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Hearts of Ash

Hope Blackburn

Esther drew the attention of the other migrant workers like a bright light near winged bugs. For she had arrived cold and alone to the struggling town of paper tents, save for the baby she surely carried in her swollen stomach. Esther was too young for her predicament, they soon observed. Her inexperienced face, though intelligent, revealed nothing but the stubborn expression of youth. To add it all, the young woman rarely opened her mouth to speak; and instead, words poured out like flood waters from her expressive dark eyes. Even the single pocket that bulged from her ragged red dress became the topic of excessive interest, as it was promptly found to hold two pencils and a little mud stained book. The other migrant mothers were ravenous with mockery and wasted no time in concocting the idea that Esther dreamt of becoming an elementary school teacher. This fresh spreading rumor was cause for multiple bursts of screeching laughter that reverberated throughout the camp. “She’s in for a big surprise if she thinks she’ll even set foot in a school house near this place,” sneered one gossipier without even bothering to talk to the young woman. Many did, however, inquire constantly about the whereabouts of the baby’s mysterious father. “He is gone,” Esther would simply state with flattened and emotionless words, code that in truth, too many feelings for him were bottled up in her arguably broken heart. It was grief that would most definitely come pouring out if she spoke much else. The other migrants didn’t read code though, and they merely scorned her abrupt speech.

One day, as the fiery California sun slid lazily down the wall of the horizon, throwing a warm orange glow upon the typically grey-clothed Hooverville, Esther felt sharp movement from the child inside of her. Its limbs were pushing, pinching, and squirming to come out of the dark womb, and to emerge into the yellow sun-spattered world. Esther wished to tell her baby to be still, to whisper that this new place, a land that looked to hold such wonder, was only waiting to unveil its true form as a starving, empty, and frightening expanse, a sanctuary with no resemblance to the warm home she kept now. But the baby persisted; and as evening kept watch at the opening of her tent, Esther's skin wept with glistening sweat, and she couldn't suppress the inevitable ugly cries that seemed to explode from her throat. All the women that could came to help her, covering her shuddering body from the prowling eyes of the men.

Not surprisingly, Esther called the baby girl Luna. This was the name that she and Jack had chosen together in the early weeks of the summer, when their little paradise had teased to stay forever. The very thought of Jack brought stale tears to her cheeks, ones that she had been holding in for quite some time. Esther cradled her newborn baby with the very first tinglings of a mother's pride promising to show in her eyes. She was caught up in these moments, these raw breathless seconds, and she began to unlatch the stiff and tired barricade from around her heart. This was one she had held shut since the awful day that she had crouched, sobbing, at the top of a giant cargo train headed somewhere west. The memories from her wandering summer came back tonight while she struggled to properly hold the small baby girl in her thin arms. Most of all, she felt the weight of her tragic decision drop from the gallows of her heart and swing throughout her limbs with soft trembling. Why had she let Jack go? Why hadn't she run after him, gone back with him to the place she had come from, back to dusty Arkansas where her stubborn family toiled still, forever waiting for the unmerciful King of Time to miraculously turn their luck around? The loud argument, once painted so tumultuously in her mind, now seemed completely dissolved, as Esther couldn't quite

remember what she had been so angry at him about. She was ashamed at the motives surrounding her mad decision. Though she would have denied it to anyone, Esther knew deep down that she had been buried underneath a great mound of stubbornness, one heavy, heaping fortress of pride that was finally beginning to sink into ruins. She remembered the night of those horrible tick-tocking seconds, the cargo train launched into a plummeting free fall away from her love, her heart realizing bluntly that she had chosen out of absolute vanity. Her dreams of prosperity came nowhere close to making up for this awful loss.

As the first days of motherhood shuffled by, Esther watched her baby grow tough like a warrior. Luna's malnourished cheeks and starving eyes stuck like magnets to Esther's tired face. It was as if the child knew already the dire need of her circumstances, and it pained the young woman to see her so cold and hungry. A baby shouldn't live like this, she thought to herself. With each passing foodless day, Esther began to wonder more fervently how she would ever find work. She realized that Luna could not be left alone, as this determined her task of gathering enough penny-producing crop nearly impossible. Each night, Esther spared herself a single tear, letting it slip carelessly down her cheek as the other migrants straggled back from their days' work. She let those tears go for the loss of her dreams, for the broken promise of wealth in this evidently cursed land. Most of all, she cried for the child in her arms doomed to starve forever. Here, prosperity was nowhere to be found, even scarcer than that famous California gold once romanticized in her Grandfather's relishing stories of the olden days. Esther would shiver when she felt the sun next to her, all hot and ablaze with light, carving a deep grey shadow into the things behind her.

Soon though, Esther's shadow turned darker and darker until it was black like the jet night sky. Only this was what the other migrants assumed, that the shape so closely stooped behind the woman was merely her own shadow. The manly figure, in truth, was strangely alive. He wore a

heavy cloak of darkness to conceal his face, a countenance that was surprisingly human and handsome. This presumed shadow had haunted these Hooverilles for many months now, and he adored their decaying stench, for it meant that they were as plentiful to him as buried treasure chests. These days, he stayed closer still to this particular town of cardboard because the mere sight of one young woman endlessly intrigued him. There was something different about her aura, something he could not quite understand. Her time was coming to an end, that was for sure, and he knew that her little babe's hour was even more imminent. Yet for an indescribable reason, he chose always to return to the side of this curious young woman rather than spend his after-hours exploring the spoils of other copious places. He remembered stumbling upon her once while she was singing to the baby, and her raspy voice had filled the air so softly as if it were a sleeping dragon's breath. The song had left him unable to move from her presence. It was as if she had frozen him into the tapestry of time and space. Now the figure watched her during the daytime hours while she struggled calmly to herself in the field of hopeless cotton harvesters. He loved to witness her daily battle with the gnarly plants, her hands fumbling with their course skulls as she scraped the white material from their stiff brown insides. He would smile as her muscles shook with the weight of the heavy stuffed bag, and chuckle when the baby wailed so loud as to make the other workers avoid her like the plague.

In all his years of work, the creature that lived as Esther's shadow had never encountered another human being so captivating. Now he longed for the day when he would plunge his hands into Esther's cold and lifeless body, searching through every curve and crevice with his fingers until he found and extracted her newly expired soul, only to carry it like a child in his arms back to the great Scale to be presented and weighed in front of the wise Maker. He planned to remember just how heavy her heart turned out to be. Then, with jealous hands, he would turn her passionate soul

over to the Maker for the final judgement, and witness him let her loose into the colorless abyss, either to go up to paradise or down into oblivious inferno.

Death shook with the thought of watching Esther's soul go flying.

Only two weeks passed before Luna took a turn for the worst. Esther could sense it in her child's eyes, for Luna's almost menacing look of desire had vanished completely. Her fingers didn't grasp at Esther's cheeks and ears, and she no longer took to her typical bouncing laughter and giddy dancing. Any ounce of time Esther had been saving for herself she now spent with raw commitment beside her dying child. She was wrought with grief over Luna, still haunted by the man she had so foolishly let go. "If Jack were here," she whispered to the sleeping baby, "None of this would hurt so much." That was the truth, of course, and Esther knew all too well that Jack's departure had taught her misery in its truest form.

She tried to weigh the strength of her heart. If Luna were to die, Esther doubted that it would make out simply laced with cracks as it had for Jack. No. This time, Esther figured that her heart would crumble into unidentifiable dust, becoming as weightless as ash. She wondered if her own death would follow quickly in suite, or if it would rush over her gradually like the slow yet steady descent into a deep sleep. In the meantime, Esther did everything she could to ignore the looming presence of something alive, something all too ghostly that seemed of late to be always so near, always waiting for the right moment to advance upon her. Yet the worse her daughter became, the more intensely Esther became aware that it was Death himself who had taken a terrifying interest in her precious Luna.

Then one day, when the sun seemed dipped in blood as it sank into the heart of Salinas Valley, Esther sensed the first tender strings of life being pulled stealthily from Luna's body. She stiffened, heart pounding with screeching fear. She could nearly see him, standing still and graceful

before her, tugging on the strings with perfect precision. Esther could bear it no more. “Stop!” she cried, “Stop you evil wretch!” Only then did she break into uncontained sobs, her heart melting with the shock of Death’s scorching closeness.

When Esther screamed, Death almost dropped the delicate bundle that he was clutching so carefully inside of Luna’s chest. Had she known of him all along? Death wanted to step back, for he felt the anger of Esther’s dark eyes piercing inside of him. He knew what she would ask even before she opened her mouth to speak.

“Can’t you take mine instead?” she begged, pressing her salty wet lips against Luna’s forehead. Death thought for an endless moment, ideas and fantasies swirling in his mind like drops of paint in a jar of clear water. If he agreed, he would undoubtedly be breaking the rules of the universe, dangerously ignoring the formalities set in stone by the Maker himself. For human souls were each prescribed with delicately chosen times, and Luna’s was flooding upon him this very instant. Yet despite his responsibility, Death could not resist his boiling urge to take up Esther’s drastic offer. For if he gave her what she wanted, she would become his, his until the day he had drained every last bit of life from her body. How could he let this wonderfulness slip through his fingers?

“Do you truly wish to sell yourself to me?” Death asked, hardly suppressing his excitement. He believed she had no option but to agree. “Take me.” Esther whispered, tightly shutting her eyes to refuse him the satisfaction of seeing her tears. And take her he did. After gently letting Luna’s tiny heart slip back into its perfect place, Death stepped closer than ever towards Esther’s hopeless and quivering form. When he could feel her shaking breath against his chest, he lay one hand over her pulsing heart, and finalized the deed by twisting with all his might. A silent scream burst from the young woman’s mouth, and Death blinked with satisfaction as liquid the color of life seeped out

towards his palm, quickly turning dark the second it touched his fingertips. Esther's soul was officially his.

Living as Death's slave was everything it should have amounted to. It was also unlike anything Esther had ever known. She grew to believe that she had lost a single sense completely. Gone from her grasp were the tendrils of movement and life spilling up from every living thing. Vanished was the peaceful light from the grey-blue moon; and the tingling heat from the sun when it was highest in the sky was a mere memory. Esther was hit with indescribable heartache. How could she move on after losing sight of the sunsets made of her mother's rosy cheeks, since she could not hear the conversations between the river and the rocks? Her heartbeat had surely disappeared, yet she could still feel half-frozen blood moving slowly through her veins. What frightened Esther the most was a new and uncomfortable presence, a raw power derived from that gaping hole in her chest. This unwanted feeling triumphed over her as if it were a stranger dead set upon destroying her sanity. But surely Luna was safe and sound, and Esther breathed a promise to her daughter that she would find a way to be all-right. She would force herself to at least pretend to be alive if Luna was to last any longer in this cold-hearted world.

When the cotton fields were finally scraped to the bone, emptied, down to every last flake of fluffy whiteness, the migrants embarked upon yet another search for work and wages. Esther considered herself fortunate when she found a meager job picking oranges in the orchards. The work became her distraction, a dream world in which all that mattered was how many oranges she spotted under the golden California sun. Luna strapped tightly to her back, her shredded red dress tied just above her knees, Esther would spend her days tromping through the secret place which was her work. She liked to pretend that it was paradise, to imagine that she could still hear the birds and the bugs laughing with each other, that she could even smell the citrus sprinkled throughout the air.

In the evenings, weary with empty exhaustion, Esther would take the five cents she had dutifully earned that day back to the general store to buy bread and milk. Then, clutching her crying child, she would listen to her weak uneven footsteps as she hiked up the quiet highway and back to her tent. She always ate the food with uncontained hunger, saving for her daughter all of the lukewarm milk provided by the small disposable carton.

There was something else about Death's enslavement that bothered Esther more than she would have anticipated. Her captor was leaving a trail of changes upon her physical body; for her appearance was fading like the wilting leaves of a flower. First, she saw that her hands had become so thin they looked about to break, and soon found that the striking dark color had been squeezed entirely from her eyes. Then, Esther was struck by the discovery that her own touch set off in living things an early descent into death, for even the slightest brush of a finger shriveled up innocent things and crumbled them into indistinguishable particles. Equipped with what was certainly the worst of powers, Esther fell into the shadows of her work, disappearing like a lonely ghost in the midst of the other orchard workers. In a struggling attempt to save her oranges, she used pieces of food wrapping as binding around her catastrophic hands. Esther could not hide her predicament from the other Hooverville families though, and she was shunned as a witch by her own neighbors. "We knew something was wrong with that woman all along!" they began to murmur, each day inching farther away from her innocent tent like a pack of nervous animals. Esther could only cradle her child for comfort, for Luna had never been afraid of her.

On one occasion, while Luna lay in peaceful slumber, Esther found herself being forced to listen to things she wished with all her might to unhear. Sounds of utter anarchy and discord seeped into her waking dreams. For a moment she felt like she was falling, a sense that she was plummeting down, down into an endless pit that only grew darker as the depth increased. This is true oblivion, she thought, this is the infinite and uncaring vehicle of time itself.

As Esther lay captive to this freakish nightmare, only half asleep in the company of her slumbering child, a pair of foolish jokers lit the air around her with their reckless games. It was Chaos and Time who accompanied Death for this friendly visit. They were grinning wide, their excitement bubbling on the brink of uncontrollable laughter. Immediately after spotting the grief-stricken human being, Chaos had launched into taunting Esther with his slithering insults. Then, as if not to miss out on the fun of it, Time had taken up his drum to sing her a tune of his own, a spell of lovely sadness. Now Death watched as his comrades joked and played with the young woman like little children. For some reason, he found he could not take part in the foolish and immature antics he normally would have embraced.

The trio's makeshift party came to an abrupt end when a shimmering green figure the color of rotting fruit appeared at Death's side. Chaos and Time turned around hastily and stared glaringly up at the hooded man. This figure was Deceit, a dreadful soul whose awful actions had doomed him into exile at the beginning of time. Now he had proven himself a master at the art of crafting portals, using his devious powers to regularly sneak in and out of the kinks and crannies of the world. As he advanced upon the others, Deceit kept the fire of lust in his eyes directed acutely at Esther. The four glanced around with tense unease, each secretly readying himself for whatever was about to happen. Then, in the next split second, Deceit's shimmering image seemed to turn itself inside out, and the hooded man was suddenly replaced by a sun-tanned farm boy, damp with sweat as if he had been out working the fields. "Are you mad?" Time asked the exiled troublemaker, looking up at the changed figure with a mixture of fear and admiration. "The Maker will surely find out about any human you dabble with." Deceit turned slowly towards his former comrade, and simply replied, "She does not belong to the Maker anymore. She belongs to Death."

Deceit never once took his intense eyes off Esther's restless form, and his presence pushed past the others like a giant. When he stepped closer to her, she immediately tensed and opened her eyes, which were stained red with permanent tears. Then she gasped for air as if breathing had betrayed her, and touched her cheeks and mouth as if she were testing reality. "Jack?" she finally whispered, letting sobs of laughter escape her lungs, her eyes full and open with joy. "Oh Esther," Deceit said to her, already advancing close enough to wrap his arms around her neck. Then the man crouched down beside her, reaching out to touch her dress.

Death could bear this no longer. Something was burning in his chest, a distant feeling he faintly recalled noticing in ages past. He could not ignore the clear jealousy in his mind directed at Deceit. Yet strangely, it was not pure envy that prodded him to yank the vile creature up from the ground the second he put his fingers into Esther's dress, to strike him with three of his brutalist blows, and to let something along the lines of rage overcome him. Then, it expended from him an uncommon amount of restraint to contain his clenched fists, to watch his thwarted opponent limp slowly through his pitiful portal and down into void and soundless banishment. Death was immediately overcome with thought. He had tried too hard for some time to stifle out this roaring flame inside of him, and it was high time he let it burn. Is this love? he wondered with disgust. Deep down, the burning sensation sputtered and spat, expanding fully with air and movement. Then, slowly but surely, it took up a staggering beat, like a drum that stomped a tune in his chest. Death shook all over with fear, for who in their right mind would believe that he of all beings could be infested with a heart?

Death watched as Esther clung to Luna with wide, protective eyes, looking up at him with angry exhaustion. He couldn't imagine what she thought of him, not now when he had wrenched her long-lost lover away from her grasping fingertips. "He wasn't real!" he wanted to scream to her, "You don't know what he would have done with you!" Yet even as he thought this, Death squirmed

inside with sickening guilt. It was he who had hurt her first, he who had torn away her beautiful blooming life, and now it was he who owned her as prisoner.

Angry men came one night with shouts of terror and rage, they were shaking their fists at God and all of his ironic creativity. “What’s wrong?” asked husbands and wives as they emerged from their makeshift shelters. “There’s a fire on its way, and a damn big one too,” replied a man who was calm enough to explain. Then the mob of ruined men moved onwards, on in the direction of the next poverty- stricken camp. Esther watched as the circle of tents erupted in movement. Women gathered their children close, lining them tightly up like frantic mother ducks. The men let their tents collapse into a mess on the ground as they rushed to pack up their miserable family belongings. Esther could only reach out to where Luna lay crying beside her with upset sobs. She picked the baby up, cradled her in her arms, and staggered to her feet in an attempt to run away. All she could do was walk slowly up the hill, unable to muster another ounce of speed. Soon she listened to shuffling shoes as the other migrants caught up to her, then watched as they sped, uncaring as ants, past her and her child.

The runners could smell the fire by now, it’s scorching heat being flung in waves through their ranks. Esther was at the back of the thundering herd, the fire casting a mystical red hue on her face. It roared like a rabid lion behind her. Suddenly, she looked down at Luna with pure terror written in her eyes, for her dilemma had become all too obvious. Esther’s own life was worthless, this was apparent. But Luna, her beautiful, strong-willed child, oh how she must live! Esther reached inside of her weak body and gathered every ounce of her remaining energy to expel into the air in a loud, determined cry. At first her shouts were lost in the crescendo of flames. Only then she started to scream, numbly, grasping at the arms of the few stragglers closest to her. “Take my child! Someone please save her!” Esther held Luna with outstretched arms, her eyes tightly shut to ward

off the precipitating fire. Then, to her greatest relief, she felt Luna being snatched resolutely from her grasp. She opened her eyes for a split second to see the bouncing head of her child atop the shoulder of a fleeing middle-aged woman. Then her knees buckled, and she sank like a stone into hot soil.

The racing migrants shrank in horror when they spotted a tall figure clad in darkness plummeting through their ranks. Death was actually clothed in fear. His newfound heart was strumming a frantic tune in his veins, his eyes were searching desperately for the fallen young woman. Where was she? Death had seen her drop, and had felt his soul sink along with her into the earth. Just then, when his feet almost tripped over a heap of crumpled red fabric, his heart promised to tear apart with both love and sadness. Death scooped the precious bundle that was Esther up into his arms and took long easy strides away from the hungry fire, letting the tiny weight of her skeletal body sink deep into his shoulders. He heard her shriek in her half unconscious state as he wrapped her underneath his cloak of darkness. He felt her scarce breath against his bones as he carried her up and away. Yet Esther's body was ever still, lifeless like the expired souls he brought out during his regular rounds. Her time was seconds away. This he knew because he felt the tingling urge in his fingertips to uncover her heart from somewhere underneath her breast, to extract it from its fragile chamber and carry it away. It was a duty he was so accustomed to. Yet, something was drastically different. For Death understood now that no will of his own could force him to follow through with such a task upon Esther's soul. Hers was too beautiful.

The fire finished surrounding the straggling ranks of retreating migrants, and Death sensed Time's ceaseless clock ticking in his ears, counting down the seconds as if to say, This is it. He could no longer feel Esther's scarce breath, for she was suffocating gradually in the heat of the toxic smoke. Death stopped running then, and knelt on the hot coals that were smothering the grass.

Next, as gently as he could, he held firmly onto the dying woman with his hands in place to compress her ribs. It was with a strong, spilling desperation that he placed his mouth to her lips and breathed. Death breathed until his air ran out, he breathed until his chest seared with pain. Then he inhaled the coarse, burning air and did it again, and again, and again. She only sank deeper into his shaking arms.

Death had never before kissed a single soul in all his time, and the thought of this presumed shortcoming had never crossed his mind. But when his lips pressed madly upon Esther's tender mouth, he felt more strikingly human than should have been possible. And while this brief instance was not even a true kiss, Death was immediately shy, overcome with rare embarrassment. For buried underneath his wistful desperation, Death had always known that he could never be a true giver life. He had only pretended that sending Esther oxygen held a chance at reviving her. Yet still he had breathed into her, maybe merely for the sake of trying, maybe only to feel her lips just once against his.

Again, the ever-present thought of his own role in Esther's demise struck him with pounding potency. Oh, how he gagged on the memory of his own disgusting robbery of her vibrant soul. Death looked down intensely at the woman he had so recklessly enslaved. No more than weeks ago, she had sold her soul on behalf of her newborn daughter, and smuggled ripe oranges for a beggar child. Yet today, at this awful moment, no one was present to restore her sacrificial deed. She was no one's greatest treasure and care, not even the child's she had willingly given her life for. Death felt so much sadness that his own heart was hurting, the sting of it pressing upon his chest. Then the pain was reaching everywhere, unraveling in strands throughout his bones, all the while begging for some timely action. Death knew what he was to do. He understood without a doubt the idea that had suddenly sprung upon him along with scarce, unbridled hope. Trembling, he placed his burning fingers against his own chest.

If extracting the hearts of dying people had been a painful task for his hands, ripping his soul out from its blooming infrastructure was excruciating for his entire person. Death opened up his mouth as if to roar in pain, but no sound came out. His hand seized in fear as it betrayed the rest of his pulsing body while it screamed for him to stop. Madness seeped in through the giant hole he had made in his chest and tempted him to end this hopeless fling. Yet an invisible force had taken his side, and it was pushing his hand forward and in through Esther's skin, towards the place where her blackened and deflated heart hung empty in its chamber. Death dropped the priceless, ever-beating bundle of life into her chest, and exhaled in exhausted wonder. She lay ablaze with light in his crumbling arms.

Esther awoke to the charged humming of the burnt morning air. She could feel injured life beneath her sweating limbs, its movement spreading through her stiff skin. She allowed herself to rise and fall along with the tired breathing of the hills as they inhaled the quiet blue sky. When she finally opened her eyes, Esther saw that ash the color of snow covered everything she could see. It enveloped all but a small pile of jet blackness. For a time, she couldn't remember who she was, or what in the world she was doing here. Then, all of a sudden, memories rushed back to her like faltering sentences. There had been a fire that roared like a beast, shouts so angry they could have killed. Then fear the color of red hot flames had stunned her heart. Next, she remembered arms, great long arms that had taken her baby away. She had also sensed darkness, such an endless shadow that could have engulfed all eternity, and someone's face so close that she had tasted his skin.

Perhaps she felt his presence now, his hands still gently plucking at the strings of her heart. She shivered at that strange thought, and carefully picked herself up to stand. Esther would walk for miles and miles until the glistening whiteness bloomed back into color.

Three days later, two obscure figures stood knee deep in a pile of ashes, their arms madly digging through the debris. “How could this happen?” they cried in echoing whispers, “What must we tell them?” Finally, once their colorful hoods were fully doused in the white residue from the fire, Chaos and Time felt with exhausted fingers the fading form of their ghostly friend. The two retreated upwards with frozen fear, only to dive immediately back in again, down into the frosty sea of ash to pull this blackened shadow out of the dust. They looked at each other, speechless, when all that came up in their hands was one thick fireproof cloak, filled completely with emptiness.