

-The Skin I live in-

A whisper is like a scream in a crowded room; Pointless and inconsequential. It hangs amidst the element, ignored by all but one. It actively seeks the intimacy that it cannot achieve and remains a deceitful jibe in its obscurity. Though unwanted and unbidden, it will fumble through an atmosphere of smoke and noise to be heard. It defies the established logic to occupy the vacancy that longs for the low syllables of muttered lexes and issue its last, fatal resonance. Then it is gone, shredded from existence by the roaring cascade of surrounding voices. Inconsequential.

Beneath the trembling veil of rain-soaked twilight, we sat clad in darkness; silhouettes against an auburn sky stricken by the orange hew of sunlight being consumed by the horizon. Separated by a dulled pathway beaten uneven by the furious threads of a thousand footsteps we seemed completely isolated from the ruckus of blurred forms that fought against the cold evening wind on the overpass above. They dared not register the two soaked forms on the dock below, strewn upon the sand like rag-dolls, debris from a sunken ship. Though we existed simultaneously, we were decidedly different creatures, link by nothing more than a common ancestry. They were completely divorced from the scene that was our unquestionable reality. They belonged to life. And we watched them dancing as we slipped farther into oblivion, the moments of precious, unrepeatable time pouring from us and onto the greenish peddles of algae-stained shores. The sun still shone in a weak projectile of flickering colour, the spiralling waters of the expanse of bay extending outwards into eternity. The Atlantic waters had never been crueller, with their grey waves beating monotonously against a stony coast-line, gnawing incessantly at the jutting peninsulas that dared extend their reach toward the dull unit of constant motion before them. It was low tide and the sea had shrunk back towards the abyss, as though in distaste at the two beings that claimed its beach. The spiral staircase of splintered ash by which we had descended twisted down from the road to this flattened prairie of mud and shingle where we were left as immobile figures, extending our gaze to a wilderness of uninterrupted grey. We were alone. Then, as though summoned like a creature from a pit, she stepped out from behind her veil of impenetrable twilight and was towered over us, an unwavering malevolence knitted amidst the spider-webbing wrinkles of her haggard, denuded face. She chuckled hoarsely, her neck osculating from left to right like a calculative reptilian, as I allowed my head to flop sideways onto my shoulder and stared across to the pale form that still clung limply to my outstretched palm, her small, heart-shaped face still painted with the emotion that had been her last, unmoving and breathless.

“Now, I need you to look at me and tell me what you see.” Her lips trembled as she spoke in her characteristically timid eloquence, leaning closer to be heard over the mulling and spluttering of passing traffic –a white car with a dented bumper, a steel rimmed jeep, a

convertible with a suspect side-mirror- as we sat, backs to the tall, flaking entrance of the small orphanage. It had been rather masterfully constructed at the convergence of two high streets and so, assumed the shape of a letter 'L' from above as it enveloped the resulting corner with its concrete form. My companion's body seemed to shudder as she spoke, despite the clammy summer air, as though her limbs were actively repelling the exertion. But her subtle movements exhibited a constant fluidity, like a flame dancing and flickering around the dishevelled and mundane populous of the city, distilling them all as she moved. Although her legs were thrown haphazardly before her, with bruised knees and skinny thighs exposed like freckled twigs to the morning sunlight, she did not seem fully grounded, instead lingering in a state of disguised flight, rendering her untainted by the dreariness of her setting. All the while, her subtle movements and silent gestured were orchestrated by a pair of oval-shaped, silver eyes that peered up at me with a quiet curiosity, her blood-red lips parting to produce a dimple-inducing smile. I had not realised that I was staring.

"Your silence, I must admit, does not immediately inspire confidence." I swallowed audibly, tearing my eyes away from hers like a strip of wax that left me reeling, raw and exposed, as the silence was interrupted by her soaring syllables.

"What can I say?" I could have written a thesis on my exact opinion her. My only friend, acquaintance, house-mate; the only person that had ever tolerated the eccentricities of a boy who was born into the world penniless and showed every likelihood of living and dying in much the same circumstances. It was funny how the content of one's pay-package seemed to reshuffle other people's priorities.

"Tallulah, you know me. I don't give anything that much thought. I mean, what's the point? Figuring myself out is still proving difficult. You can't expect me to start diagnosing everyone else." I took a deliberately large gulp from the steaming flask of reheated tea, a seemingly unwise choice in light of the weather, to complete my deflection and passed it across the void between us to her small, clenched fists that knitted around it eagerly, absorbing its warmth.

"It's funny." She muttered, before taking a delicate sip, "I never really figured you for existential thought." She projected her piercing gaze out onto the street, taking in the details of the metallic colours that jerkily screeched and rumbling down the 300 metres of street, a smirk spreading across her reddened cheeks, whipping at the base of her ears. "But I'm not asking you about everyone else. I'm just asking you about me."

"Well, you're pretty short, I suppose. And you do that weird thing with your eyebrows, no matter what emotion you're experiencing..."

"You know that's not what I meant." There was a sudden intensity to her voice that broke the custom of her usually timid murmuring, to project a focus and pensiveness.

“We’ve known each other for a long time now, Timon, and I just think that considering coming events, I would like to know some of the things that you are going to tell people about me when I’m gone. That’s what people do, isn’t it? Tell stories..?” I was so shocked by the sudden change in dynamic of the conversation that my immediate default was agitation.

“Why do you expect me to answer your questions when you deliberately avoid even the most simple that I put towards you? It’s hardly fair to expect something in the way of the thoughtless abdication of my most secret thoughts when you offer nothing in return.” If dissected by a third party, my words would have seemed cruel and void of any recognisably human emotion. But there was none to bear witness that were not accustomed to the cold way in which we chose to hold all our heated conversations. It was our mutual high-ground that we retreated to when threatened. “You speak of death and destruction and yet you refuse to share any of your plans with me. I’ve lived through this hell with you, Tallulah. You are the closest thing to family that I have ever had. You have *always* been there. And now, there is this looming possibility, this sudden chance, that that is going to end and you ‘can’t tell me about it for my own safety?’” I spat the words like they were actively poisoning me, and need to be ejected from my body with gross indifference.

“I mean, it’s just rubbish and it’s just so like you. This distant possibility arises that I might get caught in the crossfire and you just shut me out. But it doesn’t work like that. I have watched you get hurt too many times to play the part of your gullible friend that minds his own business any longer. Tallulah, it’s like you don’t know how much I-“ I cut an end to my rant as I forcefully regained control of the stream of consciousness that had so diluted my sanity and was streaming like venom from my quaking lips. She turned to me as I had rambled, her eyebrows lowered in concentration and empathy. She trembled before she spoke.

“It’s like I don’t know what, Timon..?” She had always possessed a naivety, an unabashed serenity that in any other would have infuriated me to the point of having to dwell too exclusively on my own extensive collection of faults. But with her, it just stimulated truth. A truth that, no matter how much shame or embarrassment followed in its wake had to be expressed or suppressed to the point of amnesia. The latter usually won, but not now.

“It’s like-“ A lump immediately formed at the base of my throat, expanding like a vicious cancer as I willed the last syllables from my mouth, like sandpaper. “It’s like you don’t know how much I love you...”

Her jaw seemed to assume an inhuman elasticity as her mouth immediately fell open and her eyes widened to consume the rest of her face in their opaque glow of incandescent moonshine. I desperately continued, the fear that I would never have the chance again fuelling me.

“I love you, Tallulah. I’ve loved you since that day you walked into my maths class and took the seat just in front of me. I’ve loved you since I watched you work on in the book when

you thought the teacher wasn't looking, so determined to avoid provoking the envy of the class, even since you lent me that pen with the pink feathers at the top that day my pencil-case was stolen. You are the best person I know and it strikes me with anguish that you can even entertain the possibility of leaving me when I would be left so desolate without you there constantly to remind me when I'm about to forget my locker key or tell me when I am acting like a complete douche, which is a substantial amount of the time. If you're not here, I can't function. I can't breathe. It's all I've ever wanted out of life... to be with you. So don't tell me that I am better off without you or that I can carry on living when you are gone. Because no one will ever make me happier than you have in the past six years by merely... *existing*. So please, just... say something."

The sand beneath me was cold and unwelcoming, digging mercilessly into the extruding bones that seemed to comprise all that remained of my beaten body. Every effort to struggle to my feet, to push against the harsh surface of the concrete pier was met by the high forehead and sunken eyes of my adversary. She moved slowly, skulking across the sands, her stick-like arms folded across her chest, clinging on to each other as if they were holding her dwindling form together. She was dressed in a consuming black frock that appeared to be stretched across the expanse of her long limbs. She seemed pale and emaciated, with sandy whiskers that seemed to be dying on her cheeks. Though I knew her to be less than forty, her experiences of life had worn heavily on her, giving her a much older appearance with skin seeming to droop from around her skull like putty in sharp contrast to the taught skin of an elongated neck. Her entire body was shrivelled to half its regular size and curled over in a spine-crippling fashion that forced her head towards the ground and the arch of her back upwards. So pronounced were her bones that the vertebrae of her spine appeared like the ridges of a dragon's back, protruding threateningly towards the first few sprinkling of stars that dared approach upon the late dawn. She was running out of time. She was not looking at me. Instead her enlarged pupils pierced the dim light for the body that was strewn beside me, lying dead or unconscious in a state of eternal rest. She moved for her and suddenly, my limbs assumed a consciousness of their own and were propelling me forward across the rough pebbles, dragging those body parts that refused to be so readily responsible. I was numb to the tearing of the skin and the pricking of discarded glass against my legs as I draped my exhausted body over hers like a human-shield. She did not react to the touch of my slightly warmer skin against hers. She did not fight against the added weight of my body as I lay atop of her brittle ribs. She did not move. The smell of dwindling sunset gave the illusion of warmth coming from her but no more. Instead, all the feeling in my body seems to slide uncontrollably in a wave of gravitational necessity to the pads of my fingertips that tingled uncontrollably as they make a constant, brilliant contact with her skin. I closed my eyes, oblivious to the figure scampering towards us with hands diving deep into her blackened robe, an outward representation of a darkened soul. I did not see it happen. I saw the weapon fall to the ground, heavily clunking against the rocks and heard her shriek in unnerving zest. Then she seemed to punch the air between us and I felt something hot slice across the millimetres of cloth that made up my shirt and then deep into my chest. I lurched

back, pressing my hand against my bosom. When I looked down I saw blood trickling between my fingers. It took me a moment to realise that I had been struck by a sharpened blade of glass. For a moment, she hovered before me, no longer a woman but a snarling creature with eyes ablaze and lips drawn back into a ferocious grimace and then she had wrenched me away from my prize, flinging me like a twig towards the waterline. I could do little more than watch as she bent over the helpless girl and forced the remainder of the blade deep into the cavity of her chest. With it, the twilight erupted into violent, eradicating crimson.

My lips touched hers and I was tugged away from the grimy street pavement and the clammy summer air, as I cradled the back of her head. It lasted no more than a second, the time it took for her to lean forward with her constant prowess and silence my mumbling, but that moment seemed to extend to eternity, etching itself forever into my foremost memory. She did not speak for a moment as she retreated, her cheeks flushed a deeper pink than I would have believed possible and her chest rising and falling like an over-active sun. Then she spoke, feeling the desperate need to answer me, unaware of how my life no longer needed the fulfilment that would come from the divulging of information that seemed, presently, so trivial.

“It’s about Ms Hangman.” I was suddenly hurtling towards the pavement again, exiled from the arcadia in which I had resided for so brief a time, as her heart-shaped lips puckered to announce the name that worked to unsettle my stomach.

“She’s almost finished her prototype... and she had chosen me to be the subject of the first... experiment.” Her words seemed to crack as she spoke; like someone had driven a nail into them and a deep, obscuring fracture had been the result. My trachea seemed to close in on itself as I fought for the will to answer.

“That...t-that can’t be true. I have seen the contraption myself, only yesterday and it was far from completion, let alone-“

“It seems she got tired of waiting.” She quickly interjected with a distinct resonance of defeat. “She broke into a mission’s base last night and stole the energy she needed for the completion. It’s too late, Timon...” I could not breathe, like all my motor functions were failing, tauntingly slowly.

“But there is no way she would come for you. There are so many other test subjects that would survive the transformation. You, you could die-. What would be the point..? Even she could not be so stu-“

“I’m afraid it seems that that is exactly her point. She can’t risk wasting a perfectly good test subject on the first trial. The likelihood of failure is too substantial and she needs to see how the element reacts in a vessel before she can harness it successfully. She needs someone...”

“Expendable..?!” She did not answer, but her silence was all the agreement I needed to provoke anger.

“Let me tell you something, Tallulah Clancy.” Instinctively, I gripped the base of her chin and guided it upwards so that she met my gaze. Her eyes had expanded under the pressure of welling of tears. “You are so many things. You are selfless, you’re strong and intelligent and infuriating.. and pretty eccentric...” She chuckled despite her tears. “But you are not expendable.”

“Well, come tomorrow evening it won’t matter.”

“..What happens tomorrow..?”

“The winter solstice.” My face must have mirrored my lack of recognition of the date’s significance because she quietly continued. “The shortest day of the year. The day that she has pinpointed as the pinnacle of her powers.”

“And, coincidentally, the day that she has chosen to murder you in cold blood?!”

“Do you think I want this..? Do you think this is the destiny that I sought, the reward I was seeking? I don’t want this, Timon. I don’t want to watch as the sun is ripped from the heavens and harnessed as a source of mortality for a woman who doesn’t even desert to live. I don’t want to be the vessel from which she sources this supposedly eternal energy and uses it so that she never has to succumb to tiredness. To death. And most of all, I don’t want to be the means by which she does it. But I’ve known for a long time now that this is not going to be my choice to make!”

“I know!” The shout that interrupted the silence of the surrounding metropolis was fuelled by passion, not the futile anger that raged in my core but was so useless in aiding the situation. I reached for her hand, trembling and petite against the harsh concrete. “I know...”

“Please, I just- I don’t know what to do. All I know is that... I love you, Timon. And that my one regret leaving this world is only tell you that now because you are loud and obnoxious and the moodiest human being that I have ever met, but god, I will miss you. You are the best man I have ever known and I don’t want to leave you.”

“And you won’t! You hear me? You won’t because we are going to run away. Me and you, and never look back. At all this hurt and destruction and fear. We can put it behind us, just come with me.” I was on my feet in an instant; a skinny wedge separated the layers of suppressing heat that had been congregating around our immobile forms. I extended my hand towards her, steady and unwavering. “Come with me now, Tally and live.”

My pinched and nervous disposition seemed to assist the speed at which the blood poured from my paling form and into the liquescent ocean spray. I watched it as the diluted scarlet was eaten at by the foamy froth of the waves and sucked out to sea, abandoning my

body like an unfaithful dog. My head felt light and confused as I whirled it around in time to glimpse the orb of light that surrounded Tallulah being diminished to a mild flickering as the blade bore deeper into her chest. I shrieked, feeling the blade exacting a similar pain on me as she lay unreactive to the invasion of her body. I dragged myself along the jutting corals, yelping and whimpering like a seal, my scratched hands groping the air for contact with the woman's throat who, even now, threw her head back to indulge in a guffaw. I looked from the crippled body of the person I love to her murder in one deft movement and scorned the world for turning, indifferent to the injustice it contained.

"You monster!" I breathed disdainfully, spitting the words as blood began to collect threateningly at the base of my throat. At that moment I had slapped her across the face, her head suddenly snapped sideways and her face darkened to the colour of the skin that surrounded her small, shrunken eyes.

"You still have no conception of the person you are up against, do you boy?" She leered, osculating towards me as though testing the air before her, seeing how it felt against her newly revived skin that had been saved from the damnation of rotting beneath the ground. "I begin to wonder if I'm not wasting my time in this pursuit of immortality. Let me make something clear: Tallulah Clancy was born into this world to die by my hand. Her soul purpose in life is to be the benefactor of my transformation. She has partaken in the earth's defining moment. You should be happy for her.." She hissed like the serpent that now had control over her movements. She snaked left and right amidst the rubble and noise. All the time growing closer.

"Why are you doing this? What possible reason could you have for willing yourself to live longer? Why exact that upon the world? We have enough to contend with. And you hate us for it. You hate us. Why do you pursue this when your skin crawls at the thought of another moment amidst the stagnation of humanity?"

"You stupid, pathetic child. You think I want to live amongst you? You think I can bear the thought of eternity on this rock, mulling through the stream of all the pointless, sickening lives that everyday populate your streets? No, but I stand it. I will stand it until my spine curves over and my tendons disintegrate so that I can witness the obliteration of your species from the face of this planet. I will see you suffer. I will watch your world crumble and relish in its prolonging arrival."

"Well...you won't have to wait too long." The world delved into a puff of garish smoke as the sun that had slunk so lazily across the overcast sky to its finally resting place upon the horizon suddenly and violently immaterialised, as if by my bidding. The orange light that it had cast so forlorn across the darkness was consumed by an over-zealous night and the moon that had brashly appeared before its time was stolen from its place among the stars. For one last second my eyes fell upon the body that still bore the shard of jutting glass on her chest as a brooch, seeping into the shadow of the overpass as though she were being erased from

existence. Then the lightness of the sky began to dull, the splashes of blue mitigated to a greyish haze and then black. Someone had flipped a switch amidst the heavens and the great over-head lighting that was our primary power source was powering down after a millennia of arduous work. Now, the only active power source exuded from the hollowed corpse of my friend. Her eyes flickered open as though she had been merely submerged in a miraculous dream, but with flaming eyes of a terrifying auburn and golden centres that made her small face seem dead and bloodless in comparison. She pushed her suddenly solid body to a stance and was baked in the goddy swell of a thousand sunsets before projecting her arms towards her murder and bestowing her last gift; immortality, before being drained completely of all prospects of life and descending once again into a lifeless heap of tattered clothes and midnight. I watched the hawk-like woman who stood above her consume the brilliant light with open arms as it burrowed its way into her chest, glowing from beneath weather skin. She turned to me, arms outstretched and fingers twirling with the same golden eyes. And even now, this was moth to my friend's butterfly. She sneered at me, teeth sharpened to grotesque and yellowed points.

"Witness the birth of a god."

"A god? You are no more a heavenly being than the logic of this, so profound a scheme, is credible." Suddenly, the light and heat that exuded from her chest intensified, seeping a vicious yellow poison through her body and her eyes began to splinter an electric orange, spitting shards of raw heat that skimmed across the darkened pebbles. She hissed as the pain tore through her body and her feeling of invulnerability became a fear of obscurity. She fell to the ground, knees crushing down against the concrete with a bone-shattering force that could not distract her from the ravaging of her limbs as she slowly disintegrated amidst the element that overpowered her.

"You thought he had it all planned. You thought you could escape yourself." As she dug her claw-like hands deep into the sand before her, her head rose to meet my gaze, plastered with the pain that now mastered her. "But you can't. No matter how high you aim, you will always be undone by your impulsiveness and your naivety. The sun is no more immortal than you or I. Now it fades into oblivion and we are plunged into darkness. You would not listen. And now we die." I chose my last words to her carefully. I did not stay to watch as her body was slowly dismembered from within, deconstructed by a power that she could not hope to control, to harness. I did not stop to take one last, sorrowful glance towards a doused sky as it played with the last spirals of orange light that remained before we were left helplessly in the glow of streetlights and all natural light was stolen. I did not stop to steady myself as the world seemed to keel over amidst its new darkened state, unable to form an equilibrium that did not focus upon the sun. No, instead I barreled on, senses dulled and mind focused on a soul cause. New greyish stains of chipped pebbles were added to the uncountable stains upon my knees and I leaned down to the girl that, all through her trials had been so sober and silent. I moved to kiss her as the skin upon her small forehead

wrinkled and for one brief moment she returned to me, teetering on the abyss of momentary and immediate destruction. Her eyes, their normal, euphoric blue flashed upon my scuffed form accompanied by a weak, dimpled smile that worked to make me feel for one moment that all was no hopelessly, irrevocably lost. I did not speak but stroked her hair behind her ear with blood-stained hands that had long given up in their pointless task of trying to stop my bleeding. She gazed at me, her eyes misrepresenting the pain that no doubt swam throughout her veins and crippled her body. She was peaceful and accepting, even in death. There was no regret in her eyes, no fear and though this should have given me comfort for my own fate I could only focus on fighting the tears that welled for my coming loss. Her small hands fumbling to seized mine in a comforting caress before guiding them artfully to the shard of glass that protruded from her chest, crippling her lung and accentuating the gash it had created with its reflexion. I pulled free immediately; the thought of what she was suggesting the only thing that could terrify me now. I shook my head, no longer able to muster the voice that merely saying the word 'no' demanded. She persisted, reaching again. This time I did not pull away but fought against the weak effort she made at pulling me towards her once again. I lowered my head in defiance.

"Timon," The sound of her voice called my attention immediately, the voice that overcame all the coiled emotions that strangled one another inside my mind. "Please. End my suffering. End *yours*."

"I-I can't. Tallulah, you can't ask me to--"

"I am dying, I know that. All I want is for it to be quick. Don't make me linger here when I can be waiting for you somewhere else. I have bared enough of this world. Let me leave it with something to look forward to." Every instinct I had fought against the illegality, the horror of what she was suggesting. But my conscience could not see her so. Those eyes bearing any amount of pain killed me instantly, in every moment. I could not bear it. Reaching for the blade the hovered millimetres above her heart, I shuffled close to her immobile body that still bore the unwavering smile of a girl who could glimpse the coming arcadia amidst the darkened skies above and long to be subject to it.

"I love you." She breathed, her eyes slipping away from me now and towards the sky. I could no longer contain the flood that threatened to pour from my eyes. I did not breathe.

"I love you, too." My hand coiled around the other, tensing atop the blade and trembling with the pressure I threatened to exert. "Wait for me..." I whispered, it being the only thought that consumed my tired, fading mind. Leaning down to kiss her, I felt the blade chug as it penetrated yet more deeply and her body became slack as she drifted off into her deserved nirvana, free from the shackles of a world that had so thoughtlessly discarded her.

-by Caoimhe Clancy ☺

