

HALCYON

Amber

Waves crown insatiately against the sandy shore in front of us, hungrily crawling closer and closer to my worn-down sneakers. The skyline stretches as far as the eye can see, sailboats balancing precariously on the edge of the world as they make their journey to safety in lieu of the heavy clouds that darken the horizon. Its smile stretches uncannily across her face next to me, her gaze pierces my skin—a gaze I refuse to meet.

“Let’s get in the water, for old time’s sake,” it insists, eerie grin unwavering.

I reminisce on the previous summers we spent staring at this same skyline. We’d splash and play in the water, screaming at the top of our lungs over the most mundane things, like seaweed brushing against our ankles. Everything smelled of salt and smoke—the kind of smoke that meant family and s’mores and *summer*.

Now, there is a chill to the air that seeps into my bones like a parasite.

The scent of rotting fish and the threat of tears burn my nose as I turn towards the thing parading as my best friend and ask:

“What are you?”

Everything pauses in a sinister silence, even the waves.

“What do you mean?” it drawls.

“You’re not her. You’re not my friend.”

Smile faltering slightly, it whispers, “...How could you tell?”

The storm that had been brewing begins to descend towards the earth, accompanied by the distinct smell of petrichor. Each drop that hits me melds with the hot tears cascading down my face in rivulets. With every cry of thunder, it seems like the sky shares my pain.

I take a frenzied step backwards, away from the *thing* in front of me. It reaches out and snatches my hand, keeping me in place. Her palms feel cold, colder than that of the rain pouring down upon us nigh endlessly. It’s unfamiliar against my skin, so unlike that of the friend I once knew.

I struggle in its grasp, pulling and screaming “let go of me!” as vines grow seemingly from her fingertips and creep up my arm. My heart races in fear, whimpers tearing through my chest in agonal gasps as it begins pulling me closer, face-to-face.

“Do you want to get into the water now?” It taunts.

Rain still pouring and thunder still roaring, it drags me toward the starving waves. I kick and scream and sob as I rip at the liana holding me captive to no avail. We wade further and further into the sea, imbibed up to our ankles, our knees, then our torsos.

The shocking frigidity of the water bleeds the fight out of me.

"I did what you asked," I pleaded, "now let me go!"

Its leer sharpens impossibly. "If you say so," it purrs and forcibly pushes me further into the ocean's maw.

I lose my footing, careening down into the deep, devoured by the relentless waves. It holds me there, just out of reach as I gag on the brine.

Water enters through my nose, my mouth, my ears; ingurgitating me whole. My throat burns, and my eyes lose focus.

I think back on the previous summer one last time, how the lurid sun shone in our eyes, causing us to squint them even further than they already were from the overjoyed smiles we shared; how the breeze caressed our sunburnt shoulders as we built empires in the sand, only for the sea to rise and swallow them up.

How we'd lay in the pasture at night, surrounded by daisies and cattle, and she'd point at stars and say, "This one reminds me of you—because it's the brightest!" then laugh so hard her brother would hear and make us come inside for bed.

The last thing I think—that distorted, saccharine smile still looming over me—as the ocean reclaims me and my vision fades to black, *Those halcyon days are over.*