

FALLING NIGHT

I remember once when I was five I was reading 'The Little Red Riding Hood' with my sister on my bed. My *favorite* sister, mind you. I was sick with the flu, and very cold and needy. Our family was never on the rich side of things, so I could never get the medicine I needed. That was how my father died.

Astryd had let me lay close to her so I could warm up. It was like a warm pillow, or laundry fresh out of the dryer. It was my safe-haven, just me and her.

"If you get too close to me, won't you get sick too?"

"No, Theo. Even if I do, I won't mind, as long as you get better."

I yawned, and rolled over so my stomach would settle. Astryd set the book down so she could tuck me in. As I closed my eyes, I felt her warm lips on my forehead. She sat on my bed until I was completely unconscious.

I opened my eyes. I was lying on a bed of dirt, surrounded by bare trees. The sky was grey and unforgiving, and a cold wind moved the branches like rattling bones. In front of me was a dark creature with a lopsided head with arms to match, no legs and piercing, dark eyes, hovering slightly, unmoved by the wind. It looked like a three-dimensional shadow, slowly moving towards me. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

I woke up to find Astryd on the ground in a puddle of vomit, barely breathing. I screamed for real.

NINE YEARS LATER

For nine years, I have had the same nightmare every single night. Eternal. Never-ending. The shadow thing reaches for me, almost touching me. It gets closer every year. Month. Week. Second, hunting me down night after night. Father is dead. Hunter is dead. *Astryd* is dead.

I keep thinking about the Night she got sick. She kissed me on the forehead, I remember, and all of my sickness went away. But that *can't* be right. There has to be some other explanation. My theory is she *transferred* the sickness to herself so that she would die instead of me. She said she wouldn't mind as long as I got better. She died for *me*. Or it's just all in my head. All in the head of some crazed fourteen-year-old who's had nightmares since they were five. Sometimes I wonder how I even think straight.

I'm still trying to figure out what the shadow creature is. Every night, as it gets closer to me, I try to catch a glimpse of it from my highly protective hands that cover my eyes the second I'm asleep. Nothing I can imagine fits its description. My mother says I scream all the time at night.

I worry her.

I only have one other sibling left. Cassie. The sister who has been mean to me ever since I poured sand in her hair. (I was *four*!) She locked me in the bathroom and turned off the lights (I was too short to reach them), pushed me down a lot, blamed me, punched me, kicked me, even stole and hid my favorite stuffed animal (the only thing that helped with the nightmares). I still can't find it to this day.

Life truly is miserable here. No education (my mother can't pay for it anymore), a sister that hates me, no father, no friends, the list goes on. If I had one wish, What would it be? No more nightmares? Astryd instead of Cassie? A better life?

Today I woke up to a completely unexpected sight.

Astryd.

Sitting on my bed the same way she sat the night she got sick.

"Astryd? Is that you?"

No answer.

She leaned forward. Her head *went through my body*. She was a ghost or something. I went through her shimmery body as I jumped up. There was a different boy in my bed. He was small.

He was me.

It was then I realized that this was some kind of playback of the Night. When she leaned over she was kissing my forehead.

Astryd stood up and walked toward me.

I was confused. "*This is just a playback, Theo,*" I told myself. "*She can't see you.*" She stopped right in front of me.

"Theo."

"*She can see me!*" my heart was pounding. This happened so long ago. She's dead.

I started to walk around her. Her eyes did not follow me. It was a *recording*.

"Theo, I have something very important to tell you. Please listen."

"I am, Astryd."

"I am a Witch."

What? Astryd, a Witch?

She continued. "I can tell the future. That's how I could tell where you're standing. I put a spell on this room to playback this message." she looked at five-year-old me worriedly. She became pale rapidly. "I have taken your burden as my own"-I was *right!*- "So I could save you. I will love you and miss you always no matter what." Astryd's voice shook. Her knees buckled underneath her and she fell to the ground, retching.

I closed my eyes.

I was running. The shadow creature was gaining on me. I tripped and fell, hoping I would go quickly, when all of a sudden it stopped.

Astryd was standing in front of me, holding what looked like a piece of the sun.

The creature shrieked and disintegrated, crumbling into nothingness.

The light was gone. Astryd turned around and smiled at me, her last words being: I love you.

I opened my eyes.

I have never had another nightmare again.

THE END