

Three Shapes of Memory - Finn

CW: grief, mourning a parent, holiday-related loss, emotional distress, ritualized remembrance, non-graphic references to violence and crime.

The city dressed itself up like it always did, as if brightness covered up a body. Paper stars hung in shop windows. Strands of light blinked along lampposts, illuminating the fog. Bells rang on every street corner, trying to make cheer out of cold brass and frozen skin. Snow fell softly and turned the street into a postcard no one wanted to live in.

I walked a few steps behind Thorn and Rose. They needed space. They moved like reflections of each other. They stepped in sync. Their coat collars turned up to block the wind chill. Only, Rose looked up. At the lights. At the windows. At the way the city tried to cover the darkness. Thorn kept his head toward the ground.

"Just a little light," Rose nudged Thorn with her shoulder. "We don't need a tree. Just something small. It's still Christmas."

"It isn't anything. Not this year." Thorn's voice was quiet. Snow caught in Rose's hair like stars in the night sky.

"It can be. For us." Rose stopped walking. Turned toward him and gestured back at me. That did it. Thorn's jaw tightened as he stopped.

"I don't want to pretend, Rose. Christmas was for time with Ma. She's not here to make it Christmas." Thorn's voice was steady so as not to make a scene.

"Her body may be in the ground, but her energy isn't missing. It's just a different shape," Rose's voice softened. "That's why I want light. To remind us that there is something that can cut through the dark." She grabbed Thorn's hand.

"What do we do when the light fades? Everything will go black again." Thorn asked plainly.

"We're already in the dark. Ma's death left us in the shadows. Don't you want something to illuminate it, even just for a small time?" She pressed her forehead against Thorn's. For a moment, everything stilled.

"Do what you must," Thorn whispered enough that I could barely hear him. "All I want is not to dress up grief like everyone else."

They turned in silence and continued down the street. When we reached the front door to the apothecary house, Rose immediately opened the curtains and pulled out strands of electric lamps. Thorn pushed past her without a word. He slipped behind the door to his room. Only, he left the door unlocked. His signal that I was welcomed in his world.

I tapped the door once before I entered the room. Not seeking permission - but some thresholds deserve respect. The room smelled of cold wool and dust with a faint trace of ash from whatever he burns when he's alone. He sat legs folded on the floor in the corner by a bowl of water, a bone-handled knife, and a flickering candle. The shadows were sharp, cutting deep across his profile.

"Light lies, Finn." He started the conversation. "I keep her where the dark holds her. The bone that can't break. The roots of trees that weave into the earth like veins pulsing life into the dying city. I can't put her into words. If I speak her name, she becomes a shape I can lose. Something that can be gripped and torn open. I keep her everywhere by keeping her nowhere." I moved closer, slow, as someone does with a wounded predator. I knelt behind him, enough distance between us for silence to breathe.

"There's nothing wrong with leaving her where she can't take shape. You learned how to survive in the shadows. Like you, she can stay there where no one but you can find her." I had more to say, but I kept it short. Thorn responded better when there was little conversation after he started talking.

"I can't do what Rose does. I can't let the light in." Thorn turned around and moved to me. Close enough for me to feel his breath. "Light never gave me anything; it always faded into the dark. It showed me nothing except what could be stolen. Ma was the light of the world. Now she's gone.

I'm honoring the dark because it never gave me anything but the truth. Light lies, Finn. If I let it lie to me again, I won't survive." That's when he breaks. The kind of collapse that happens when someone's hands give after holding up a wall for too long.

He folded into me. Forehead against my shoulder. His breath tore out of him in short pulls. I wrapped my arms around him and held on. I knew how to contain a storm. He shook, then calmed, then shook more.

"Some nights you are going to feel fear. Others, you will feel loyalty. Both are you." I tightened my grip. When he eased, he didn't pull away. Not immediately.

"We can't do this for too long. Rose will be suspicious," Thorn warned as he stood up and shook away the pain and the quiet moment like he always did. That's all he had.

"I'll leave you alone for a while. I should help Rose with dinner and the room." I stood and left the room. The door lock clicked behind me. Thorn was holding the darkness of his world alone now.

The main room was sharp with citrus, sap, and spice. Their scents cut through the dense coal dust and damp oak. I found Rose at the table. She had shed her coat. Just a dark dress clinging close, sleeves rolled, as if she planned to work until her hands gave out. Lamplight caught her hair and the bare line of her arm. Making her appear warmer than the room. Citrus wheels spread across the table. Orange and lemon slices dried thin. Twine. Pine sprigs. A small tin of cinnamon, she must have lifted from a store shelf in town. She threaded pieces together with precision. Building light out of whatever winter hadn't taken yet.

"You don't waste time," I rolled my sleeves up and stepped beside her.

"Don't want to give Thorn time to change his mind about them." She didn't look up and continued knotting pine into the twine and weaving it through the sliced citrus. "He's all right, though?"

"He's dealing with the holiday in the way he knows how. There was no protocol for the first major holiday." I picked up a length of twine and knotted it around a pine sprig. She stopped, set her twine garland down, and turned to me.

"I miss her, too, Finn. I'm not pretending or putting on a mask. I'm carrying her in the light. Gold. Flame. These citrus wheels. Anything that still dares to shine in this pitch black world." Her hands shook just enough to notice.

I didn't interrupt. Some grief needs witnessing, not answers.

"Ma taught me how to smile for nothing." Rose pulled down her sleeves and wiped a tear from her eye. "She kept moving, as if the day might justify itself. I mean, I know she had other reasons to live now, but the joy was still there. Before she started bringing me to the city, I wanted to run. We walked through these streets, and she taught me that joy didn't need a reason to shine. Now that light feels snuffed out. That's why I want to light this year. Not to pretend but to remind myself that something can still spark something." She swallowed and picked up another stand of twine and laced it through a lemon slice.

"It's okay to miss her, Rose. You and Thorn, much like your skill set, are two sides of the same wound. He keeps her in the shadows, and you find her in the light that she taught you to love." I laid my completed garland on the table and placed my hand on her shoulder.

We stayed silent while Rose finished her stand and set it on the table instead of hanging it. Unhung. Waiting.

"You should get some rest, Finn. You didn't get any sleep during last night's surveillance." Her voice steadied just like her mother's used to when I was young.

"Harllow was too quiet. That isn't his pattern. Men like him don't usually stop unless they're repairing damages." I watched Rose's eyes scan me as if she were looking for worry. After a moment, I nodded once and left Rose at the table. "I'll see you at dinner."

I closed the door to my chamber and clicked the lock shut. Clean. Scent of dried herbs and old paper, with the ink still drying. The safest place I know.

I laid everything out on the ground like I was inventorying evidence:

My dad's scarf, not really his, not blood. Just the man who raised me when my mother was across the river.

Rosemary for memory.

Juniper and salt for protection.

Bread and honey for the living.

Water for reflection.

Last, I set down the one thing the twins have yet to see. A small silver key. The only thing she left me. Pressed into my hands before I could understand the price of secrecy. The proof I belonged to her before she gave me to a family in the Black Veil.

I kept it wrapped in fabric all these years. Afraid to breathe on it. Scared it might remember more than I was allowed to.

I didn't light the usual candle. Flame would have felt like I was calling on something I had no right to. I sat on the floor and let the quiet settle around me.

I looked into the bowl of still water and let myself sink. The air thinned. Sounds dulled, and my breath slowed until it felt like there was someone else living in my chest.

Thorn and Rose mourned Adelane as the woman who raised them. I mourned her as the woman whom I only saw once a week.

Our relationship was professional. That was the word she used. Professional. Clean. Safe. It created an uncrossable line.

Two hours a week with me. She taught me how to steady my breath. The writing style I should use for files and rituals. How to mix herbs that ground panic and quiet grief. How to stitch up knife wounds without leaving scars.

Sometimes, when she thought I wasn't looking, I caught her eyes soften. Not enough for an untrained eye to see, but enough for me. Blood recognizes itself even in small doses.

I picked up the key and held it in my palm. Cold. Heavy. Real. Something solid from her. A door I had yet to unlock.

I rested my hands on the floor and let the trance fade. Slower than fog rising from a river. When my own breath filled my lungs again, I stayed.

Holding the grief that didn't have a name. Grasping for a woman I was never allowed to claim. Keeping the truth that fits only inside silence.

Outside of the room, I was their keeper. Their balance. The grey area between their black and white. In here, I was just someone who was given a key by his mother and never told its secret.

Once the room welcomed me back into it, I put my objects away and moved slowly to the narrow wardrobe in the back corner. The hinges sighed when I opened the door. Inside, everything hung in order. Dark to light. Heavy to thin. I kept clothes like my records. Not careless. Not loud. Practical. I grabbed a dark shirt, not ritual black but the illusion of mourning. Next, I took a plain charcoal waistcoat from the shelf. Buttoned close and cleaned. Held me together when I didn't feel like I was. Kept my dark-pressed trousers and shined boots tied firmly. A charcoal-brown scarf wrapped around my throat once for warmth. Last, I slipped the silver key under my vest above my heart. Then, I closed the wardrobe and went to join the twins.

When I came back, Rose had hung lights, framing the window and lit two lamps, barely enough light to carve the dark into shapes we all could live with. The room smelled of citrus and pine, but the warmth didn't reach far. Outside, snow fell, covering the world in an icy powder.

Thorn stood next to his chair, his hands bracing the table. Almost unrecognizable. Dark vest pressed sharp enough to hold a crease like a blade. Carefully brushed, every line in its place. White shirt buttoned higher than he ever wore it, as if he'd tried to pass it as formal wear. Only the middle button of the vest was clasped together. The jacket hung on the back of his chair. Neat, straight trousers. Clean boots. Not polished, clean. At his side, half hidden under his vest,

like usual, was the dagger his mother left for him. Bone-handled and wrapped with no explanation.

He looked like a man who dressed for a funeral, then stopped halfway through.

Rose was in the kitchen, back turned, moving between the counter and the stove. Her sleeves from earlier gone.

Her blood-red dress clung to her frame, dark and rich in the low light. The dark color that swallowed shadows instead of fighting against them. Gold flickered at her ears, throat, and wrist. Modest chains, nothing to draw too much attention. On her right wrist sat the one thing she never took off. The bone bracelet Adelane left for Rose to find when she could understand its weight. Pale against her skin, catching the light like it still remembered hands that no longer wore it.

"Sit," Rose said with authority. I hadn't heard from her in a while. She looked at me, then at Thorn, and gestured to the table. "Both of you."

The stove had a single pot, steam lifting slowly. Thin potato and onion soup. A meal meant to keep us going, not to celebrate. The smell of it drifted through the room, dancing warmly with the citrus and pine from the window frames.

I took my place while she ladled soup into chipped bowls. Thorn stayed standing, eyes fixed on the far end. The empty chair had been pulled back enough for a fourth person.

"It's for her." Rose followed Thorn's gaze quietly. "She'll have a space with us."

"Space is dangerous, Rose." Thorn didn't look away. His grip on the table loosened as he sat down.

"So is forgetting."

"Next year, you should light a candle in front of it. Let her light up the table again." Thorn turned his head to look at Rose. A tear rolled down her cheek and under her chin. She didn't wipe it away, just let it trail down until it disappeared.

No argument from either of them. A quiet truce.

Rose placed the three steaming bowls on the table and paused.

"Before we eat," she slipped the bracelet from her wrist. For a silent second, she held it in both hands as if it would break. She then placed it on the table in front of the empty chair. "So she knows we remember her."

Thorn stood. Without a word, he drew his dagger and held it by the polished bone handle. He took a step forward and set it beside the bracelet. Handle facing the chair like he was offering it.

"For what stays hidden from the world's sight." He returned to his seat and sat down. Rose looked at me. I felt her calculated gaze fixed on my eyes. My chest tightened as I reached under my vest and drew out the key that I had tucked away moments earlier. It glared in the light.

Rose's breath hitched. Thorn's eyes sharpened and became dark. I crossed the room and placed it between the dagger and the bracelet. Bone. Silver. Bone. Three shapes of memory. Three ways she loved us.

Three preparations.

The room stilled. Not even the flames in the lamps flickered. The twins shared a glance. I made my way back to my seat and sat silently.

Thorn's gaze followed me and lingered longer than Rose's.

"You've been hiding thi..."

"We all do," I cut him off with certainty. "We will all discuss it after..."

Then three sharp rings from a bell outside the open window stopped me mid-sentence. Our heads snapped to see Aven standing outside with a newspaper. Aven only interrupted us when there was something important. He followed the protocol. Three rings. One for each of us.

Aven dropped the newspaper through the window and left without a word. I moved to pick it up when the bold headline caught my eye.

CITY ATTORNEY HELD IN DOCKSIDE MURDER; WHISPERS OF BRIGID.

"That is why silence can't last in this city," I said, and handed the paper to Thorn. Adelane always talked about thresholds. I never heard the word ending. And in this city, the bell always ends the ritual first.