull the lighter out of your purse and gaze into the silver. Your life

has felt like one big emergency. But you sense that this world is not through with you yet.

You hear the outer door to the restroom creak open. Footsteps sound in the hall, grow louder. The inner door swings in and hits the frame.

You whirl around to see the same tow-headed man, the same USC sweatshirt, the same ghost of your childhood standing before you with a sneer on his lips. The din from the bar is cacophonous, even in here. The pressure inside you, the heat, is building to a punishing temperature.

This is different, the discomfort. Every time before, you wouldn't have used pain as a descriptor for your sensations, at least not in the physical sense. But in this circumstance, no other word will suffice. The pain seems to ratchet up by the second, your muscles tensing as you watch him watching you. He doesn't move, and neither do you, except to scratch your arm absently where you began peeling off your skin the last time.

Finally, he speaks. "What's your name, sugar?" He has a drawl like your stepfather's. You wouldn't be surprised if this was his kid or something, maybe with the woman he left for your mama. Seems like something the universe might orchestrate.

“Get the fuck out of here,” you respond, trying to pack authority into your voice, but it cracks and whatever confidence you mustered is lost.

“Only if I can bring you with me,” he says, moving further into the bathroom. The smell of bourbon is so strong you think he might be flammable. Maybe that’s why your stepfather met the fate he did, after all. Maybe all the things you saw, all the things you felt, were just trauma-fueled delusions.

Another swell of memory rises, crashing over and suffusing you with its strength. You flip open the lighter, your thumb twitching over the flint wheel, and a smile spreads over his unshaven face.

*Fires of Creation, we summon you*

You strike the flint and the fire flares into your being. “We are the envy of Death,” you say, your eyes now faceted, gleaming blue spheres. Your voice doesn’t crack this time.

“Crazy bitch,” he mutters, and makes a break towards you, arms outstretched like an old-school Frankenstein.

“We are the fire of Creation,” you finish. You drop the lighter just as your hair becomes a writhing mass of crimson and violet tentacles.

*Crazy, indeed.*

Fire—cleanser, comforter, redeemer—flares at your feet and leaps up your calves. It kindles your thighs, blazing through your abdomen, erupting from your head.

The man shrieks as flames travel from his hands to his arms to his torso, until he is enveloped in your red-orange and purple conflagration, burning only in the spot where you and he stand, burning you to a pile of velvety gray ash flakes and him to a circular reduction of grease and char.

Then Keisha rushes through the door, and with her, the catalyst you need to resurrect yourself.

## 6

A surge of golden light erupts from the pile, solidifying you into the shape of a woman, then a bird, then a bird-woman with a plumed hood and cloak hunched over the pile of ashes. Once your vision clears, you come into the awareness that you are no longer in metamorphosis but different, *complete*, and now hunched over the ashes that once cocooned you.

Unfurling your wings so they eclipse the moon, you stand up straight, straight, straighter than ever in your life—and see your new reflection in the grimy bathroom mirror. Your body is muscled, broad, and powerful, with amethyst-ruby-citrine feathers that sparkle and glow in the light. Your long neck and sleek head are covered in iridescent blue-green scale-feathers; your curved yellow beak in a matte sheen. You look down, your sapphire eyes glinting, and marvel at the keratin scales on your huge talons.

*What was different this time, you wonder. Why did I finally change?* A scorched circle on the tile floor holds the key. You bend down and sniff it; a hint of bourbon lingers. You understand now. Pain is the impetus for so many transformations.

You look up and see Keisha standing in the doorway with her hands clasped to her face.

“This makes a weird kind of sense,” she whispers almost to herself. With these eyes, you can see her for what she is: a being of pure light wrapped in flesh, a herald angel in disguise. Your lips turn up beneath your beak. This guide did not steer you wrong. She kept you on the path, though it was treacherous, and



though you often faltered.

*If I could just speak to her*, you think, but when you open your mouth to try, you emit a short screech that makes her clap her hands to her ears and grimace.

Her shining eyes tell you all you need to know. She approaches you, stepping around the grease spot next to the pile of ashes.

“You gotta leave me, huh?” she murmurs with a half-smile, and kisses you on the cheek. You consider, too late, whether she recognized you all along. She’s certainly been the moth to your flame. If you’re granted regrets in any of your lives, leaving her behind will count among them. Your lover, your enabler, your savior. You’re two of a kind.

“Remember to take your meds,” she says, laughing. You try to laugh, too, which makes her cover her ears again. You want to tell her that where you’re headed, you’re pretty sure you won’t need them. And that when the world is reformed anew, she might choose a different way of living, herself.

But there is still a long journey ahead. You must learn yourself as you are now, learn how to be at peace with the cycle of death and rebirth, before you can midwife a new world into existence. The knowledge rattles your hollow bones. It’s

time for you to go.

You turn away from her, scoop up the pile of ashes with your wings, fold it into a pocket within your cloak. Sweeping one wing out in front of you with a whoosh, you shatter the frosted glass in the window, smashing a hole through the wall. You hop over the crumbling plaster, careful to avoid glass shards, and look up and down the empty alley.

From the other side of night, the song beckons:

Sing to the sea, the rocks, the breeze  
Sing to the sun, the beasts, the trees  
Minions of Death, fear our cry  
We are your envy; unable to die  
Fires of Creation, we summon you  
Fashion us a world anew!

Your ears perk up. This is the rhythm you've danced to every time you lit yourself ablaze, the pulsing, driving heart of your existence. The sun, with all its light and nurturing warmth. Beyond it, the fires of Creation, the nursery of all living things. And beyond even that—pure, uncut hope. A chance for a new beginning. This is what you've been dying to find.

You beat your mighty wings. You call to the sea, the beasts, the trees. *A change is coming, you say. You'll see.*

Then you climb high into the sky, towards that sacred realm where your kin  
burn. Defying death, radiant and eternal.