

ONE

He knows what it is to be buried alive, the feeling of dirt in his mouth and the quiet fitting around him like a well-tailored grave. Sometimes Evander still tastes it under his tongue, that rich earth clotting between his molars. He should have grown out of the memory by now, but he belongs to it, and not in a gentle way.

Sometimes he feels like he's still outside, moldered down to the bone with roots woven through the soft tissue of his lungs and rot spilling from the remnants of his rib cage. No one saved him in time. He was never dug back up. Maybe all that's truly left of him are white bones in the garden, and his ghost is the thing now rattling around the hollow expanse of this bedroom in the ancient, moth-eaten manor of Hazelthorn.

Except ghosts don't develop blood blisters along their arms after being viciously pinched, and Evander has just given himself his fourth welt of the evening. A little shock of pain for proof of life.

The grim sky has brought on an early twilight, and the gloom has put his mood through the floor. It gets to him, sometimes, how lonely he is. Only the elderly butler flits in and out of his room every day, bringing doses of thick, milky medicine that makes Evander feel sluggish and dulled. He'll flop onto his bed and stare at the wallpaper until the pattern of dead-eyed fauns and bloody thorns stops spinning and the loneliness passes.

Then he wakes.

And it begins again.

the same and the same and the same

He gave up screaming a long time ago.

All that's left is to let the quiet thicken about him like a shroud as it runs a tongue around the rim of his ear, forcing him to listen to every noise he hates drifting in from the cracked-open window. The hushed whispers of trees, the trill of night birds and cicadas as they flitter between the many walled gardens, the humid breeze riffling the laurel hedgerows. The smell of summer is relentless, an unfettered punch of evergreens and florals, overturned soil and tree sap and *life life life*.