

Down

I promised myself I wouldn't look this time, for I knew what I'd see.

Her grey face, expressionless. A hint of reproach. Feet that never touched the carpet. Her white dress brushing on the garnet red and pine green patterns. She had loved to walk on it barefoot. Never would again.

I caught a glimpse of her silhouette as I turned around the handrail and faced the stairs. The carpet flowed down the steps. Red and green. Blood and moss. The contents of her lungs by the end.

Her wheezing burst behind me, and the hair on my body spiked up.

Every night she died in front of me. I kept my stare ahead, down the corridor or through a foggy window or in the garden or around the bed, as she followed, gurgling the liquids in her throat. Then it was like she'd never been there.

I took one step down. A second.

As I reached the third step, she whimpered. Her weak voice begging for painkillers we had run out of echoed in my memory.

On the fourth, the cry she made in the doctor's office tore through my brain.

On the fifth, she sobbed softly. So did I.

My legs grew weaker the further down I got, pushing through against the tide of sorrow.

On the sixth, I smelled the perfume she had worn on our wedding day.

On the seventh, I tasted the soup she'd make during endless, bitter winters.

I felt the softness of her skin against my cheek, her hand down my back.

I gripped the rail to pull myself forward. Didn't let my head turn.

As I approach the floor, my hand tightened around long, blond hair.

I ignored her wailing over my shoulder. She stayed behind. She understood.

I stepped onto the parquet. Her laments faded away. Her hair turned to dust.

I let her go, and she did the same.

I wondered if she'd ever come back.

One rainy night, as I slept in the center of the bed for the first time in years, a long, painful inhale came from the other side of the bedroom, and I got my answer.