

Stone Cold

The number of cameras outside the apartment dwindles with every passing day until finally, I'm able to take a step outside without being set upon by thousands of flashing bulbs. I haven't looked at a newspaper in 246 days. I haven't used the phone in six weeks. I've become invisible.

Maybe it's better this way.

I know what they're calling me. A siren. A seductress. A gorgon.

The last time I left the apartment was 78 days ago. I'd done everything right – worn black, covered my face. Still, they found me.

After that, I stayed inside. I know the story he'll be spinning.

He'll say I manipulated him, that I stole him away from his wife with false promises and perfumed lies. He'll tell them that he hated it, hated me. And they'll believe him.

I take a deep breath. In, then out. My hands curl around the railing of the balcony, long nails making a sharp sound as they collide with the metal. They used to be beautiful. Now they're gnarled and curved, unkempt and destroyed from too many coats of nail polish and too much time spent tapping them against tabletops while a tightening net of anxiety worms its way around my thoughts.

With shaking fingers, I raise the scissors and begin to cut. Flakes of nail crumble beneath them and fall into the darkness, down and down and down and down. The noise of the city feels muffled, as though I'm sinking, further and further into the depths of the ocean.

I cringe.

I don't think about the sea anymore.

With another, shuddering breath, I head back inside, pulling the sliding door shut behind me. Over the months, I've ritualistically smashed every mirror in the apartment but now, I go and hunt because there's work to be done.

Eventually, I find one. It's an old, handheld thing, with a blemished façade that slightly distorts my reflection. I think I like it.

I pick up a hairbrush from the countertop and methodically begin to brush. At first it is difficult – my previously sleek raven hair has become matted and tangled by weeks of apathy and dragging the brush through it proves to be a challenge.

Clumps of hair gather in the basin beneath me, and I collect them in a reverent manner, pressing them into the bin with the respect of a grieving mother. Then, I look in the mirror.

The face that stares back at me is not my own. My face is sharply defined, with high cheekbones and full lips the colour of blood. This face is tired.

I look gaunt and haggard, like the last few months have shaved decades off my life. Eyes that once sparkled are red-rimmed, puffy from too many nights of sobbing like my heart was going to crack in two.

With detached motions, I splash cold water onto my face, blinking slightly in shock and begin to lay out my makeup. I haven't touched these bottles in what feels like a lifetime. Once, they represented excitement, the prospect of something illicit. Now, they just feel like a reminder of everything that came before.

Everything on this table reminds me of him.

It takes me an hour before I can bring myself to take a proper look in the mirror again. Am I capable of facing the world again?

The doorbell rings.

I flinch. I'm surprised it still works.

My legs carry me to the door over a bed of brittle shells, but I'm floating, high above my body, watching the scene below me play out like it's a movie and not the life I've subjected myself to. I watch my hand reach for the doorhandle but don't feel it connect until the door is swinging open and suddenly there's a person there, a bundle of wires in his hand and a microphone sticking out from the rucksack he's got slung over his left shoulder.

He looks too young to be here in my monochromatic home, with his dusty blonde hair and his sea-green shirt.

With a wrenching feeling, I am torn from the sky and forced back into my body to look this man in the eye.

Normal. That's what he needs to see. I'm normal.

I extend a hand, "Meredith."

The boy grins back at me and shakes my hand. His grip is stronger than mine. "I'm Percy, I work for The Kereek newspaper."

"I know," I smile, trying not to let my discomfort show on my face. Another person hasn't set foot in this apartment for 292 days.

Percy is still staring at me expectantly and after a few seconds of awkward silence, I realise he's waiting for me to let him in. I step aside hastily with a sheepish huff of a laugh, "Sorry, please make yourself at home."

He grins and makes his way inside, swinging the rucksack off his shoulder, "I'll just set up by the sofa if that's alright. Can I have a plug socket for the microphone?"

Wordlessly, I gesture to the wall where a socket is set into the plaster, "Excuse me for a second."

Before he can respond, I've half-sprinted across the apartment and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. My breathing is increasing in pace at an alarming rate, and I have to take a second to remind myself of exactly who I'm doing this for.

I'm doing this for me. For myself and my career. Not for him.

Serena assured me this is going to be a short interview. He's going to ask about my plans going forwards – am I going to make any more films, do I have anything planned for the future. Nothing too difficult. Nothing that could break me again.

It's going to be fine.

Taking another, shuddering breath, I open the bathroom door and head back to the living room, my shoes scuffing slightly on the wooden floor. Tentatively, I lower myself onto the sofa across from Percy and smile at him like I didn't just breakdown in the bathroom.

"Are you ready to get started?" he asks, his bright eyes shining with warmth.

Something about him manages to put me at ease and I smile slightly, a real one this time, "Go ahead."

He reaches behind him and flicks a switch. There's a small, high-pitched noise and then, the microphone seems to be working. Giving me yet another reassuring smile, he asks, "So, how have you been doing the last few months?"

I take a split seconds to format my answer before speaking into the microphone he holds out to me, "I've been coping alright. After all, it's not every day there are thousands of people camped outside of your apartment building, shouting your name."

He laughs. That's good.

"Can we expect anything in the works for you in the next year?"

I give him a secretive smile, just like I would for the cameras, "Well I can't say anything yet but I'm constantly on the lookout for new opportunities."

That's a bold-faced lie. No production company will touch me with a ten-foot-pole after the last year.

He smiles again and carries on in the same vein, inane questions about what I've been eating, whether I'm enjoying my new apartment and a rather strange one about whether I prefer wasabi or beetroots but then, he finally reaches the climax of the interview and it's right at that moment that I know I've made a terrible mistake.

This boy, this golden-haired, deceptively charming boy, has the nerve to look me dead in the eyes and ask me, "Do you think he ever loved you?"

It's like he's held a deadly mirror up to my face. I freeze in my seat, my body turning to stone.

In a deep, slow voice, I say, "Get out."

He tries to protest, to retrace his steps and profess that it was never his intention to offend me but it's too late. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I shoot to my feet and repeat the words, "Get out," but this time they're a scream.

So he leaves, chased out by my fiercely cold eyes and frigid heart. He takes with him his microphone and his cables and all the evidence of my brokenness that, by tomorrow morning, will be plastered across the front page of every newspaper in the city.

And just like that, I'm the villain again. The highly-strung, volatile madwoman, chasing away a heroic reporter who was just trying to do his job.

I'll be a pariah, a devil. My words will be twisted, my life made to seem foolish. They'll use the pictures again, the ones from the beginning of my disgrace. He'll make millions.

He'll become the hero who exposed Meredith Gorgo in all her madness and I will fade away until all that's left of me is a blurry image of a stone-cold temptress that people will look at and see a person who maybe, was beautiful once.