

DOGTOOTH

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“Eye of the Story” (2015-16)

I.

Eighteen years and counting on the island, but she still doesn't know why they call it Dogtooth.

The pack followed her father because he was strong. He had raised them from pups, taught them how to hunt. They were loyal because they wanted to be. But Oona suspected that one day, if her father had them at his back, they would place him on trial beneath their paws and under their jaws to see what his insides were like--if he was made of the proper stuff to lead them.

The dogs were impeccably trained but they weren't meant for children, something her father pointed out often. "The only thing they care about," her father had said, "is a quick pulse and how to stop it." That meant if you were shoving your tiny fingers up its muzzle, you needed to keep yourself calm or otherwise fake it.

She remembered as a child, peeling back the saliva coated lips on one of her father's hounds. Ever so careful as she did it. The mouth of the pack leader, Cano, was hot and sweating. He panted out wet rolls of breath that unfurled in her face and reeked like turned meat. Lifting up his cheek, she felt the long grooves of teeth. Yellowed and sharp. Cano was her father's oldest and quickest hound. He could sniff out a hare from a whiff on the breeze. She remembered peering into his opened jaws and pressing her pointer finger up into a canine until her nerves flared with pain.

Cano had been still and silent beneath her hands. It might be the duty of a man's dog to heed him. That included behaving while his master poked around in his mouth. But Oona had *felt* rather than noticed the hush that fell over the hound. She glanced up, saw the dog's eyes. Something in them made her flinch. But there wasn't enough time in between Cano's mute snarl and Oona's arm to pull back. It was teeth into skin. Blood came reluctantly to the surface of her fingers, collected on her limp hand and dribbled, like baby's drool, onto her shirt as she stared, horrified.

Watching the dog through a glaze of tears--for the nip had been harsh on a child's temper--Oona couldn't help but feel like the dog was pleased at being tested. An opportunity to demonstrate his place above her in her father's pack.

It would take many months before she got near Cano again, at least of her own free will. Either by some deference to Cano, or by some mutual understanding that

Oona was not worthy of their respect, the other hounds would not heed her. They sensed her trepidation as though she were a hare quivering in the underbrush.

That was where she lived: in the mouth of a dog. If you weren't fast enough, or smart enough, the island would bite down until you started leaking. This place was watered on the blood of its things.

II.

The wind bellows overhead, snagging itself in the treetops. Leaves clutch tight to their branches, but are spirited away like children ripped from their mother's skirts. They fall, browning and weightless to the earth.

A stag bends his long, elegant neck down to the forest floor. He snorts moist breath into the earth, nuzzling the decaying foliage with his snout. His ears twitch with the braying of wind through the trees, minding each crunch of the brush, but otherwise at ease. He wears his antlers like a crown. Light bends through the canopy and tangles in them, spins like thread into his coat, drawing out hues of red not seen since the summer months.

He easily has forty-five kilograms on her, yet the first thought in Oona's head is how *delicate* God has made him. When this beast is not rutting pure violence into his brothers, he looks almost fragile. His hooves graze the soil softly, reminding Oona of a woman's hands.

Shifting on her belly in the dirt, Oona studies the stag as she winks one eye down the barrel of her gun. *Beautiful*. The muscles in his chest inflate with the lungs beneath them, and Oona wonders if she were to press her hand there, whether it would feel like pressing down on a sheet that has been shaken up into the air.

The stag's nostrils flare to take in another gush of wind.

Without warning, his neck jerks up. Alarm courses through his muscled haunches. He quivers, preparing for flight.

The stag is about to take to the air when the first shot enters him.

He screams, back legs collapsing like twigs. Against the stag's will, he is forced down to the earth. He attempts to rise. But the hind leg Oona has marked shatters beneath him.

It is her father's daughter who dutifully pulls the forearm back, preparing the second shot that will finish this. But Oona hesitates a moment, if only to prepare herself for the consequence of her next action.

She takes the stag in the neck this time; a moan escaping, half-formed in his throat.

The death feels distant, the way his body slumps onto his side and goes still, settling into the forest floor like a sleeping thing. The trees cease their groaning, the birds hush their young, and the forest cocoons its fallen child in a shroud made of silence.

The barrel of the gun breathes smoke into the cold, and Oona tastes gunpowder in the back of her throat. She rises from the brush on distrustful knees and goes to meet the body.

Approaching the stag from behind, Oona's shoulders hunch around the buttstock and she keeps the angle low to the ground. Her finger drifts with uncertainty between the guard and the trigger.

"Until it's dead, keep 'er loaded," her father's voice counsels from behind.

Oona circles the stag, mindful of the antlers and hooves.

Easing the barrel of her gun forward, she nudges at the eyelid. When he does not reanimate with furious life, Oona's fear departs alongside her stoicism. Air abandons her in one fell swoop, like a hand has reached down her gullet and ladled it from her chest.

"Well done, child." Her father has come up behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. The shotgun falls from her fingers like a dead weight.

Lowered by a mimicry of penance, Oona bows upon her knees before the body.

"Have you prepared something?" Her father eases to his knees beside her, boots crunching in the frost.

It is custom to utter a prayer before dressing the animal down. Thanking the good graces of God, thanking the beast for its life unwillingly given. Yet the phrase carried out into the air on her weak breath is *I'm sorry*.

"No. Don't be sorry for this," her father corrects. "This is the way it is. You cannot apologize for what's natural."

Oona does not think a death borne from the bowels of a shotgun is a part of nature's good will, but she bites the words on her tongue.

When her father opens the belly up to take out the guts, his hands become wrapped with blood. The innards steam the air. The scent gets in her eyes and in her mouth, like she's inhaled one of her brother's cigarettes and choked on the smoke.

Oona's eyes water with the heat spilling from its intestines, kidneys, and heart--the heart she half expects to beat alive in her hands when her father presses it into her open palms. Her own heart wants to come up her throat. She can feel the lump of it in her neck. She cannot speak. The dressing is done in silence, save for the squelching of the stomach and the liver deposited like wet rags onto the leaves.

"Look up now, Oon."

Her father dabs her forehead with the blood before palming wet imprints along her cheeks. The smears feel too warm. She wants to scratch it off, does not want to be baptized with this animal's blood--with the blood of something she shoved by grisly violence from this life into the next.

It is all ceremonial, part of the bleeding rite. This deer is the first thing she has killed and it will certainly not be the last. But she will only wear an animal's blood this once. It is meant in celebration, to anoint a young hunter among the ranks of men. They will see the markings on her face and smile. *One of us now*, they'll say.

The blood starts to itch after it has hardened, but she doesn't dare touch it or rub any off. Her father's fingerprints dry into rust on her face, and whenever she maneuvers her expression, the skin of her cheeks twitches with the weight of those handprints. As if her father were still clutching them in his palms, blessing her for murder.

Oona walks with the shotgun in one hand and a sack of innards for the dogs in the other. The bottom of the bag has soaked through and is dripping a crimson trail in

their wake. Her father's palmprints streak down Oona's cheeks with her tears as she mourns in silence.

III.

Oona stands on the porch with the gun and keeps an eye on the woods. Wolves keen and scream behind the trees. The hounds' ears perk up at the sound, the fur on the back of their necks bristling.

A low hum builds in the quiet as the dogs growl softly in their throats.

While Oona waits, sweat collects damp and sour at her armpits. Flexing a hand on the butt of the gun, her fingers creak and pop from the cold. She scans the landscape, looking for any movement that might herald her father's return. The sky has just tipped over into darkness, yet some of the evening light lingers. As if the sky were hesitant to yield over to the night completely.

The Callaghans in the farmhouse one pasture over already have their lamps out, but Oona knows the children are still up. No bairn this close to the wood's edge would ever submit to sleep, not when the wolves were calling.

When she was a child, Oona would curl herself into knots under the covers, trying to block out the howls. She'd swear they were right outside the house for how near they'd sound. Too afraid to cry and too vigilant to calm down, she'd stay up half the night grinding her teeth, gaze trained on the window.

Come daybreak, Oona would wake up with shadows under her eyes for lack of rest and sore limbs for how tense she'd made herself in sleep. When her father would inquire as to why she looked so weary, Jack would smirk into his porridge and howl a cruel imitation right beside her ear.

It did not matter what folktales the grandmothers told their grandchildren to make sure they behaved. Selkies and changeling babes held little significance to a Dogtooth child when the monsters prowling the woods were very much alive, leaving dead sheep in their father's pastures each night as testament to their corporeality.

No monster, no murder was ever so foul as the wolves on Dogtooth.

Islanders would say the society men brought the wolves over from the mainlands, to hunt when all the other game grew dull. Some people believe the wolves have always been here, watching, killing.

Oona's not sure what she believes, only knows to carry a shotgun and how to shoot it. Some of the farmers will catch one going after their sheep, and if they're a good enough shot, maybe they'll bring it down. Most often the sound of the shots will be enough to frighten them off. But on the occasion a farmer does get a wolf, they'll hang the body from their property line.

"It sends a message," her father explained after they had been mending a stretch of fencing near the Callaghan's property. "They're not to come on our land."

Mr. Callaghan had gotten lucky and caught one. It was younger, but no less of a threat to the ewes.

Oona had stared at the carcass in disgust, her nose wrinkling at the stench it exuded. The body hung like a crucifix, its neck lolling to the side, mouth agape. She noticed the fur was still damp from that morning's dew, and if she got just a few steps closer she would be able to count its teeth.

Her father never hung anything on their fences. Oona hasn't either--not that she's ever shot a wolf, but if she did... she'd bury it, maybe burn it.

Hanging one of them out seems... almost like a mockery. Or an attack. An invitation for them to try again.

Oona's legs start to cramp as she stands on the porch, so she decides to walk out to the property line. The lower pastures have a better view of the treeline than the house, and she'll be more likely to spot her father from the woods that way.

Oona holds the shotgun snug to her armpit so that it can hang in the crook of her elbow, pointing at ease into the ground. A couple of her father's fox hounds jump to attention as she steps out into the yard. The dogs are quick to follow her lead, not out of submission or even affection. They are merely eager for their master's homecoming, and it is not lost on them that he is later than most nights.

The air fogs and grows colder as they get closer to the woods. Oona shivers, wrapping her coat tight to her chest. The dogs sniff the wind, stepping to and fro, restless.

A wolf howls in the near distance. It's a deep and solemn sound, and as it begins to taper off, another howl begins further into the wood, echoing back to Oona and the hounds. Oona's grip on the gun tightens.

The dogs, however, begin to bark. Short bursts at first, then they howl. An imitation of their predecessors.

"*Are you an idiot?*" An angry voice breaks in from behind her. "Shut them up." Oona had not even heard him coming in from the road.

Jack grasps her arm, as if he could jerk the sense into her. "You don't want *them*" --he gestures to the woods-- "coming over *here*. Not with all the pregnant ewes we have in the pastures right now."

A familiar anger rears up inside her stomach and out Oona's mouth before she's even thought of speaking words. "Don't you *dare* talk to me about those damned ewes. Not when I've been the only one looking after 'em these past couple of weeks." She wrenches her arm out of his hand, demanding, "And where the hell have you been? Da was asking after you this morn."

"Had things to do." He mutters, turning his back on her and making his way up to the house.

There's a bad taste in her mouth. "With O'Shea and his boys? They're nothing but--*Jack*." Oona starts after him, but halts when she remembers why she came down to the field in the first place. "What about Da? He's not back yet."

Jack keeps walking, long legs swallowing up land as he goes, putting more distance as well as silence between them.

Oona lets another bout of shivers roll through her, glancing back to the woods. She forces an agitated sigh out her nose before turning on heel and struggling up after him.

The hounds whine as the two Dohertys' depart the lower pasture. But not wanting to be left behind, the dogs give chase past both siblings back towards the house, mouthing at each other's heels.

It is almost completely dark now, and they only have the soft glow of the porch lamp through the fog to guide them home.

IV.

It will be another hour or so before dawn, and Oona still has not caught anything of substance. The traps she set days before have all come up empty. The usual territories for deer herds are barren and the hoof prints she notes--if any--are days old and hardened with frost.

Her stomach chews on itself and the hunger in her belly ripens quickly into anger. She can feel agitation thicken and spread throughout her body with every growl and grouse in her gut.

Perhaps it is the cold, or maybe the hunger, that deadens her senses. She does not even have a strong grip on her weapon when the mouth of someone else's shotgun acquaints itself with her neck. Tensing, Oona wonders if they'll shoot. Wonders if she'll feel it at all.

"This is my father's land," someone says. "You're not supposed to be here."

The boy--for his voice could not be a man's--pressures the gun harder into her when she tries to turn her neck to get a look at him. "I could shoot you just for trespassing." Leaves wrinkle under their feet as they shift weight, uncertain of each other.

Oona cannot see this boy, for fear of moving her neck, but she knows his kind. *Hunger* to them is a thought, short-lived, while sitting down to their next meal. It is never a feeling. Not in the way she's felt growing up, not in the way she feels at this very moment. Ever since her father... Now that he's gone, food has not been forthcoming. Especially not for a tenderfooted hunter like herself.

She hasn't eaten a proper meal in two days.

The mouth of the gun prods at her jaw and sweat begins to collect on the small of her back.

"Drop your weapon," his voice demands.

Her fingers shake as the shotgun slips from her hand. It clanks near Oona's feet. She can hear it scrape against the leaves as it's dragged out of reach, yet even with this movement the gun he holds against her head stays poised.

"The insolence of you," the boy says in a tone of disbelief, "to think you would not be caught." Oona knows he cannot simply mean her, that he speaks of other islanders as well. "We were told that game was low this season," he continues, "but this confirms all of our suspicions. Poaching is a criminal offense. Did you know that?"

"Please," Oona murmurs, the word steaming white into the air.

The boy pauses between breaths, and Oona hears the mechanic glide of the forearm being pulled back. He could shoot her where she stands. The mouth of the gun quivers, feather-light against her jaw.

Oona takes a breath, wondering if this boy's ever killed anything in his life that wasn't for sport. Then again, maybe he doesn't think of her any more than he would a stag. Her heart is pounding so fast it feels as if she's shaking from the inside-out. She cannot even hear herself think. But she does not need to think, she just needs to move.

"Who are you?" She asks.

"Eagley. Dougl--"

Oona jerks her head from shooting range and grasps the barrel of the gun with white knuckles. Yanking the gun forward, the boy is pulled with it and Oona uses the momentum coming towards her to thrust a boot into his stomach.

A lungful of air is wrenched from his lips: a panicked, wheezing sound.

Her brain feels like a lightbulb that's fizzled out.

The world around her is made of sharp little details, shoving themselves into her line of sight. She sees leaves covered in frost. He's wearing a dark red hunting coat. Black boots--

Finger fumbling with the trigger, Oona clamps down.

A shot cries out and the barrel flushes with heat and smoke. Like lightning. The recoil pounds into Oona's shoulder and pain blooms there, running down her entire right arm; it pools in her fingertips, stiffening them.

The boy gasps and it sounds like a question--a childlike noise. He stumbles in the frost, eyes wide while red begins to leak onto his chest. He scowls from surprise. It is only when he eases down onto his knees and looks up at her that Oona sees his face for the first time.

Young. Older than her, but younger than she had imagined.

Until it's dead, keep 'er loaded, her father had said. Oona still has her fingertip on the trigger, but she removes it when the boy begins to tilt down into the ground. He won't need a second shot. His eyes roll up to the sky like they've come loose from his brain and she wonders what he sees.

V.

The way a mother gives life to her child: red, wet, and screaming.

First the head, then the shoulders. The pulp of her insides being carved out like the belly of a pumpkin. She stops screaming, only to listen to her child scream. Life is given from between her bloody thighs, bestowed into the lungs of a babe as it takes the first breath.

It is from those lungs that the child grows. Learns to inhale and exhale. Learns how it can hurt to run as fast as you can. Learns how crying takes up a lot of lungs. And that sometimes remaining silent can take even more. And how now, when you're so full of the life your mother gave to you, you will learn how it feels to stop.

The hole is not large. An eyelet perhaps. The girl's fingers pluck the shell out and it feels like mercy: a priest absolving you of sin, your mother's hand on your cheek. But only for a moment, because then the socket in your chest floods. Fills up and up where liquid shouldn't be. Welling like a geyser, like the tears of an old woman, up and up; now saturating the cloth of your crisp tunic. Miles away from the sea and you're very near drowning, spilling out onto the frost.

How many things have bled here before you, on this very ground? The earth will soak up your blood like the white underthings of a girl. She has just stepped out of childhood and yet her mother will tell her this makes her a woman.

You understand her confusion at this very moment: the tips of your fingers dipping curiously into the red and the wet. Once in your body and now out of it.

As the ground becomes sticky and the leaves swim in your puddle, as your clothes become hot and then chilled in the evening air (*have I pissed myself?* you wonder), as the ground at your back begins to marinate in you... Will your father tell you this makes you a man?

You were a boy, and then you weren't. You were alive, and then you weren't.

VI.

Oona fishes the shell out with her forefinger and thumb, still warm from the barrel and from being inside the boy. She lets it drop into the puddle he's made of himself.

Crouching over his wilting frame, Oona pats his clothes down until her hand rustles a pocket with his ammunition. She palms a handful of them out, but makes sure to rip the box open, as if in great haste--letting the remaining rounds drop to the ground in a flurry around the body.

She imagines how afraid he was. How he couldn't load his gun fast enough. Shaky hands, probably.

They were already on him...

Nothing he could have done.

Poor boy.

Oona retrieves her own shotgun off the ground. Slinging the strap across her chest, she bends down to grab the boy's as well. Oona jerks the forend back. Pulls the trigger into the sky. Waits a few spare seconds to do it again. Her shoulder cradles the stock like it were a babe, nestling the wood up to her cheek. Cocking the forend back, she lets another one go. Grits her teeth in anticipation of the recoil. Winces as she fires again. And again. Five shots the boy had tried to land.

Not a strong hunter.

Besides, the lad was alone. Couldn't of had much of a chance.

His eyelids flutter, but the boy can no longer move much else. He's lost too much of himself. Oona places the gun at the ground near his hand.

Must have dropped it when he fell, they'll murmur to one another.

He was dragged quite a ways.

Must have tried to fight 'em off.

Poor boy, will echo like birdsong between the men. There will be nothing else to say.

Oona is brought back to attention when he wheezes; a wet, sloppy sound. Saliva spouts from his mouth, turning into crimson drivel down his chin. Like baby sick.

A ghost already, Oona ruminates, looking down on the boy carcass.

Sweat mats the hair to his forehead and pools in the creases of his face.

He is preparing to leave this world, but Oona thinks perhaps it is the world that's trying to leave him. Through blood and sweat--and the air barely passing through his lips. All seeping out in ghastly little shivers. Everything once contained within him now siphoning itself out. It must feel like betrayal, to have your own body desert you as you struggle in vain to keep it alive.

You're going to a better place, she thinks.

Wherever that is. Some place gravity can't pin him into this ground, in the middle of these woods, on this island. Some place that's not here.

Swinging her own gun off her back, she checks the chamber for casings; ignoring the tremble that passes through her fingers as she does so. With a sharp flick of her arm, the barrel snaps back into alignment. Moisture ferments in her armpits and on her upper lip, chilling Oona down to the first layer of her skin each time the wind hisses past.

Her eyesight is feeble in comparison to *theirs*, so she cannot make out how many of them there are, but she knows she's being watched. Perhaps in the same way Eagley knew. He probably saw it in her eyes while she stared him down the wrong end of his gun: something hardened to all empathy.

From the treeline, gauzy shapes trace all human movement. When their eyes hit a certain light, they gleam like a match freshly struck. They move and the match is snuffed out.

The game had been weak this fall, and as a consequence the packs had dwindled in size. Their numbers had fallen, according to scout reports, and the lack of deer had dropped weight from their paunches.

Oona had felt that particular devastation, too, and was able to count all her missed meals in the gaps between rib bones. She forgot how much hunger hurt. Her own body masticating upon itself in lieu of actual food, muscles withering away and a mouth that couldn't stay moist.

They're still hungrier than you, Oona reminds herself. And stronger.

The boy moans wetly from behind her. As if his throat were trying to gargle.

Make yourself big, Oon, her father's voice resounds in her head. Scream. Put your arms up. Anything to make you seem larger than them.

Ripping the forend of the shotgun back, Oona braces herself. Raising her arms above her, she starts in towards the treeline, boots crinkling in the frost.

Never turn your back on them, her father echoes.

Her heartbeat swells the veins in her neck, bulging in her eardrums. She takes a lungful of air and feels it hang in her chest. Unlike the boy, everything within her wants to remain. The blood and the sweat and the breath. The world inside of her doesn't want to leave, it wants to stay. And she has no intention of letting it out. Not even for beasts like them.

There are crows gathering in the trees, cawing back and forth to one another.

Waiting to scavenge whatever remains once the wolves get done with him.

With one finger on the trigger, Oona begins her retreat.

She hears panting from between the trees, glimpses grey fur and thin legs. Jaws snap, snarls escalate in a tense litany for dominance. Probably two youngsters eager to eat and willing to fight for each other for every mouthful.

Something like a sob percolates through the trees, but Oona cannot afford to look back nor does she want to.

Sidestepping into the heather, she hears the first fight amongst the wolves break out. She keeps a steady, slow pace. Running would only give them a reason to chase her.

She remembers being little and hurrying away from Cano. She'd broke down in fear, had started to run, but Cano came after her, nipping her thigh through her trousers hard enough to break the skin.

If you run, you are prey to them. Her father had said, tossing her a rag to clean the bite.

A sharp whine cracks the air, and immediately she knows--from the way Oona's toes curl into her boots, the way her skin turns to gooseflesh: the sound is human.

Every step she takes forward feels treacherous. Guilt adheres like mucus in her throat, except she can't swallow it down. She tells herself to not cry, the tears will only obstruct her vision.

This is not her fault. Her shot did not extinguish that boy, the wolves did.

She says that over and over, convincing herself of innocence. He was still alive until they finished him. She didn't kill him. They did.

Crows caw overheard, and the beating of their wings almost drowns out the sounds of eating.

VII.

Dawn cracks the sky open and spills through the trees like the yoke of an egg. The warmth of daylight is a hand hovering over Oona's skin, but it never actually touches her. Oona tries to imagine the heat, but her body is racked with too much of the chill for the sensation to keep. Fall had begun to beat back the sun more and more each day, and winter would be quick on its heels.

Stumbling through the heather, Oona breaks from the trees and tramps through her father's dew dampened pastures. Her boots sink deep in the mud. Like the ground is grasping at her, like it's trying to inhale her. She tears her boots from the muck and bits of mud freckle the back of her calves.

There is no sign of Jack in the fields. Skeeving on his chores yet again.

Oona rubs at the tender muscles in her shoulder. She flinches when her thumb divots into a patch of muscle with too much force. The recoils had punched her hard. No doubt there would be bruising.

Reaching the house, Oona takes one step onto the porch. Her weight is cradled on a single shaking ankle. Her other foot is poised to take the next step when suddenly Oona cannot feel her body beneath her. She lowers herself down on the second to bottom step before she can fall.

The dogs crowd around the porch with eager expressions, but she has brought no game back with her this time. Their vacant bellies wring out whines of hunger. They

don't open their mouths when they cry, just hold the noise on their tongues until they have to swallow the longing back down.

They all watch her with so many eyes. She used to cower beneath those eyes as a child, but it is different now. They looked *to* her instead of *at* her. As if she were her father. She wears his coat and carries his gun and now they expect things of her.

Oona hunches with her forearms on her knees, shoulders gnarled to her neck. She keeps her gaze down so she doesn't have to see the want in their faces.

She studies her hands.

They look like candle wax, stiff and pale. Crooked in their resting position because she can no longer feel the joints. The color fades from her skin as the blood retreats up her veins like a drying creekbed.

She snaps her eyelids shut like she could shut out the world with them.

It is not hard to breathe. She has done it her whole life, so she does not know why she can't do it just now. Her throat is caving into itself.

She wants to stop, doesn't like hearing herself choke on air. It makes her sound like *him*.

Hot breath on her knuckles forces her to glance upwards.

Cano does not whine like the others; he is quiet and sniffs intently at her knotted hands. She observes him, trying to identify any threat in the carriage of his body.

When she senses no malice, Oona opens her palms for his inspection.

Slowly, he begins to lick her lifeless fingers. Dried blood has crusted into her cuticles like dirt and he laps at her forefinger and thumb.

The same fingers that pried the bloody shot from the boy's chest.

Oona pictures him laying on the forest floor. The shell had been surprisingly warm in between her fingers.

Cano laps greedily at those fingers, tongue searching for any bit of the boy that remains.

There Eagley was: going into the dog's mouth. One way or another. He went into the mouths of beasts, into the crows, and into the ground. One way or another. This place was watered on the blood of its things.