

# THE WOMAN WHO DEVOURS THE LAND

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We look exactly like the tourists we are. Flashlights looped onto our wrists with elastic bands and canteens hooked to belts and bobbing against khaki-covered thighs, we descend into the maw of the dead lava tube single file. My little sister, Rae, adjusts her Velcro headlamp so it sits centered against her forehead, her hair frizzed about her face like an auburn halo in the Hawaiian humidity. Our tour guide, Hokuikakai (“Call me Star,” he had said), offers his palm, and Rae toes down the uneven black rock. Our parents have already ducked into the shadows of the cave ahead of us. I can hear my mom fussing over her lilac Land’s End hiking boots. “Is this dirt on the heel? Is that a scuff? These are *brand new*.” The flash of my dad’s Nikon FM 10 illuminates the entrance in brief snippets of white light, creating with the darkness what my art tutor would call *chiaroscuro*—the art of light and shadow.

Fleet, my twin brother, maneuvers over loose bits of rock in true soccer striker fashion. Hence his college scholarship. “Hurry up, Paisley!” He beams at me over his shoulder as I stumble after him, last in line. We’re in a sort of bowl scooped out of the earth, made accessible by a narrow concrete staircase that leads down from the state park. Whiskers of fern sprout through layers of igneous rock while plumeria tree roots, broken through the ground from above, swing rope-like to the fossilized floor. Star notices me eyeing the fuchsia flowers that pock the dark ground, their thick stamens thrust into the air. “Flamingo-lily,” he says. Fleet bends to flick one. “Dick flowers.” This foreign green makes my head feel like a black and gray

kaleidoscope, all splotchy and unfocused. I'm waiting for my eyes to dilate to what's real.

As I blink away the black blobs, my fingers begin to do their uncontrollable dance my dad nicknamed the "Tardive Tarantella." He started using this moniker to make my mental illness seem more manageable. It's not. My hands have mutated into permanent tambourines—a side-effect of being on haloperidol, my little peach pills, too long. Part of why I upended each prescription bottle into the hotel toilet last week. But only a small part. It's good, really, that my hands still play the part of a symptom—otherwise my mom would see what I've done, would end our trip early. Truthfully, my fingers only bother me when I paint.

I slink inside the cave with the others. We congregate against the backdrop of sunlight, clicking on flashlights almost in tandem.

"Alright, Nelson family," says Star, his Hawaiian accent thick. "Let's go over a few guidelines before we begin our hike. Rule number one: Tread carefully. Years of wear and tear have loosened up the pahoehoe—the smooth lava rock—which is already slippery from ground water leaking through the ceiling and walls. Watch your step, true?"

Fleet salutes. "Yessir!"

My mom adjusts the canvas ear flaps on her pointless hat. My dad smacks the back of Fleet's head. "Knock it off."

"Rule number two: Stay hydrated. Even though we're out of direct sunlight, you'll be expending lots of energy on our ten-mile hike. Also," Star adds, "the more you drink, the less vog will bother you."

"What?" asks my dad.

"Vog. Volcanic smog," says Star. "It can trigger allergies."

As if on cue, Rae and I both sneeze. The acoustics of the tunnel echo the sound.

"Bless you," I say to Rae.

Fleet looks my way. "You okay, Fruit Loop?" His little joke for me.

"Just being polite," I say.

Star continues, "And rule number three: Stay together. You'd be surprised how easy it is to get separated in these dark tunnels."

"What happens to the people who get lost?" I ask. Perhaps there is

something like eagerness in my voice, because Rae frowns.

“Most turn up sooner or later. On occasion, though, a poor *haole* or two has wandered away from their group, probably into one of the smaller tubes that branches off this main part here, and, well...” Star shrugs. “I suppose they are at the mercy of the *unhane* now. Or have become ghosts themselves.”

Fleet prods my arm and says in poor Pidgin, “Ma-ke die dead.” Less than two weeks in Hawai‘i and my brother thinks he can speak the local lingo like Star. But I pay attention too, and I translate the slang: *Really, really dead.*

“Gracious,” my mom says to Star, fanning herself with her hand. “How awful.” An itch runs across my lips, and I hunt it with the tip of my tongue. How awful, indeed.

“So what does—how do you say it?—Ho-ke-ko-cockeye mean?” Fleet asks Star. We have been hiking for about twenty minutes on lava Star tells us stopped flowing in 1881. The tube’s entrance has become a yellow dot behind us. Wind screeches through cracks in the rock, carrying with it the eggy smell of vog. It leaves us all sneezing and wiping our noses. Dad stops every two seconds to take a picture of basalt identical to the bit he just passed. His white-hot flash detonates on repeat. It lets me see strange shapes in the negative light—cherry bombs of eyes, psychedelic curves of shoulders and knees mummified in rock. I’m in a raving lightning storm of stone ghosts.

“Hoh-koo-ee-keh-kai,” says Star. “My father was a navigator, a canoe voyager. He made passages across Polynesia, guided only by the horizon and stars. He named me Star of the Sea.”

“Like a sea star? A starfish?”

Star squints at him. “No.”

Silence settles then, which suits me. I can hear my thoughts this way, unfettered. I can see better, too. The haloperidol was some serious black magic—it altered what I could hear and see, exchanged hallucinations for something “real.” It felt like watching a censored TV: Every time I turned to a channel the pills prohibited—saw someone or something that apparently wasn’t there—my mind would reset, the image reimaged. Poof! Magic.

Now, I'm finding it difficult to mirror what I see and hear with what others sense. If I were alone, I wouldn't question. But now I must mutate, keep my family blind to my deceit. I force myself to see the lava like them—blackened and frozen mid-motion. As petrified as the forest in Arizona we visited last June for Fleet's and my high school graduation. Like the stone trees, this geological immortality has a tragic sort of beauty—honest but enslaved.

It's the kind of beauty I wish I could burrow into and fill its warm, hollow center with a heartbeat of blood. Resuscitate. If I weren't trying to become such a stellar liar, I might admit that this river looks golden-red instead of chalkboard black. My skin might be bubbling off my bones.

Rae touches her palm against mine and stills my trilling fingers. We wheeze in the sulfur-smelling air, our boots scuffing against the floor. The persistent *plink-plink* of dripping ground water makes my head ache.

"How far did you say we're hiking, Star?" asks my mom. She has bent down to tighten her boot laces. In the beam of my flashlight, I can tell they have gone from store white to soggy gray. She comes up frowning.

"This tube is twenty-five miles long," says Star, "but to beat sunset, we're only hiking in about five miles, then back out."

"So, ten?"

"If you can make it. It's easier coming out into light."

"It will be good for my thighs, then."

My dad says, "Star, how about you tell us some of your people's legends? To help pass the time."

"Sure thing, brother." Star begins to tell us one we heard two days ago at the summit of K lauea, about the mighty volcano goddess Pele who lives in its Halema'uma'u crater. Fleet interrupts Star to inform him that this story is old news to us. After a pause Star asks, "Did you find her hair?"

"Hair?" I say, tripping over my feet.

"If you'd looked closely at the ground during your visit, you may have noticed what look like black spider webs. They're actually strands of Pele's hair, strings of lava she's crystallized to her brow. She walks among us, you see, disguised as a human in need—a young *wahine* or old auntie—to test mortals."

“Spooky,” Fleet says.

I try to picture her, Pele—a woman wreathed in molten fire with hair trailing the ground like glass needles, but she is too beautiful and fearsome to imagine.

“Have *you* been tested?” I ask. Star stops short, and I knock into his shoulder. My family keeps walking, now ogling and shining their lights on petroglyphs carved into the walls.

Star’s russet skin pales, and his expression is one I haven’t seen on him. Curdled.

“Sometimes, Paisley,” Star says, “the pieces of what we are searching for are right in front of us. But often they are too delicate to touch. Like Pele’s hair. And if you try, pieces shatter in your hands, betray you with a cut. Best to leave them be.”

A red curl has escaped my ponytail, and I tug it. “Or what?”

“You scar.”

Nothing more to say, we catch up to my family. I slip between Rae and this rougher-looking rock near the curved wall. I read about this type of basalt in my Hawai’i travel guidebook. Even though it looks like hunks of charred bread, it can slice through a shoe. I run one of my new rubber soles over its humps when Rae isn’t looking, pausing to glance at the traction on the bottom of my boot. It looks like a pilled bedspread.

The tube stretches long and dark before us, pinching together in the distant blackness where I can’t see if it ends or turns. I have the strangest sensation that we are traveling into the esophagus of a titan.

“Let’s take a minute to hydrate, Nelsons.”

We sit down on a semi-circle of mini boulders, letting the moisturized rock dampen our rumps as we sip from canteens. I’m not thirsty, but I drink to ward off the vog. Fleet clamors up onto a shallow plateau above us and shuffles loose rock with his feet. Bits fall onto Rae’s and my shoulders. Rae glares at our brother with her mouth sewn up like a button.

“Watch it, Fleet,” I say. He offers a shit-eating smile, the only way he knows how to apologize.

“How are you feeling, Paisley?” My mom asks.

She wears her rhetorical look, the one that curls an eyebrow into a

question mark. She sported this same expression when my guidance counselor had “strongly recommended” I see a psychiatrist my freshman year.

Schizophrenia hadn't mean as much to me as it had meant to my mom, whose grandmother had wound up in the cuckoo's nest because of it. But Grams' plight was in the days of yore, before the miracle of my little peach pills. I'm not her. I'm—

“Nutty as a fruitcake,” I say. But only because it's a stupid question.

“You know I don't like that.”

“I'm great, Mom. Super, even. See?” I show her the Tardive Tarantella. It's the best I can offer her. She stirs the damp air with a round of *tsking*.

My dad pats her knee.

Rae links her fingers with mine and squeezes. I'm testing Mom, and Rae knows it. She always knows. She squeezes my hand again, urging. I open my mouth to apologize, but Mom crosses her arms and turns away. I shrug. Rae unlocks her hand from mine and sighs.

Star stands apart from us, his color returned. His headlamp, which he moved from his forehead to his crown, bounces off the low roof and creates an aureole about his body. He catches my eye in the darkness. “Aloha.” And the way he says it, I understand what he really means: *I see you*. I suddenly become engrossed in gnawing off a hangnail.

“We'll hike another couple miles, and then we'll stop again to eat.”

Star hoists his backpack, which contains our prepaid lunches of cold cut ham sandwiches and dried pineapple, and beckons us to follow as he resumes his pace down the black tube. My parents rise and resume picture-taking and clothes-straightening. Dad says over his shoulder, “Let's go, guys.”

Fleet bicycle-kicks off the plateau and lands on his feet. Shining his light beneath his chin, he grins at me through lacerations of shadow.

“You ready to see more rocks, Fruit Loop?” But his little joke doesn't make me smile this time. It makes me feel like a child.

Suddenly, my body is too heavy to move. My mutation is more draining than I had anticipated. I want to solder myself to this rock. Despite Star's warning, I want to scar. Affix to something permanent, something real.

Instead, I web together my dancing fingers. "I'll catch up."

I feel Rae then, a slight press of fingers against my wrist. "I'm okay," I whisper, trying to smile. My face feels so thick. My head throbs. "I just need a minute." She nods, then picks her way toward Fleet, who has already begun walking.

She looks like a carbon copy of me as a kid. She's even wearing the same tie-dye t-shirt I wore when our parents took Fleet and me to the San Diego Zoo during a family reunion when we were eight. I had tried to vault the fence into the crocodile exhibit because I thought I could walk on the water's solid blanket of algae. I can't believe my mom saved that shirt all these years.

After a minute, the titan swallows Fleet and Rae whole, and I exhale. I slide the plastic switch on my flashlight to the OFF position and let it fall to the floor, trying to black out my headache.

It's only as my eyes begin to adjust to the lack of light that I notice the hole. It's tucked into the wall beneath the plateau near me. Little more than a crawl space to the left of the main tunnel path, the hole switches from black to white as I blink, my retinas still in flux. Blink-black, blink-white, blink-black. A little worm hole burrowing into the hot center of the earth, searching for a heartbeat of blood. Resuscitate . . .

Between one beat and the next, I slip into the hole in the wall. My heart erupts, pulse smelting my ears, and I crawl on hands and knees deeper into the darkness, all heaviness abated.

This darkness feels different. Quiet. Still. Abruptly, I'm terrified. I think I've never been terrified—never felt much of anything—and the sensation is rapturous. The air smells moist and acrid. The lava here is all smooth. My hands, knees, and boot toes fill the curved depressions where the solid river dips and twists. I hit my head several times against the volcanic roof, and little slices of freed rock bloodline my palms.

After a few minutes, my foot catches unexpectedly on something. I yank hard, and my boot comes free before I kick it back against a surface that's the consistency of hard foam. A small crackling sound. "Dammit, Paisley, I think you broke my nose!"

I can barely make sense of the voice in this ancient cocoon.

“What are you doing here, Fleet?” It’s too cramped to sit, so I plop onto my belly, waiting.

“What am *I* doing here? What the hell are *you* doing here?” His voice sounds nasally. He must be bleeding through his nostrils. “You never caught up to us, so I came back to get you. I saw your flashlight by this tunnel’s entrance and put two and two together. What were you thinking coming in here?” He clicks on his light. Pale yellow shimmers down the dark tube ahead of me. The stone ghosts live in this tunnel, too.

“I was...curious.”

“I figured,” Fleet says. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving.” I wedge my elbows against the rock so I can cinch my ponytail.

“Well, I’m not leaving you here,” Fleet says. When he realizes I’m not going to budge, he groans. “Fine. Let’s see where this damn thing takes us.”

I’m not sure how long we crawl. Fleet has managed to worm his way next to me in the tunnel, bumping his shoulder against mine. The vinegar smell of his sweat fills my nose. His flashlight’s beam bounces erratically off the curves of the black passageway.

“Think we’ll find any oo-hineys?” Fleet asks, teasing.

“It’s oo-ha-nay, idiot,” I say. “And you don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Only because I can’t see them.”

Before I can reply, the floor abruptly slopes downward and disappears. Fleet yelps, grabs my wrist, and we fall. Our bodies twist and thwack against each other. We are the most graceless trapeze artists in the world. With a crack that knocks the air from my lungs, we land together against a rocky floor. Fleet’s heart staccatos against my back, and mine beats faster to match. I wonder if this is what it must have felt like in utero—two bodies fetaled like spoons, hearts humming-birding in the suede blackness.

Fleet stands, moaning, and pulls me to my feet. He was born only two-and-a-half minutes sooner, but I will always be the little sister who needs help. The little sister who weighed a third less than him at birth. The defective sister who had to cook in the NICU’s plastic oven until her gray skin pinked to medium-well.

INTRAUTERINE GROWTH RESTRICTION. Our mom had scrawled these words in our joint, cartoonish baby book, but only under my name. Dr. Seuss themed, I believe. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from my school's library helped me translate: Search under *I* for *IGR* and learn that *I*, not Fleet, got gypped on placental nutrients and other necessary fetal whatnots. *Big P*, *little p*, *what begins with P?* *Paisley's poor placenta*, *P p P*. It made me tiny. It made me . . . see. And yet, not see. It caused my brain to question what's real.

"Where are we?" Fleet asks, coughing. The vog hangs thick here, a whitish sulfur-smelling fog. The beam of my brother's flashlight sputters against the rounded walls and ceiling of a small hollow, barely discernable through the haze. The light hovers over the tunnel that dumped us here, about fifteen feet or so above our heads. My head starts to throb again, so I rip out my too-tight elastic, and frizz explodes around my shoulders. I'm not used to this type of humidity. In Boston, I can wear my hair down most days, especially during winter, and it curls like copper shavings.

"A cave," I say. He clicks his tongue in a way that would make our mom proud. There's dried blood above his lip and the bridge of his nose has begun to purple, but I don't think it's broken.

"I see now why Mom and Dad think college would be a wasted effort for you."

My mouth turns tinder-dry. "That's not fair, Fleet."

"But it's true," he says, shrugging. "Hell, Paisley, it's probably for the best."

"What would you know about it?"

"Only what I see," he says, pointing his flashlight at my trembling hands. I sheath them under my armpits.

Until our family moved from L.A. to Boston when Fleet and I were three, our mom was a hippie. A free love, clean living bohemian. Which is why she refused to medically treat my IGR. After her grandmother was tossed in the asylum by the state, Mom swore off hospitals. Unnatural things.

"I could have died," I had said to her after I researched IGR at school. "Before I was even born."

"But you didn't," she had said, not looking up from folding shirts on top of the dryer.

"But I could have! And then Fleet would have died too."

"Fleet would not have died. You didn't share the same sac. He was going to be fine either way." She spoke with words flat as the shirts she smoothed with her palms.

"But not me," I said. "Why didn't you just terminate me to avoid the risk?"

"I couldn't, Paisley. Can't you see?" She flattened the hemline of her own blouse, frowning. "I just couldn't."

But I wish she had. Then I wouldn't have to wear this liar's skin.

I glare at Fleet's shadowed face through the vog, fighting a sneeze. "You don't see anything."

"Oh, yeah?" he says. "Why don't you paint us a way out of here, Madam Artist? Go on. Oh, that's right." He shakes his hands at me. "You can't."

Fleet must not feel the sudden heat crash into the caved room as soon as those words leave his lips, because he resumes scanning for an exit with his flashlight. The heat sizzles first against my calves, and I think, *this is it*—my mutation finally becoming complete. It rises and rises, leaves a piece of itself to coil red in my stomach, a shard to splinter my heart. It surges and froths and spills from my lips, my nose, my fingertips. Its sulfur taste engorges my tongue, and I choke. I tense up onto tiptoes to keep from making a sound against the burn. God, but this heat is absolutely *molten*—

And just as I prepare to erupt like Kilauea, she appears.

A woman the color of a fall maple leaf stands before us. She looks both lovely and terrible at the same time, like one of those holographic stickers that shows a different image depending on how you tilt it. She's wearing a tattered white sundress that brushes the ground and is so filthy at the hemline that it looks as though it's been dipped in tar. Her feet are bare and ashy, her shoulders hunched. Black hair streams wetly down her back and licks her narrow waistline. I can't tell her age—too much sweat and dirt have grimed her face. But her eyes. Her eyes are two golden match heads flaring in their sockets.

"Where are you?" she asks. Her voice is water steaming over stone. "Here," I say. "Can't you see me?" She crooks her head. She doesn't blink.

Fleet looks at me. "What?"

"What?" I parrot.

He shines his light in my face. "What's wrong with you now?"

"The woman," I say, pointing. "You're lost, right?"

Fleet trains his beam to where I indicate. And it's the oddest thing: His light, when it touches her body, parts around her like a river runs around a boulder and shines instead onto the blank lava wall behind. She leaves no shadow.

The woman peers at me still, through the light. She looms her blackened fingers through her hair. Slivers snap off with the crack of breaking glass. "Will you show me the way?" She takes a step closer. The flashlight flickers.

"Shit." Fleet tugs on my arm. His voice quivers. "I thought you finally had a handle on this, Paisley. Where are your pills?"

"But she needs help."

"We need to get out of here and find Mom and Dad. Right now." He sounds worried, scared even, which is an absurd thing to be, here of all places. I pull against his grip.

"I'm not going anywhere, Fleet. I have to help her."

He pauses, his fingers going still on my arm. Not a shred of humor touches his face or voice when Fleet says, "Paisley. There's no one here. It's just us. Can't you see?"

But what he doesn't understand is that I *do* see. I see the flesh on his arms shiver and turn to chicken skin while his flashlight gives an eldritch flicker and dies. I see two match heads in the darkness dance on pinwheels of light. I see the detonation of my dad's camera, the piercing gray of my mom's eyes. I see Star and Rae with their headlamps, coronas in the darkness.

I see a tiny spot in the galaxy curled up in the design of my name. I try to marble it between my thumb and pointer finger. I want to know what it *is*.

“Rae would know,” I say on an exhale. Rae always knows. In the burning glow of the match heads, I see the outline of the woman’s hand, reaching.

“Will you show me the way?”

Fleet says, “Who’s Rae?”