

to wake up in her warm bed and see the lush green earth outside her bedroom window.

Wading through the rising water, she trudged up the steps and reached the deck. She knew she shouldn't have been up there, but it was the only possible way for her words to survive and live on without her.

Her hair was wet with sweat and salt water. Her lips were cracked and stung with the water. She struggled forward.

Looking over the edge, she saw sweeping currents and knew she had to drop it. Her last memory of that night, and of him. It flashed in the moonlight, gleaming as it fell into the water and sank deep into the deep, black liquid. It was gone. Would it reach him?

THE BOOKSHOP

The shop smelled and sounded like good times, old times. People flicked through musty pages of books that had not yet been written. Echoes of laughing hard at a joke that didn't make sense and whispers of conversation—ancient gossip—flooded the empty hallways. The seats were outfitted with red velvet that hugged the sitter like an overly enthusiastic grandmother.

Shelves were lined with languages from before the dawning of civilization,

word

on

word

on

word.

In the early days, people rambled in slowly at first, then all at once. As the bookshop grew more popular, anyone who was ever someone passed through, combing through the shelves.

Now all that was left were the echoes and the ghosts of the happy people who had come before.

Before.

Before.

Before she had arrived and taken over.

The caretaker had a lizard-like complexion. Scaly hands slithered along the shelves, snaking their way through the books. Her hair was tied

up in a taut bun. Small wisps of hair that wanted to fly away tragically clung to her scalp with terror. She used to have a name, but no one could remember what it was.

Her hands were wrinkled like pinched fabric. She had the eyes of a reptile, bottle green with cat-like pupils that dilated when they were on the attack. Her skin was cracked like the hottest part of the Sahara desert.

Now people swapped snide comments between themselves, careful not to speak any louder than a soft brush of lips together. For if they were heard—and she heard everything—they would face her wrath.

Hush.

Hush.

Hush.

She ruled the store like a sergeant, making sure nothing was out of place. If a customer strolled in, she kept a cautious eye on him. It was as if she could hear the books complain if they were handled too much. If one page made even the smallest sigh of distress, she shoved the customer on his way, slamming the door behind him.

Still, she showed pride in her work. She cared for every volume, from the *Odyssey* to *Winnie the Pooh*, tucking them away with a gentle hand. Some said she had her own language with everything in the shop. Gossiping with the dusty shelves, whispering to the book spines.

Fewer and fewer people came. There was nothing worthwhile to do anymore. Ancient gossip was hushed; stories were sealed. Eventually everyone was shoved out of the shop... and the door was locked. The musty smell, the gentle flick of the pages— it was all hers.

She would comb through the spines, touching each one lightly, for the rest of time.