MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS



Leech

RIKKI LEIGHTON

leech

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blurb

Dead.

He's dead.

It echoes in my head like a waking nightmare.

Shadows in Bloom was my fresh start. All the baggage I've carried around background noise that feeds the songs we play on stage each night. Sweat-soaked and trauma ridden, we found ourselves in each other's beds more nights than not.

Blood stains my hands, my cheeks, my clothes.

Hell, it's probably stained my soul with how tightly I hold his lifeless body to mine.

This isn't how my story was supposed to go. Our story. The start of the one unbroken thing in my life.

He's dead.

Legend says there's a creature in the woods made of bark and vines who preys on the desperate and lonely.

Maybe, just maybe if I lay here long enough the creature will come for me.

Maybe they'll devour me whole.

Encase me in a cocoon of endless darkness.

I hum into the void.

Fade into the pain until it's all that I am.

Until a voice rasps into my ear,

"Mine, silly human. You've always been mine."

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content warnings

I am a big supporter of protecting your mental health so here are the content warnings you can use to keep yourself safe, because there are some heavy topics and events in this book.

Warnings:

Death of a loved one,
Suicidal ideation,
Addiction (past alcohol, drugs, current cryptic ability addiction)
Off page suicide of a side character
On page murder
Depression, anxiety, and panic attacks
Attempted sexual assault, implied SA (not between MCs but involving one MC)
Dubcon (intoxicating cryptid ability, consensual nonconsent)

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For those who crave pain and darkness to heal their inner wounds: There is nothing wrong with you.

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prologue

SOME CREATURES GET FAIRYTALES.

Others get horror stories.

Some become gods in ancient mythology.

They all stem from the same place, the same stories, twisted over time to fit human narratives.

In truth, these creatures are so much more than any human could possibly perceive.

They are fairytales, and horror stories, and gods all rolled into one terrifying package.

There are monsters among us. Creatures lurking in the dark, just waiting for you to turn their back so they can reach out and claim their stake.

They sink into our heads, poison us with thoughts and dreams and nightmares.

They save us so they can break us.

Break us so they can save us.

They are demons and angels. Good and bad. And all things between.

So when you come face to face with one, it may wear the face of familiarity, but if you survive, may depend on whether or not you scream.



“That’s your campfire story? Some vague, ‘they walk among us’ bullshit? Did you forget about the assignment until right now?”

Aria stares, exasperated at her brother as he shrugs and pops a marshmallow into his mouth.

“I thought it was good.” Or something like that because all she can hear is him mumbling around the oversized treat.

The fire burns at the center of their family circle, their two younger brothers fighting over the s’mores stick and their parents long since back in their tents.

It’s really just the two of them swapping stories back and forth, and Kole can’t even do that right.

“You are the worst.”

He swallows his food and smacks his lips. “I try.”

She stands up and dusts off the dirt from her palms, huffing with her hands on her hips, but Kole merely stuffs another marshmallow in his mouth and goes back to tinkering with the keyboard he refuses to leave home without.

Being fourteen with a twin brother who shares exactly zero interests with her is the icing on their horrible, homemade birthday cake.

Halloween birthdays are supposed to be fun! Spooky! But the moment something even remotely scary happens, her brother tucks tail and runs.

It isn’t fair!

She stomps around the campsite, picking up sticks to throw into the fire, grumbling her brother’s name until she realizes the glow from the fire is far away.

The sky is speckled with stars, and there’s an eerie hum blowing in the wind.

Too many horror movies. That’s all.

Something brushes her arm and she jumps back, squeals like a pig, and drops her bundle of sticks.

Just a silly branch.

She reaches down to pick them back up, and as soon as she does, they splinter and twist and wrap around her arm like a hungry snake.

There’s no air in her lungs. No way to scream or call for help. She drops to the ground, eyes wide as a pair of glowing orange eyes appear in the darkness.

“Hello there, pretty human. Those are mine, and now that you’ve tainted them, so are you.”

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PART I

blake

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one

LOVE IS … *a pain in my ass.*

Some people think love is warm and beautiful, sunshine and roses. Cozy cuddles under bedroom sheets.

What it actually is, is an inevitable decline begging for a heart transplant or a six foot grave.

It's kisses filling your lungs with a slow acting poison.

It's 5'6" with bubblegum pink hair, sea green eyes, and heartbreak thrumming through his veins.



Oliver taps the edge of my paper with the heel of his foot, and I don't need to glance away from the page to dot the tip of my pen against his skin. He makes a gagging noise that morphs into a chortle of sorts, sending my existing train of thought straight into the ocean.

"This is supposed to be a love song, jackass." The words read like they were written by a rotting tangerine peel that misses its sweet fruity center—ugh, even my inner monologue has been poisoned.

I tear out the page, crumple it into a tight ball, and aim it straight at my best friend's dumb pink-haired head.

He doesn't even bother to look up before smoothing out my disaster and taking his purple glitter gel pen to the words.

“You’ve got a couple good lines,” he says, voice pitching up like it does when he’s trying not to hurt my feelings. “But Blake?”

The intensity in his tone tightens the thread between my shoulder blades. Moss green eyes slide over to where I’m sprawled on the floor beside the couch he’s occupying.

“This reads like you’ve never been in love before, and you’ve written too many heartbreak songs for that to be true.”

That’s because angst and anxiety come easy to me.

Sarcasm? I’m your guy.

Pain and heartache? I can string words together in my sleep.

Ooey gooey syrup feelings? It’s worse than pulling teeth; it’s like metal claws yanking my ribcage open.

Oliver’s gaze is like an accusation and a pity party all in one, but it warms as I push up and fold my arms across the tops of his thighs. Fingers thread into my hair, and the bubble of insecurity shrinks at the touch.

“I can’t do everything for you, you know?” His voice is teasing, but there’s a deeper worry poorly masked below. “Emotional incompetence isn’t attractive.”

“And yet …” I press my smile into the crook of my arm and am rewarded with a playful tug on my scalp.

“And yet …” He bends forward, lips brushing my ear and hair tickling my cheek. “I adore you.”

I hate to admit
how much I enjoy
being adored
by this troublesome boy

“Sap.” I press a kiss to his cheek, and he ever so slightly tilts his head so our lips rest next to one another.

“*Thunder eyes, a storm cloud blue; how it aches to even look at you*.”

Oliver Hale is a tried and true romantic, responsible for every passion driven love song our band has ever written.

I’m jealous as hell and horribly in awe of the man I get to share a stage with.

“*A heart so fragile; crumpled to dust; who knew that love could hurt this much*?”

Oliver’s breath catches, cradling my nape with fingers tight enough to leave rings on my skin.

“Blake.” His voice cracks, but before I can distract or reassure him, his mouth is on top of mine.

I love you.

It beats in my head to the time of the thumping in my chest.

We’ve never said the words out loud. Never given them that level of agency.

Our songs have danced around the feelings, admitting a truth we both claim plausible deniability to.

In these quiet, stolen moments, we get to belong to each other. To entangle our souls and let our hearts roam free.

The front door scrapes against the wooden floor, and suddenly I’m on my back staring at the ceiling fan going round and round. I taste copper on my lips from Oliver’s teeth as he pushed me away.

“Time to hit the lake, losers. Take a break.” Briah’s voice fills the room like a tsunami crashing on shore, enveloping us and drowning the tiny speck of intimacy we let seeped in.

She’s in a gold and white two piece that fits her like a glove, ocean blue hair wrapped in a tight bun to keep the color from running and fading too fast. Behind her is Mace with his curtain of blond hair half plastered to his forehead in rainbow board shorts and a t-shirt.

He’s holding our drummer on his back: a petite, chubby girl with matching blond pigtails keeping the hair out of her blue eyes.

“Are you okay, Mara?” I flop onto my stomach just as Mace lowers her into one of the dining chairs just inside the door.

“I’m fine. My legs just got tired from swimming, and I didn’t bother to bring my wheelchair to the water.”

Looking more like twins than siblings, Mara and Mace are the true founders of the band. They had a rotation of members until Briah finally stuck. Then there came me and my carousel of baggage followed by Oliver, who never speaks of his life before us.

Shadows in Bloom is who we are, and nothing that came before matters.

“Why do that when you have your own personal pony boy?” Briah laughs as she hooks an arm around Mace’s shoulders, smacking a kiss on his cheek.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the tight smile on Oliver’s face. I wonder if he thinks about showing that same outward affection with me as

the others do with each other, but as messy as things are with us, I don't bring it up.

This right here is enough.

It has to be enough.



The sun is not my friend, and the hundreds of freckles splattered across my shoulders and cheeks would agree. It takes half a bottle of sunscreen just to make sure I don't burn; forget any hopes of a tan.

I glow in the sun like a freaking Twilight vampire.

Thankfully, there's this giant tree with willowy, mossy leaves and long, strong branches that create decent shade over the lake.

Briah lays on a towel in a patch of sunlight, unaware of the Mara monster lurking closer with arms poised to splash. Mace watches with a thinly concealed amusement, and I scan the water for our keyboard player.

Oliver often calls me the loner of the group, running off to write or listen to music while the others socialize, but my battery is simply small. Too much interaction is draining, and I swear it takes twice as long for me to recharge.

The exception to that is Oliver. It feels like I can never get enough of being with him, whether we're working on a song together or huddled up under the blankets speaking in hushed tones.

No matter how long I look, it's clear that he isn't here.

My lungs deflate, limbs growing heavy as I lounge back to float along the water's surface. Words claw at my mind, half garbled and fractured, stitched together like frakenstein lyrics.

Why is it so hard to put love into words? Pain is one thing. I could write all day about longing and desperation, but task me with putting all of these feelings bottled up for Oliver on a note sheet and every creative bone in my body shutters into lockdown.

My eyes flutter open as my skin prickles with a familiar awareness. It's an odd feeling that I've placed most often when I'm alone outside, but sometimes it trickles in at moments like these. Like someone's watching me.

There’s no one there; there never is. That doesn’t mean I don’t errupt into goosebumps and gnaw on my bruised lip until the taste of copper floods my mouth.

A cool breeze rustles the leaves overhead, a stray leaf breaking free and floating down until it lands in the water at my fingertips. I pinch it between my fingers and let out a deep sigh, picturing myself as a log carried away by the current.

Movement in the tree catches my eye, and alarm pierces through my head like a siren.

There’s no one there, I tell myself, but I can’t stop searching for something—anything—in the foliage.

Did I take my meds today?



Oliver passes into the bathroom while I’m brushing my teeth. I don’t watch him pull his dick out and piss, but I sure as hell catch that knowing little smirk I’d love to kiss off his face. He squashes next to me at the sink to wash his hands and wordlessly pulls a red and black checkered medicine divider out of the cabinet.

There are five of them. His is green and pink with cutesy frogs on it.

“Bottoms up.”

For the briefest second, our bodies are pressed together. His chest brushes my back, hands ghosting along my arms as he shuffles out of the room behind me.

I stare at the container, pop open a lid without thinking too hard about how fast my heart is beating, and dry swallow all three pills.



My palms itch like they’ve been drug through poison ivy. I sink them in the water in hopes the lake will wash it away, but I know it’s only in my head, so the itch intensifies.

“Have you thought about putting honey on it?” The voice is soft like the breeze cascading along the surface of the water.

My eyes find his in a heartbeat, in the time it takes my breath to catch and release with an overwhelming sense of relief.

The itch is an afterthought.

Oliver is straddling one of the thicker branches, watching me with a somber expression.

“I’ve heard cum works too.”

His nose crinkles, but his lips tip up in a smile. “Come join me?”

The tree bark feels rough beneath my pruny hands, but I’m a sucker for that dimpled half-smile, and when Oliver reaches out to pull me the rest of the way up, I don’t hesitate to grasp on. We straddle the tree branch: me with my back to the trunk and Oliver with his gaze toward the water, feet kicking over the edge.

“Do you ever think …” He’s watching our friends below with a solemn, pinched expression. “Do you ever worry about how unimportant we are?”

I wince, and Oliver is quick to shoot me an apologetic look. “I mean … You see how close the three of them are? I always feel like I’m intruding.”

Pink hair wisps around his ears, and I fight the urge to run my hands through it.

“We’re your family,” I whisper as emotion clogs up my lungs.

His throat bobs, and as he tucks his chin to his chest, I catch the shimmer of tears in his eyes.

“*I’m* your family,” I tell him more fiercely. “You’re important to *me*.”

He shrugs—*shrugs*—and I almost shake him, push him straight into the water below to shock some sense back into him.

“Oliver.”

I love you, I open my mouth to say, but the words are traffic jammed into my ribs.

The sun peeks through the willow leaves, illuminating the deep green irises that flash over to me.

“You’re important to me, too,” he says, and just as quickly as the calm melancholy passes over him, it’s shed away, replaced by a dazzling smile bright enough to give me whiplash. “Don’t look so serious. You know you all keep me around for my melodrama.”

I go to bite back, but he’s already launching himself off the branch, dangling precariously for a breath and then plunging under the water at the next.

My chest thrums and throbs, and there's a red mark spreading from how hard I rub my fingers over the skin to ease it.

Something has been off with him lately. Something has wiggled its way inside his brain and transformed into something rough and jagged. Something he isn't willing to share.

We all survive because we carry the burdens together. We share each other's darkness so there's never enough to swallow one of us whole.

My skin burns, and as those pesky words start to spin a web of desperation in my head, I follow him down into the water to wash them away.



Carry me away,
where ~~you'll~~ I'll never find the remnants
of the heart you so carelessly discarded.
Bury me here
beneath the willow where you shed your tears
the home you've so heavily guarded.



I'm an ass. A paranoid ass. A *rightfully* paranoid ass, but an ass all the same.

Oliver's door is decorated in yellow caution tape and hazard signs. It isn't locked; none of them are. Hell, mine doesn't even have a doorknob anymore.

We all know the darkness that threatens to come for us; and none of us are willing to take any chances.

I push it open half expecting to find Oliver passed out with his headphones on like usual and half expecting exactly what I find instead.

The room is bathed in a red light, LEDs lining the ceiling and an egg shaped one on the nightstand. Insomnia's only weakness, he calls it. The comforter is rumpled like he attempted sleep and gave up in an angry huff. Papers are scattered across the mattress, some having fluttered to the floor. There are a handful of pens—all uncapped—rolling along the paper and sheet from the tower fan blowing air across the bed.

Oliver’s writing process has always had me the most intrigued, and I wish I could be nearly as chaotic in my endeavor for the perfect words, but mine are always neatly scribbled in my songwriting notebook in easily put together pieces. Oliver could spend hours searching his closet for a single line he wrote weeks ago.

I hate the way my stomach turns to sludge when I pick one up and examine the words. Occasionally peering over each other’s shoulders when we’re writing in the room together is one thing, but we all have enough respect for one another not to snoop at writings we haven’t personally shared.

But I need to know—I need to convince myself that I have no reason to be worried, that it’s just the usual anxiety making me break one of our most important rules.

Most of the words are nonsensical, random conglomerates that sound harsh and ugly but have no meaning. What draws my attention the most—what seizes it in a heavy, deathly grip—are the dark splotches of ink. They’re scribbled so hard the paper breaks, holes where whole sentences should be. Scratches of ink thrown on as if in a fit of rage or despair.



“Talk to me,” I tell him as we’re shoulder to shoulder at the foot of his bed, as he tears out a page and rips it to shreds.

“I’m stupid, and I’m useless, and I don’t know why I bother when everything I write sounds like crap.”

It doesn’t, but he never believes me when he gets like this. I take his hand and force my fingers between his, and despite his scoff of protest, he squeezes my hand until the circulation goes cold.

“Why am I here?”

Because I need you to be, I think, but the vulnerability bleeding off of him is too much as it is. I shouldn’t overload him.



Why am I here? I always give him silly answers, anything out there enough to make him laugh and get him out of his head. Right now, as I stare at a

page with those words etched over and over in a vortex of ink, I wish I had given him something more, something serious.

I wish I had told him the truth.

It sends me into a flurry, ripping open drawers and digging through the closet like a puppy in search of a bone. Even as my search comes up empty—there isn't a pill or alcohol bottle in sight—the knot in my stomach doesn't lessen. It gets tighter, darker, more sickly. Thick and nauseating.

"Mace! Briah!" They're sitting on the couch with a bowl of popcorn between them. "Have you seen Oliver?"

Mace frowns and inclines his head toward the door. "Took his keyboard out half an hour ago or so."

"How did he seem?"

The furrow in his brow deepens. "Are you worried about him?"

Maybe it's all in my head. The way he's been acting. The signs that say—



I take one last peek behind me. Not because I'm trying to catch a naked Oliver hopping in the shower, but because there's this constant pull that tells me LOOK.

The pills are still in his hand, and instead of popping them in his mouth, he turns them over into the toilet and flushes them down.



We've all done it once or twice. It doesn't mean anything.



"What the hell are you doing?"

Oliver stands over the trashcan in his room, spit dribbling down his lips and finger shoved down his throat. I made him take his meds in front of me, made him show me they weren't hiding in his mouth.

"I need a break."



We'd fought that day. Screaming and crying. Which had turned into clinging to one another under Oliver's sheets.

All of our medicine dividers are stacked on top of each other. All filled with various medications.

Except for one. Green and pink with cute little frogs.

Empty.

I smack straight into Mace when I turn to rush out of the bathroom. He anchors both hands to my shoulders, surveying the cabinet behind me. All the bottles lining the shelves.

"He didn't take them." At first it sounds disbelieving, and then he sighs and it sounds like relief. "He didn't take them."

I move to go around him as he investigates each bottle, but one arm stays firmly wrapped around me, holding me in place.

"Blake." He says my name with an edge that has my skin prickling. "You're missing a bottle."

Excuse me?

I twist around to thumb through my collection of medications. One, two, three ...

My heart pounds. My palms begin to sweat. My breathing stutters in my chest.

"He wouldn't." Oliver takes stronger meds than I do. He has no reason to take any of mine.

Except that we would notice his missing and wouldn't think to check our own.

"Mace."

He squeezes an arm around me, not comforting but assuring. "Stay here." Before I can protest, the screen door is already squeaking open and slamming shut.

Briah stands in the living room, gaze bouncing between where I hang back in the doorway of the bathroom and where Mace has disappeared out the front door.

"Blake." She says it softly, a juxtaposition to her usual loud abrasiveness. "Come sit down."

I don't want to sit down. I don't want to sit on my hands and wait for Mace to come dragging Oliver back in whatever state he finds him in. What

if they get into a fight? What if Oliver is hurt?

What if it's something worse?

Briah sighs when I don't bother to move. Instead, she crosses the space and cups my face in her hands, tapping my chin with her fingers until I look up at her. "Let Mace take care of it."

"They're my pills."

The words spiral on repeat in my head. *Mine, mine, mine.* Gnarled and twisting like the aged wood of the willow tree.

I can't think. I can't settle. Blood rushes like a current in my ears.

I'm not patient. I can't sit around and twiddle my thumbs until the grownups solve the problem.

The pills are *mine.* Oliver is *mine.*

"I need to go," I whisper, throat restricting around the words.

Briah meets my desperation with a resigned sigh. "Be easy on yourself." She steps aside, and I only manage a cursory nod before I'm running outside, bare feet smacking the wet dirt as rain pelts from the sky.

I don't know where they are. I don't know if Mace has found him. I don't *know,* but there's a part of me that does. A part of me that screams out a path that my racing mind follows.



Lie with me
beneath the willow.
Lie to me
in its embrace.
Hold me steady
'til the marrow
washes all the pain away.



The tree stands like a pillar, like a refuge from the storm overhead. It's limbs and leaves heavy with the weight of the rain but creating a pocket of escape inside its width. There are only two things laid on the dry patch of grass at the base of the tree: a bottle of pills and a notebook.

My pills.

And as soon as my knees touch the earth and my fingers brush the leather, my heart cracks open and a sob wretches out, because this is *my song book.*

Not even just that. It's the one that I save solely for my musings about Oliver. All of the things I can't compose into a solid piece. Endless lines of emotion that don't fit neatly into song form but that pour out of me with every interaction we have. Every mundane. Every earth shattering.

Every pained breath at how we couldn't put a label on things, how we kept our clasped hands behind closed door. How our lips only met when there was no threat of prying eyes. How I never ask for more in fear of breaking whatever fragile connection we have.

It feels stupid now. It feels wrong. It feels like I'm going to shake him silly and duct tape him to my bed when this is over for making me feel like I have something to lose. For making me fucking cry when I haven't let myself in years.

I scratch my fingers over the front cover, scrape my thumb along the seem of the pill bottle's lid. My eyes are misty as I try to regain my composure.

Water from the lake sloshes against the shore, encroaching like a serpent in the garden of Eden.

"Blake." My name is heavy, doused in gasoline. Breathless. Fractured. "Blake." A pleading whisper.

It doesn't sound familiar. It doesn't sound human.

Maybe I've finally lost my mind.

The sound of distant sirens fill the air, and I don't need to lift my eyes to know I'm being watched. Arms wrap around my shoulders, and someone's head rests on my back. There's a choked off sob, and then smaller arms come around my neck, and Mara's face presses into the crook.

No one has to say a word.

I knew before I even stepped foot in Oliver's room. Something scratched at the edges of my brain, drawing me from my own demons to his.

Like a wicked guardian angel.

Once again, fingers numb and body going cold, my world is plunged into darkness.

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two

MY VICE of choice has always been alcohol.

No one fights me on the nasty pack of beers I shove in the fridge. No one bats an eye when I sprawl out on the couch with the unopened bottle cradled in my arms. Hours later when it clatters to the floor full and warm, it's Mace who pushes a pill past my lips and cups a hand over my mouth until I swallow.

When the sun peeks through the cabin's blinds, Mara takes a seat and pulls my head into her lap. Fingers card through my hair, and something plays on the TV, but soon enough I'm asleep again.

In the evening, Briah sits on the floor and force feeds me french fries.

As the sky grows dark again, a blanket is tossed over me, and Mace takes up the end of the couch. We become a tangle of sleeping limbs, and when one of us sniffles, the rest pretend we didn't hear it.

This goes on for ... days? Weeks? Endlessly until Mace comes through the door with a box in his hands and expression painfully blank.

Briah is the first to go to him, to touch the red, plastic container and wrap her arms around Mace like a bandage. His eyes shut, and he lets out a heavy breath. Mara kisses my forehead and gingerly transfers to her chair. It rolls across the floor, and when she takes the box from her brother's hands, his calm finally shatters, returning Briah's embrace and hiding the way he crumbles into her shoulder.

Mara locks her wheels by the arm of the couch, and the next thing I know the box is in my lap.

It’s heavy. Heavier than I would expect, at least. I lift the lid, half expecting to be hit with a cloud of dust, but no. There’s a thick, clear bag inside filled with ash.

I should feel something. Anything. Heat, rage. Coldness, distance. Everything is lukewarm.

“What should we do?” Mara asks, soft and hesitant.

“He has a brother in Alabama,” I say. “They aren’t on speaking terms.”

“We should put him in his room.” Mace’s voice is raw and ragged. “Until we have a plan, he deserves to be home.”

I’m the one who sets the box of remains on Oliver’s bed, and I’m the one who doesn’t leave the room for forty-eight hours. Not until there’s hands on my biceps hauling me out of the bed and plopping me onto the couch.

One of the beers is shoved into my hands, cap removed and cold mist circling the rim.

“Drink.” Mace’s voice is soft but firm, and when I don’t immediately comply, he crouches down to eye level. “Drink,” he repeats, this time pressing up with the palm of his hand on the bottom of the bottle.

The feigned fight I’ve only held onto for their sake leaves me with one harsh exhale. Half of the bottle is gone before my throat retaliates with a series of burning coughs. Mace smiles and takes the bottle from me, downing the rest like it’s water and pushing to his feet.

Another bottle is offered, and I don’t bother to question this one. Instead, I get lost in the bitter taste until the dark fuzz around my brain begins to smear.

Sunlight burns across my vision, nausea rising in my throat. I roll onto my side and press my throbbing forehead to the base of the willow tree I’m lying under.

There’s the sound of hushed voices and lapping water, but they pale in comparison to the absolute pounding in my skull.

“Welcome back to the world of the living.” The words are spoken softly into my ear, punctuated by Mara’s breathy chuckle.

I open my mouth to ask what happened, but a sharp pain shooting through my temple silences me.

“Everyone gets a pass today,” she says, dragging her fingers through my hair. “Briah is waking Mace up in the lake.”

Against my better judgment, I laugh—and fuck yeah, that hurts like a mother. “That’s a cruel punishment.”

“Well, sometimes my brother can use a rude awakening.”

I scratch along the bark of the tree, eyes screwed shut, and feel a familiar, aching weight rest on my shoulders.

“He’s hurting.”

“We all are, but you don’t see me dragging Briah out to a club to get high.”

“I would have rotted in there.”

A piece of wood breaks off under my finger tip, a thin trickle of blood blooming in its wake. I press the cut to my lips and try to breathe through the dizziness that follows.

“My grandpa used to tell me there were spirits living in the old willow trees,” Mara says. “Ones that you could sit and tell your problems to. He said it was like talking to a friend, and when you were done, it was like all of those bad feelings were leeched out of you.”

How nice would that be? Get all of this sticky gunk off my chest and feel like a person again? Instead of a hollowed out meat sack.

“You could give it a try.”

I finally manage to open my eyes, and despite the rush of pain, I train my focus on the outline of Mara’s face. “Talking to the tree?”

She smiles, and I hate how her scrunched nose and dimpled cheeks make all the fight leave my body. “The tree spirit.”

Sure. That sounds lovely. Pour my heart out to a giant splinter and hope like hell this hole in my chest decides to magically close up.

“Not where you nosy numbskulls can listen.”

Mara’s breath tickles the side of my face as she brushes a kiss over my temple. “Grouch.”

I want to tell her I wasn’t always this way, that I used to smile and laugh effortlessly, but these days that side is reserved solely for Oliver.

Because while I feel trapped in my mind and in my body, Oliver made me feel whole.

Moonlight spills through the leaves of the giant willow, casting shadows of little dancers on the surface of the water.

What I wouldn't give to fall into the safety of it. To be enveloped by the waves and thrust back to the open air, sputtering into the sunlight of the days before. To be given one last day to make a difference.

Cool plastic holds defiant in my grip despite the cruel press of my fingers.

It's such a stupidly small box for what it contains. Absolutely absurd that one whole human can be reduced to a pile of ash no bigger than the books we tell our stories in.

I don't know what possessed me to take him from his room, but the thought of sitting out here in the dark like we've done together so many times—only alone now—feels innately wrong.

The grass is soft and damp at the base of the tree where I sink down. A heavy breath fills my lungs, and for the briefest moment it feels like I'm drowning. Tears that I've been holding hostage all afternoon break free with a sob that's wrenched straight from my gut.

"You fucking asshole." I squeeze the box tighter, as if it could become a permanent part of me. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

The wind whistles through the leaves, adding to the symphony of noise buzzing through the otherwise quiet night. Crickets, cicadas, frogs, water rippling with nature's movements.

My head thunks against the tree, and I stare at the mess of branches above. There's a quiet hum reverberating through the bark. I feel it in my chest. It gets louder with each breath in, quieter on the exhale. Mesmerized and willing to take whatever distraction I can get, I close my eyes and let my breathing fall into a steady rhythm.

"Mine." Soft like the wind spilling over me, that one word loops through my brain. *"Mine, mine, mine."*

Oliver was never mine, but I was undoubtedly his.

"Mine." Louder, more aggressive. My eyes snap open.

Silence. Had to have been my imagination. I'm not drunk off my ass anymore, but I've been rocking a steady hangover and nursing it more than I should.

I shift my focus back to the hum, the stuttering in my chest finally easing as the growing anxiety dries up my tears.

A chill chases pebbles down my arms, and I instinctively wrap them tighter around the box.

“*Silly human,*” comes the wind’s whispering that my mind turns to words. “*You can’t be his, because you’re already mine.*”

That’s not my imagination, but it doesn’t sound like a voice either. It’s behind me, around me, inside my own head.

My heartbeat hammers in my ears.

“Are you the tree spirit?” The words rasp out of my throat barely audible.

The hum grows louder, transforming from a purr to a roar that crawls beneath my skin.

“I miss him,” I say, and despite the alarm running through my body, it relaxes more against the tree. “I don’t know who you are.”

“*But I know you,*” it says in a way that feels absolute, “*and that’s all that matters.*”

Something wraps around my waist, slithering up to circle around my wrists. It squeezes, lightly at first, and then harder, harder until my hands spasm and the box drops into my lap.

I focus all of my attention on the box and not on whatever the hell is happening to me. Maybe I’m drunker than I thought, because none of this makes sense.

A tangle of green vines enclose the box, overlapping each other until it’s no longer visible.

Now the vines are encroaching on my throat, stirring a panic in my chest.

“Let go,” I whisper as a sharp cracking noise springs tears to my eyes. “It hurts.”

Give it back, I want to scream. *Give him back. Don’t take him from me.*

The vines around my wrists loosen, and when I reach for the box my fingers are met by the prickles of thorns. Blood blooms at my fingertips, but I only press harder, pain spreading along my palms.

“Please.”

A gust of wind whips past my ears, and the remnants of vines holding onto me recoil. Fresh cuts appear on my arms, a sickening crack jolts through my collarbone, but all I can think about is that goddamn box.

“If you give him back, you can have me. Whoever—whatever—you are.”

In a gradual decline, as if someone dragged the volume knob to zero, the forest enters into an eerie silence.

“I give you the boy,” the leaves and bark all say at once, *“and you give me yourself?”*

Who would have ever thought I’d be making deals with mythical woodland creatures? Over the ashes of my dead lover no less.

The quiet stays for another beat. Two. Three. Between one heartbeat and the next, the cluster of vines holding Oliver’s remains captive glow a golden hue, and then just as quickly disintegrate as if they were never there.

The sounds of the forest roar back to life, and if it weren’t for the physical aches from the vines and thorns, I’d think I genuinely imagined the whole thing.

As I curl my body around the box, a screaming protest in my shoulder reminds me of that sickening crack, and I swallow down the bile that springs into my mouth.

I’d take all the pain in the world if it meant waking up in Oliver’s arms one last time. Not even mythical tree spirits can bring back the dead, so I’ll settle for wrapping my broken body around all that’s left of him.

If I were lucky, I could close my eyes and drift away, soul escaping my body and finding wherever the hell it is we all go when we die.

If I were lucky, I would have succeeded years ago, long before I met Oliver and the others, and I’d be just as miserable in death then as I am now in life.

Here lies Blake Monroe.

The most foolish boy in the world.

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three

I NEVER SHOULD HAVE LET Mace drag me out.

There's quiet chatter drifting all throughout the coffee shop, the bitter aroma of espresso and coffee grounds mingling in the air. It feels more like I've stepped foot into a slam poetry competition than an open mic night.

Bars have always been our thing: stale, tobacco filled air, patrons with their volume knobs broken, and dirty, grunge bathrooms to get a quick fuck in.

It's not the whole band here tonight, though. Mara and Briah are having some kind of girl's night, while Mace and I are here: standing in this godforsaken mix of beige and pink with the strings of my acoustic guitar cutting into my fingers.

I haven't touched my guitar in weeks, songbook lying buried in a pile of clothing I can't be bothered to dig through.

Music feels tainted now, laced with a slow acting poison ready to seep beneath my skin at the first sign of weakness.

There's a sick feeling churning in my stomach, one that's haunted me since that night at the tree. An oozing unease that won't leave me alone.

"This is a bad idea." The words taste like battery acid in my throat, but the pleading look I throw Mace is met merely with a pat on the back and a forced smile.

"Ollie would be over the moon to see you play a solo gig."

I give him my sternest "that's a low blow" face, but then a bubbly, bright eyed kid behind the counter calls me over and points to the stage.

Would vomiting get me out of this or only embarrass me more?

The little stage is a round platform maybe a foot off the ground housing a mic stand and a wooden, backless chair. There are tables littered with patrons all around, sipping their coffees and eying like they're at the start of some B-rated indie film with nothing better to do.

The linoleum flooring squeaks beneath my sneakers, a pair of ratty Doc Martins covered in sharpie that will have to be pried from my cold, lifeless limbs one day.

Everything about this feels wrong.

Still, I strum the guitar, turning the pegs until it sings instead of shrieks. I clear my throat and lower the mic.

"This song is called 'Fade to You'."

My brain switches off, the chords striking against the open air enough to crack my chest and let the fresh air in.

I've never played this song before, only ever picked at the notes, but it pours out of me unabashedly like a rapid river. Nothing else exists. No one. Just me, the guitar, and words that only half belong to me.

Words that stick in my throat the moment I open my mouth.

To my credit, I never stop playing the song, strumming along even as I go mute.

Mace catches my eyes, but he's no use here because I'm the only one who knows the lyrics.

The silence is deafening.

By the time I reach the chorus, my fingers stutter and catch on the strings, coming to a skittering halt.

Who the hell am I kidding?

I might as well pack a damn bag and evict myself from the band. There's no point if I can't even make it through a singular song without breaking down.

"Boxes broken under shifting weight,

Glass shattered in the picture frame

Moss covering the rusted gate."

The words are half spoken, half choked, and I scratch the chord with an angry strum and a huff into the microphone.

I absorb the beats of silence, the normal quiet chatter stiflingly empty.

Breathe in. Out.

I strum the guitar again, back to the beginning, and as soon as I open my mouth, a sob sneaks out.

Motherfucker.

I’m ready to bang my head on the nearest hard surface when the sound of makeshift drumming spreads throughout the cafe. It’s in tune with my guitar, and even though my brain wants to focus on searching out the source, my body is all in on continuing to play.

They’re almost unperceivable, cloaked in dark maroon and hidden near the back of the room that turns into a hallway. Fists pounding on the wall, palms slapping their knees; it really is a crude way to make the beat.

Even so, it reverberates through my bones. Keeps my fingers running and the anxious knot in my stomach loosens.

“You take a step,
I follow behind.
You smile bright
I cover my eyes.
Falling in love has got me terrified.”

I can’t look anywhere else. Not at my bandmate. Not at the other patrons. I’m locked onto this strange man drumming along to some song he’s certainly never heard before, all while he seems to be giving me his full attention as well.

“But you, but you
awaken something crumpled and brand new
I knew, I knew
you’d be the one thing I’d have to lose.”

There’s little force behind my words, more breath than bass, but the relief from getting them out is immediate.

“The world fades to you
Magnetic smiles and superglue
Stitches tearing me right in two.
I’ll never find you in my bed
words holed up in our heads
too afraid to let them in.
Now, I’ll never get the chance again.”

My finger knicks the strings, a thin cut across the pad, and both the stranger and I stop playing in unison. I can’t look anywhere but at him, half afraid if I move my gaze the tears I’ve been holding back will escape.

The man smiles. It’s a sad almost pitying one, and I can’t even bring myself to be mad about it.

I *am* pitiful.

He inclines his head toward the hall, hooking his thumb over his shoulder, and holds my eyes for another moment before turning away.

Something guttural yanks in my chest. It nearly makes me stumble off the stage with it's force. My boots thunk the ground, guitar shoved into Mace's hands, and I can't see the man anymore, but the invisible string keeping me in a chokehold urges me forward.

Down the hall.

To a singular, unisex bathroom.

The handle sticks.

A lock turns.

The door clicks open.

He's standing at the sink, eyes watching me from the mirror. They're a deep green, nearly glowing in the florescent light. His hair is an off-white silver color hanging near his shoulders with the front tied back away from his face.

Who are you? It rings in my head like an incessant toddler, but I can't make my voice work.

"You have a beautiful voice," is all he says. No follow up.

It takes a couple of hard swallows and a cough to spit out a, "thanks."

The stranger's tongue brushes his bottom lip slowly before he smiles, and I realize I've been caught staring.

"You don't recognize me," he says, finally turning so we're face to face. "That's fine. I didn't expect you to."

He takes a step forward. One and then two. It's a small bathroom, and it doesn't take much to put him right in front of me.

He's a solid head taller than me, but he dips his lips down close to my ear once he gets close.

"My little musician."

A chill zips down my spine, and I don't mean to grasp at his sweater for balance, but here my hands are digging into the soft fabric.

"Yours?" I want it to sound snarky, but it's merely breathless.

His smile touches the shell of my ear. *"Mine."*

My body reacts violently, seizing up with the ghost sensation of vines crawling along my skin.

That indescribable pull between us freezes, and I shove hard at the stranger's chest.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

He stumbles back, but he doesn’t look angry or upset, and that only makes my own frustration run hotter. His half smile looks more like a cocky smirk with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

“I had a feeling you might react this way.”

His fingers brush the side of my neck immediately followed by a burst of white, hot pain beneath my skin. There’s half a second of darkness as my vision blinks out, but then everything comes back into focus all at once.

The lights in the bathroom are too damn bright, and the black splotches that show up from rubbing the sting from my eyes are no help at all.

“Is this better?”

Everything stills: my limbs, my breathing, hell I think my heart even skips a couple beats. Not in a cute way either but downright terrifying.

I take a moment to let everything go back to normal, staring hard at the floor until my vision runs clear. A breath forces its way into my lungs, and the steady in and out calms my heart.

“Aren’t you going to look at me?”

The stranger doesn’t sound like a stranger anymore. Their voice is higher, softer, holds a certain cadence that burrows deep into my gut.

It’s more than familiar.

It’s intimate.

When I feel steady enough, my gaze travels up, and it’s like every single heartstring snaps at once.

I’m losing my fucking mind.

He’s wearing the same sweater. The same jeans. His hair—albeit pink instead of silver—is still pulled back in a messy half ponytail, but he isn’t a stranger anymore.

From that dimpled smile to the way his eyes crinkle at the corner, I’d recognize this boy anywhere.

“Oliver?” It’s a whisper, because any louder and the illusion might break.

I must be dreaming or drunk or maybe even dead—and I wouldn’t have a single fucking complaint about it.

His smile dips the slightest fraction. “Only sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

Oliver takes a step forward, fingers reaching for my cheek before he hesitates. “May I?”

All I can manage is a stiff nod with my head stuffed full of confusion.

He doesn't sound like the stranger anymore, but he doesn't quite sound like Oliver either.

Neon green eyes bore into me as *the person* strokes a thumb over my cheek.

"I borrowed a piece of his soul," he says with Oliver's voice, Oliver's mouth. "You asked me to give him back, and this was the best I could do."

I'm not entirely losing my mind. This person—this creature—really is the same as the spirit in the tree.

"This isn't what I meant."

I only wanted it to give me the box, not bring a faux Oliver back from the dead.

But the more his skin touches mine—warm and alive—the less distressed I manage to feel.

How many nights have I awoken in a cold bed, alone, and left with the bleak reminder that the one person I let myself feel something for was completely and utterly gone?

"It's what I can give you."

The creature—Oliver—leans into me so close their breath fans across my face. They tilt my chin back, bumping the tip of my nose with their own.

"Blake."

My weak resolve snaps like a twig.

Electricity crackles through my bloodstream, Oliver's mouth *finally* coming to rest over mine. My fingers dig into his sides, dragging him backward until we hit the door as one solid unit.

The soft facade of his touch fades, fingers grappling at the back of my neck and into the unruly strands of hair resting there. He kisses like he's starving—licking, sucking, and biting down on my lip until it bleeds.

He tastes like morning dew, like honey droplets dripping from a flower petal. Behind that, though, is a faint hint of the peppermint candy always in Oliver's mouth.

I barely feel the first tear that slips through, but when our mouths break apart and his lips chase the wetness down my cheeks, it's impossible to ignore.

"I've got you baby. It's okay."

It isn't. Nothing is.

“You’re not Oliver.”

The person wearing my best friend’s face moves into view, knocking their forehead to mine.

“No, but I can feel him just enough to know that he’s worried about you.”

“Can you talk to him?”

“No, just a vague feeling.” Their lips touch featherlight to mine again, but then they step away, taking all the warmth from my body with them. “Does this make you happy?”

How in the world do I describe the ache that seeing him brings? How do I express the relief and the fear that opens like a gaping chasm in the pit of my soul?

“It hurts.”

A faint orange glow envelopes his body with the buzzing heat penetrating my skin as his palm touches my cheek. “He has to go for now.”

Confusion swims to the forefront of my mind, but it’s replaced by a heavy cloud of exhaustion. It blankets me, presses down until my eyes close and the world feels like a distant afterthought.

“*Sweet dreams, little love.”*

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four

I DON'T KNOW what I'm looking at, but I know I am much too sober for it.

Silver hair. Dark t-shirt under a leather jacket. Hands shoved in the pockets of his dark jeans. Green eyes that are inhumanly bright.

"Why is he here?" I cast a side eye to Mace where he sits at the foot of my bed.

He has the nerve to squeeze my ankle as if I'm some feral cat he doesn't want to spook.

"You passed out. He just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Waking up in my bed with Mace's worried stare almost had me convinced the episode in the bathroom was a horrible nightmare, but when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and saw *him* standing beside the bed, that tiny pinch of relief skittered away.

The stranger's smile is soft and sweet and very unfitting for how my nerves prickle at his presence.

He bends down to my level and holds his hand out. "I'm Ash."

And I'm having a mental health crisis.

Still, I take his hand and give it a firm shake. "Blake." Before we let go, I tug on his arm so he stumbles forward, and somehow only find curiosity instead of surprise in his eyes. "Are you stalking me?"

A wider, more ominous smile spreads across his lips as he presses them to my ear. "I live here too, remember?" He backs away, putting a gap between us I never should have closed in the first place.

He’s watching out my window, staring down the old willow tree visible at the water’s edge.

Great. I’m being haunted by a tree spirit who happens to dabble in taking on the face of my best friend.

That’s lovely.

“Creepy tree spirit.”



Apparently Ash can’t just fuck off back to his tree—no, that would be rational and considerate, two words that don’t apply to this man/spirit/tree/thingy.

Instead, I’m sitting at our little wooden dining table watching Ash send Mara into a fit of giggles while plating up some fried potatoes. When she wheels some over to me, I try to give her a ‘what the fuck’ stare, but she throws on that placating smile and pats my arm.

“I know today was hard, but I’m so proud of you.”

Against all of my wishes, my eyes start to tear up, and I let her pull me down into a hug.

“I love you.” She knocks her forehead on mine, and the brief sense of serenity it causes vanishes the moment she pushes away.

Ash is watching me from the kitchen counter, an amused smile on his lips.

“I’m alive. You can leave now.”

Mara giggles as Ash travels over to the table and plops down in the spot beside me. He brushes a knuckle over my cheek, sending a bolt of something sharp and tingly under my skin. I raise my hands to push him back, but he pivots to wrap his fingers around mine.

“Don’t be so prickly, little love.”

I turn to Mara for help, but she’s got her lips pressed tightly together, obviously and horribly hiding a smile.

“Why are you touching me?” I mumble, pushing food around my plate.

Ash’s smile makes me want to sock him, but he’s still holding my hand, and I can’t seem to make myself pull away.

“Would you like me to stop?”

I open my mouth to say *“fuck yes”*, but there’s a lump holding the words back.

Ash is stroking the back of my hand with his thumb, his shoulder barely grazing mine, but even as my brain screams to back away, my body inches closer—seeking out his warmth.

Mara doesn’t say anything, happily eating away as if my discomfort is completely invisible.

Traitor.

The door opens, and while I expect a similar reaction to Mara’s, instead there’s a record-scratch scuff as Mace’s feet come to a sudden stop.

His brows are scrunched, mouth slightly agape, and head cocked to the side.

Ash’s smile doesn’t waver; he turns it on Mace, and we trade matching looks of concern.

See? He gets it!

Mace has his guitar slung over his shoulder, and he eases it down beside him as he pulls out a chair and sits across from us.

He acknowledges Ash with a nod and turns to me.

“Blake. I’ve got an earworm. Want to workshop it with me?”

Yes, please. Get me out of here.

I push my untouched plate away and get to my feet, only to realize Ash still has my hand in an unwavering grip.

I dart my eyes to Mace, who puts on a smile that he uses to charm unreasonable fans at our shows.

“Thank you for taking care of Blake. He’s really important to us. We’re just going to relax and get some work done. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind inviting you back later.”

Ash’s lips twitch down the slightest bit, but his grip loosens. The moment the contact breaks, a deep chill runs into my veins, and I almost reach for him again.

I catch myself though, clenching my fist so hard my nails bite into my palm.

“Sorry to overstay my welcome,” Ash says, rough voice raising my hackles. “I’ll see you soon, little love.”

He looks as if he’s going to touch me again, but he just reapplies that eerie smile and gets to his feet. Mace takes the hand he offers, and for the tiniest of moments his expression falters.

As soon as Ash is out the door, I collapse back into my chair with a loud groan.

“Mason Summers, I love the fuck out of you.”

Whatever stupor he’d fallen into dissipates with a laugh and a shake of his head.

“Right back ‘atcha. Seriously, though. Are you up for some songwriting?”

Am I? Over the last several weeks, I’ve only managed to put words or chords down to the one song, and even then it was against my will.

“I don’t know why you’re being all Papa Bear right now,” Mara cuts in, and I nearly jump out of my seat. “The guy obviously has a thing for Blake that looked pretty mutual to me.”

“Mara, he looked terrified.”

She crosses her arms and aims those *you know I’m right* eyes directly at me.

“Blake, baby, please invite him over again so I can prove my point.”

Mara is a mix of sweet and scary that I don’t think would work for anyone else, so I promise her I’ll bring him back even though I have no intention of it.

Not just because I have no idea how to contact him, but also because I have no doubt he’ll show up again of his own accord anyway.



That night, I’m drenched in sweat, tossing and turning in my bed with never-ending nightmares playing when I close my eyes.

My body is heavy with exhaustion, sore and screaming from the sleepless nights that have wreaked havoc on it.

Every time I start to doze off, I see Oliver’s body: cold and lifeless. Blue lips. Dripping with water from the lake Mace pulled him from.

“I didn’t want you to see this.” He’d said, taking on the burden like he always does.

We bear it together this time, but I wish I’d listened and stayed in the cabin. Maybe then I could actually get some sleep.

The wind rattles a tree branch against the window, and I bolt upright like a child afraid of the dark. I’ve heard any number of odd noises living

out here, but now that I know *something* is out there, my anxiety has hit a new high.

I wonder what the hell he does when he's not stalking me. Does he just live in the tree and watch the forest animals? Watch us?

Does he wander around the woods pretending to be human?

It's absurd I even have to think about it.

It knocks again, and I'm highly contemplating throwing the window open and breaking the branch just to prove a point when it's followed by a *click.*

I freeze, listening to the soft scrape of the window lifting up. It's old and squeaky, and makes a solid *thud* when it fully opens.

My knees are tucked tightly to my chest, arms wrapped around them, as I glance over and watch a figure crawl in from the darkness.

Someone needs to teach the tree spirit about boundaries, but it isn't going to be me, because for that I'd need to be *breathing*, and based on the burning in my chest I most definitely am not.

"Blake." The voice is soft and familiar, my name rolling off their tongue like a sigh of relief. "You're safe. I promise."

Oliver.

Fuck this creature so hard.

A large rush of air clears my lungs, and as much as I don't want to, I reach for the body as soon as it comes close.

They climb over me, sprawling out on the bed beside me and pulling me down to them.

Our lips instantly connect, and even though I know it isn't Oliver—*I know*—I can't hold back from giving in and getting lost in them.

He's smaller than me like this. Not by much, but enough that the fear I can't quite explain when he's Ash is absent.

I cradle his face in my hands and kiss him hard. He gives it right back, gripping my sweat-soaked tank in his fingers and arching up so our bodies collide.

It feels like fire spreading along my skin, lightning shooting underneath. I've never felt an urge so primal, so savage, as the one that tells me to surrender myself to the man—the creature—beneath me.

"I'm yours, little love," he says with Oliver's voice as he breaks away to suck in a breath. "Do what you want with me."

All of my fight is brittle and pointless, because with the ghost of Oliver right in front of me, I can't resist slipping my hands under his shirt and splaying them along his chest.

His skin is warm, flush, unmistakably alive, and I press a series of open mouthed kisses down the pulsing vein in his neck. The gasp he makes rattles in my ears, urges me to the bulge of his throat. It bobs with a heavy breath, and what starts as me sucking the skin into my mouth to taste him turns into digging my teeth in so hard his blood fills my mouth.

"Blake." His voice holds a note of warning, said just as my tongue begins to tingle.

This isn't Oliver, but still I work my mouth harder, taking in more and more until he raises a knee between us and pushes at my chest.

"Blake." The sharp command cuts through the haze, and I slam my eyes shut as they begin to water.

"Fuck." The tears taste like salt on my lips. "Why are you doing this?"

The hand on my chest wraps around the nape of my neck, squeezing with a comforting pressure.

"You said if I gave him back, you'd be mine."

I nearly choke on the sob that wretches out, and it's weakness that has me burying my face in his shoulder, taking in the familiar scent I can only describe as *home*.

"What if I can't be?" The words are heavy and hard in my throat. "What if I don't want to be?"

Oliver's—Ash's—skin glows a deep orange, brighter and brighter until my eyes slam shut in protest. I don't have to see him to know he isn't Oliver anymore. I can feel the shift in my bones, in every fiber of my being.

"Little love," his deep voice rasps in my ear, arms wrapping securely around my waist. "You already are."

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five

I'VE STRUMMED my guitar into oblivion, but nothing comes out. My muse is dead—literally—and I'm tired of drowning in the sadness of it.

If I didn't love the thing so damn much, I'd chuck it in the river.

Soft fingers rub circles along my ankle, slow and sensual and driving me mad.

I shoot Ash a glare where he sits with my legs in his lap, but all I get in response is a lazy smile.

My head thunks against the trunk of the willow tree. "How do you do it?"

"Hm?" Ash's hand travels up my leg, fingers pressing into the underside of my knee.

"The Oliver thing?"

At first, I thought bringing it up might upset him. Whatever his deal is, it can't feel good having to pretend to be someone else with the person you … like, for lack of a better word.

However, he simply shrugs and keeps drawing patterns on my skin.

"It's a transfer of energy. My existence remembers his and mimics it. That's my biology."

"What about this version of you?"

Now his attention drifts to my face. "What about it?"

"Where does it come from?"

Ash purses his lips and pushes my knees up so he can rest against them.

Rude.

“A long time ago, there was a man who used to visit this tree. He spent what would be considered years for you humans seeping his energy into the roots. His essence I suppose is wound into the same space my energy resides.”

“What would you look like if you weren’t trying to be human?”

Never in a million years did I ever think this is the kind of conversation I’d be having with someone I share a bed with, but the longer he hangs around, the more I feel the need to know.

Ash flicks his tongue across his grin, and I’m ashamed to say I watch it with rapt attention.

“One day, little love, but not today.”

I push out my bottom lip and cross my arms, belly rapidly heating at the laugh he barks out.

“You’re a silly human, Blake Monroe. I am captivated by you.”

Fire burns in my cheeks, and I stare up through the leaves to avoid getting any hotter.

“I’m being stalked by a tree spirit, Ash.”

His lips brush the tops of my knees. “Is it stalking if you enjoy my company?”

“I tolerate your company, smartass. You know damn well you’re here because you give me Ollie.”

This time I can sense the displeasure in the air, but I refuse to acknowledge or take it back.

It’s true.

Ash is an infuriating necessity to getting what I want. That’s all this is. It’s not like he’s unaware.

“Cruelty doesn’t suit you, little musician.”

I refuse to feel bad for hurting the feelings of a tree spirit. Hell, I’m not convinced I haven’t suffered a psychotic break and this isn’t all one big hallucination.

“Can you do it whenever you want?”

His hands have moved to my thighs with a rough grip I nearly flex away from, but the surprisingly gentle way he strokes along the inside keeps me still.

“Within reason.”

Each stroke draws him closer to something I haven’t dared ask for. Not when he gives me Oliver, and certainly not when he presents as Ash. It

reignites the heat coiling through my gut, and I hate how my body rises to meet his touch.

"What about whenever I want?"

His grip moves to my waist, and in contrast to the sensual way he's touched me so far, he's rough when he yanks my hips to his.

"Within reason." His lips brush the side of my neck, teasing the skin with a scrape of his teeth.

Is it reasonable to ask him to do it now? To give me Oliver? To kiss me? Touch me? Maybe even ask for more?

Or would that be cruel?

I'm not forcing him to be here. He wants this. He wants me. This is all I'm willing to give him.

Even if my body is begging me to take things further.

Ash doesn't give me the chance, pulling away and putting a distance between us that has me sitting up in alarm.

He doesn't look upset or in a rush to leave—when did I start caring whether he hung around or not?—but instead he's reaching for my guitar and plucking it into my lap.

"I'm still connected to the tree," he says, sitting beside me again. "I can feel your ache and confusion."

I look down at the guitar and back over at him. "You want me to write some stupid song about being horny?"

That does it. That cracks his nonchalant facade.

I've heard him laugh, but this? This sound is pure joy wrapped in pleasant surprise. It sends a shot of inspiration into the hollow creative space of my mind.

"Is that what you are, love? *Horny?*"

It sounds fucking weird coming out of his mouth, and I purposefully strum an ugly chord to show my distaste for it.

"Can you even get laid, tree boy?"

His brows shoot up, followed by the corners of his lips.

My belly drops.

"You aren't my first human," he says so casually it makes the chasm in my gut deepen. "But you are my favorite, so yes, I can *get laid*, but that hasn't been important to me for a long time."

"What if it's important to me?"

He leans forward, cards a hand through my hair, and tips my head back to meet his eyes.

“Well that all depends, little love, on whether you’re seeking the need from me … or someone else.”

Something slithers around my torso and tugs me to the tree, tightening near hard enough to make breathing hurt.

Ash isn’t concerned, watching as more and more vines wrap around my body.

“Ash.”

His eyes close, and he hums softly. “I like the way my name sounds in your mouth.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t used it for something else.”

Bright green eyes snap open just as a vine crawls up my neck.

“Blake.”

Something inside urges me to push. Harder. Find his tipping point. Why?

No fucking clue, but as my heart reaches a hammering speed, I’m not sure I give a shit.

“You could hurt me if you wanted to,” I say as his vine circles around my throat and applies the lightest bit of pressure. “Could take whatever you want no matter what I have to say about it. Why don’t you?”

A soft, sweet hum comes from the guitar situated between us when he drags the pad of his thumb across the string, and a matching noise bubbles in my throat when he takes that thumb and guides it up my sternum.

“I don’t want a doll to play with,” he ghosts his lips over mine, and the grip around my neck tightens. “I want you with all your messy, complicated emotions and *baggage* as you call it. I want the person whose love I’ve felt as deeply in my bark as you feel in your soul. You, little love, are a special kind of temptation.”

When I should be terrified, something else springs to life in my mind. Words that arrive like bubbles popping, a melody that sets itself on loop, and a baseline that sounds like the thump of a heartbeat.

My fingers move of their own accord, my lips buzz with the tune that won’t leave me alone.

Slowly but surely the vines recede; Ash sits back and simply *watches*, doesn’t say a word or comment in any way. He’s a presence that feeds the

monster in my brain, dragging more and more of the insanity I've been feeling to the surface.

When I finally break out, it's crude and stitched together with duct tape and Elmer's glue, but it's the start of *something*.

My eyes find Ash's to be met with a wide-eyed wonder and straight adoration.

I pick up the notebook and pen that have sat discarded on the side the whole evening and scratch down as many words as I can catch from the hurricane in my head.

"So you can feel my emotions if I'm touching the tree?"

After the chaos of throwing a song together in a mindless haze, I've decided that I need to put some distance between Ash and I.

A tiny bit of distance, that is, because I have too many questions to abandon him now.

The water is warm and laps at my chest where I'm submerged in the lake next to the willow. Ash is on the bank, a hand on the trunk, with a soft smile playing on his lips.

"Anytime you touch the tree, I'm flooded with the full scope of your emotions. Unbridled. Unfiltered. Even the bits you push away or haven't decoded—I feel all of it in an instant."

All of the times Oliver and I sat at this tree working through songs flashes through my mind. There was never a time we were here when I wasn't dying inside from how badly I wanted him.

Ash felt all of that? Every bit of pining and desperation I did my best to hide?

"It's addicting at times, taking from someone who doesn't realize they're giving everything away."

I might put on a stoic facade, but my emotions are always brimming at the surface, waiting for whatever I can find to unleash them.

"Did you ever pick up feelings from Oliver?"

I expect his blunt honesty. Likely something about hardly paying attention because he's too fixated on me—I wouldn't find that surprising.

He doesn't, though. Instead of answering, his expression shutters closed, and for a split second, he flickers. It's a sunset hue, a golden sunburnt orange, there and gone before I can blink.

"Ash?"

He looks at me, but I'm not sure he actually *sees* me. His face is blank, eyes vacant, and it stirs up an ugly mess in my stomach.

"Ash?" I climb back to the bank and lay a hand on his knee. "Are you okay?"

His eyes close, and he slumps sideways into my chest. Both of my hands fly up, but I force myself to hold it together and wrap them around his shoulders.

What's happening? Is he back in the tree? Does he leave his body in sleep mode or something when he isn't physically here? *Why* did he leave?

"Ash?" I brush aside some of the silver hair falling into his face. "Please don't scare me like this."

The silence ticks on, my shoulders tightening with every second that goes unanswered.

Two minutes. Four. Six. I lose count at fifteen, and by then my legs are going numb and my back hurts.

I should lay him down and leave him here; surely he'll pop back in when he's ready, but I can't convince my arms to let him go.

So, I turn to put my back to the tree, resting against it and pulling Ash between my knees. Warmth spreads where our skin touches, my fingers exploring the curves of his face, the length of his neck.

There's a pinprick sensation in my fingertips, like the static when your leg falls asleep, and it isn't long before my eyelids begin to feel heavy.

It's like a weighted blanket is draped across me, and even as the throws of darkness start to close in, I'm astutely aware of Ash's body in my arms.

I feel it more than see it when the orange glow returns, Ash shifting between my legs.

"Sorry. I needed to rest."

You could have warned me, but I can't manage to make my mouth move.

Something soft and warm touches my cheek, drawing me closer into a cocoon of comfort.

"Your turn, little love. Sleep well."

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six

MOONLIGHT STREAMS *through the flowing curtains, illuminating the space where Oliver's body meets my own. His bare thighs cage my hips, a hand pressing down on my abdomen, another tangled in my hair.*

In. Out. Up. Down.

He tastes like candycanes, pouring every hitched gasp into my mouth. I lap it up, soak in every spot his caress touches.

"I've missed you so much," I whisper with my hands guiding his movements.

Up. Down.

"I'm here." His voice is soft, breathless, breaking in the middle. "Blake."

His hair curtains my face, eyes squeezed shut as he shudders. "Blake."

Cum splashes on my chest, and I'm seconds away from following him over the cliff.

"Blake—"

"Blake!"

"Huh?" I blink, and I'm standing at the bathroom counter, toothbrush half dangling from my mouth, and Mace is standing in the doorway chewing on the pad of his thumb.

"I think you fell asleep."

Judging by the dried drool at the corner of my mouth, I'd say he's probably right.

I fill my hand with water from the tap and swish it around in my mouth until most of the minty toothpaste flavor is gone, then spit and shake my

head free of last night's encounter.

"Are you okay?"

Pulling my pill box out of the cabinet, I give him an affirmative nod. With the pills dumped into my hand, I count them one, two, three times before tossing them in my mouth and stealing another handful of water.

Maybe I should add an antipsychotic to my roster.

A hand touches the small of my back, and every muscle in my body tenses. Mace must feel it, but still he steps closer.

"I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine."

I don't want anyone but Oliver to touch me, so I step to the side out of Mace's reach.

"Blake. This isn't the first time I've seen you doze off like that. You passed out in the shower yesterday. Mara thought that you had hurt yourself."

"Maybe Mara should mind her own business." I let my eyes go unfocused as I take a piss, only realizing that Mace is still there when I tuck myself away and turn back in his direction.

His arms are crossed, and he's chewing on his lip in a way that always leaves a new miniscule scar behind. Oliver used to bitch at him for it all the time.

"You're scaring me."

I roll my eyes and shoulder past him. There's only one towel left in the hall closet, which means it's time for someone to do laundry, and I might be on rotation for that, but I'm not sure.

When I turn around, Mace is still there.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll call Ash, and he can keep me awake. I'm sweaty as hell, so I'm taking a shower."

"I'm not so sure spending *more* time with Ash is a good idea."

Oh here we go again.

"You were the one who invited him here in the first place."

Mace throws his hands up. "Because I thought he was a concerned friend, or potential friend at least. You've been moping and lonely for weeks, and he seemed … I don't know, Blake. Like he cared. I figured you needed that."

"I do. And he does. What's the problem?"

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “The amount of time you’re spending together isn’t healthy. I swear I hear someone sneaking out first thing every morning. Is that why you aren’t sleeping? Too busy hooking up with this guy you just met?”

I bark out a laugh. “Rich coming from you. Who is it who hasn’t had a girlfriend in years because he cheated on his last one and now no one trusts him?” I take a step forward, close enough I can see the hurt shining in his eyes. “Who I sleep with is none of your business.”

Mace’s expression hardens, jaw clenching as he straightens his shoulders. “Like how you were sleeping with Oliver?”

Something squeezes so hard in my chest that my ribs ache.

“What do you know about that?” We were careful—so fucking careful—because Oliver was afraid.

Mace grapples onto my t-shirt, pitching forward so we’re nose to nose.

“I know that you weren’t the only person he was hooking up with.”

My throat feels like sandpaper when I swallow. “I’m sure I wasn’t.”

“You were in love with him.”

Hot, angry tears threaten my eyes. “And?”

Mace’s entire body deflates on a sigh, and he pushes off my chest to take a step back.

“Dammit, Blake.”

“What?”

There was something else, I can see it. The hesitation, the bone deep sadness I feel in my own soul. It’s there in him right now.

“What does it matter if I was in love with him? *He’s dead.*”

“Because I was in love with him, too.”

The hurt is unfathomable. It sears across my skin like a branding iron.

“He only ever came to me when he needed an outlet. I wasn’t the person he fucked out of passion or love—it was transactional. But somewhere along the line, it started meaning more to me.”

No. No, no, no, no. I don’t want to hear this.

“Shut up.”

“I stopped having sex with him because it hurt too much, but I saw him struggling. I saw him deteriorate little by little, and there was nothing I could do about it.”

“Stop.”

“You aren’t the only one broken by his death. We’re all hurting. *I’m hurting*, and it’s so fucking hard to hold everything together when I’m afraid you’re about to off yourself, too.”

I shove him as hard as I can until he stumbles out of the doorway, and then I slam the door shut and lock it just as the tears start streaming down.

“I’m not going to hurt myself,” I choke out, stripping off the clothes that feel like they’re strangling me. “Fuck you, Mason.”

I can’t take it anymore. I’m suffocating.

The shower heats up fast, steam billowing into the room like an eerie mist. I shove open the bathroom window and call out in a hushed voice, “Ash. I fucking need you.”

The wind picks up, the leaves rustle and sing, and by the time I dip my head under the water to let the roar drown everything out, I can sense him.

My skin prickles, almost burns, but before I can open my eyes, there are hands on my body. I don’t recoil, I sink into him, relaxing with my back to his chest as Ash’s hands explore my thighs.

“What do you need, my love?” His lips trail from my ear to my neck down to the base of my throat.

“Everything hurts.”

Part of me wants to ask for Oliver, but another part of me is burning with a nasty betrayal that tastes like vomit on my tongue.

“Make it stop.”

Ash’s teeth scrape across the top of my shoulder, and his hands slide along my arms, lifting them above my head and around his neck.

He takes my flaccid cock in his fist and strokes it to life. Kisses flutter along the expanse of my shoulder, and it’s only when I’m hard and snug in the palm of his hand that Ash bites down on my shoulder blade, breaking skin.

I almost scream, but his other hand covers my mouth and nose. Not completely. His fingers are spread just enough to take in small huffs of air.

“Think about me. Only me. The feel of my hand. My lips. My voice telling you how good you feel against my body.”

That’s when it sinks in: Ash is naked behind me. His warm skin touching mine. His soft cock hanging heavy between his legs and pressing up to my ass.

He’s seen me. He’s touched me. He’s intimately familiar with the way my body reacts to his touch.

Only ever in Oliver’s body, though. Never his own. Never where I was thinking about *him.*

“I’m going to close my fingers,” he breathes into my ear, still languidly stroking me. “I want you to take in a full breath, slowly, and I won’t move my hand until you come. Understand?”

When it comes to sex, I’m always the one in control. I’m the one tending to my partner’s needs, finding what brings them the most pleasure and going there.

Taking orders doesn’t come naturally to me. At least, it never has before.

Somehow, my body sinks effortlessly into his hold, my hips arch into the slick glide of his hand, and I find myself nodding even though I’m more than a little apprehensive.

“Good boy.”

A shot of lust shoots straight to my dick, and I moan into his palm.

“Ready? Three … two … one …”

I take in a slow, steady breath through my nose just as Ash’s hand forms a tight seal around it.

At first, it’s strange and hard to focus on my dick while my body stands confused at the lack of breathing. A twinge of discomfort starts in my chest, and though I squirm, it only earns me a brief squeeze at my base and a refreshed eagerness to his strokes.

“You can do it, baby.” Ash flicks the shell of my ear with his tongue. “You’re mine. Your body is mine. Your orgasms are mine, and I want it, baby. Nothing and no one else matters.”

It burns, but I’m hyperaware of each and every touch. His thumb rubbing circles over the head of my dick, slicking precum along my shaft. The tightening of his fingers on every downstroke. The twist on every up.

I buck into his hold, and he presses tighter to me.

“Come for me, Blake, and I’ll let you scream my name.”

In that very moment, there’s nothing in the world I want more.

It crashes over me like a tidal wave, one hard pulse after another. Ash uncovers his hand from my face and instead loosely holds around my throat.

I barely manage a single gasp before I’m doing it, hoarsely shouting, “Ash” into the shower spray.

Several minutes pass until he’s cradling my limp cock in his hand, fingers stroking my cheek as his lips mark my jawline.

“Fuck.” Pain throbs in my chest, skin burning hot under Ash’s touch. The tension is gone but there isn’t a part of me inside or out that doesn’t *hurt.*

Ash’s relaxed hold transforms to alarm as the air seesaws in and out of my lungs too fast to be effective.

He spins me around to press my back to the wall, tilting my head back and pressing his fingers along my throat.

“Too much,” he mumbles and cups my cheek in his palm, lowering his eyes to mine. “I’m sorry.”

And then his mouth is on mine and it’s less of a kiss and more like he’s forcing his breath into my lungs.

The world spins, my knees buckle, and if it weren’t for Ash holding me up, I’d fall flat on my ass. That orange glow surrounds us, my skin burning hot in its wake.

Just before it becomes too much, Ash breaks away, and whatever tree spirit magic he was weaving over us vanishes.

With one arm draped around me, Ash reaches over to shut off the shower, never once taking his attention off of me.

“Are you alright?”

“I kinda feel like someone pulled the drain plug on all my energy.”

Maybe that’s what two weeks of sleepless nights will do to you.

He waits until I’m steady on my feet, then steps out of the shower and grabs the towel I’d carelessly discarded at the edge of the sink.

The odd shapeshifting he does already has him dry and in clothes, and I’m a little sad I didn’t get a chance to return the favor.

I take the offered towel and wrap it around my waist, feeling more exposed than I should for a guy who just got jerked off.

“I think I should stay away for a while.”

It’s the first time I’ve ever heard him sound timid, and it has all my wheels spinning into overdrive.

“Excuse me?”

He clears his throat. “You need to rest.”

“What I need is for everyone to stop deciding what’s best for me themselves.”

“I’m not debating this with you, little love. I’m leaving, and I won’t be back for a while.”

It feels like a wall of concrete is slapped between us, and if Ash is anything like the rest of the people in my life, anything short of taking a hammer to it is futile.

That doesn’t mean I won’t throw a few fists.

“You can’t do that,” I bark, and his eyes lock intently on mine. “You can’t take him from me.”

Our bathroom is small, so it only takes a handful of steps before he’s invading my space and backing me against the wall.

My heart flutters like it’s trapped on a thrill ride.

“Let me remind you that I *choose* to treat you like a lover as opposed to a pet, but push me too hard and I might reevaluate that decision.”

He glides his fingers into the wet hair at my nape. “Be good for me, little musician, and I’ll be back soon.”

Every nerve in my body lights up like an inferno, warning sirens blaring in my ear so loud it drowns out my raging heartbeat.

“Don’t leave me, please. Not again.” It’s whispered and broken, and the pitying look on Ash’s face makes my mouth fill with bile.

He pulls me into his arms, cradles the back of my head, and presses my face into his shoulder. His body glows a more yellowy-golden hue than normal, and while nothing feels like it changes, when it speaks, it’s Oliver’s softer, slightly lighter voice that comes out.

“I love you. Be good.”

The light grows brighter, blinding, and then in an instant, he’s gone. I catch myself just quick enough for my knees to buckle and take me down anyway.

I’ve lost Oliver once, I can survive losing him again.

Ash is a means to an end.

So, why does it feel like he’s taken a piece of me with him?

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seven

TWO MONTHS LATER

"CAN you beat your drums a little quieter? I can't even hear my damn in-ear."

Mara looks up through her freshly cut bangs and smiles with so much saccharine that the bubbling frustration in my gut nearly tips over.

"Drum quietly is an oxymoron, which is perfect coming from an actual moron."

Mace steps between us with his hands held out and shakes his head.

"Knock it off. This is our first show in half a year. We're down a body, and the last thing we need is bad vibes jinxing us."

I continue on tuning my guitar, plucking each string with a sharp intention. Mara grumbles, but Mace chastises her, and I stick out my tongue which gets *me* chastised in return.

Worth it.

I've been writing up a storm the last few months, some on my own, some with the group, some with Mara or Mace, really wherever the inspiration strikes, and Mace wants to start recording again, so it's time to get some pocket change.

Which means playing shows.

"Sorry I'm late. Blood sugar was low, and I couldn't brain out which candy bar I wanted to eat."

Hopping onto the stage with a keyboard hugged tightly to their chest must be the temporary bandmate Mace was telling us about.

Supposedly, he saw them play at the same open mic night where I met Ash, and when he wanted to get us back into the swing of things, Mace asked if they'd like to play a few shows with us.

"Are you good? Do you need a juice or anything?"

They stop mid-setup fiddling with their keyboard on its stand and blink up at me. It's the tiniest bit unnerving how deadpan they are, and with their dark hair nearly completely covering their eyes, it's hard to get a read on them.

After pulling their phone out of their pocket, they give it a quick glance and a firm nod.

"I'm good. Thanks, though. Do you have a final set list? Macey sent me the songs to listen and practice, but I wanted to make sure I have the order correct."

"Uh, yeah. Here." I hand him a folded up journal page that's been hanging in my pocket with the handful of songs we'll be playing on it.

They take it and set it on top of their keyboard. "Thanks. I'm Kole, by the way, in case Macey didn't tell you. They/he."

"Noted. Blake. He/him. And, um, do you mean Mace?"

Our fearless leader—who has been busy bickering with his sister—half turns with his arms crossed and a hint of a frown.

"Please don't call me that out loud, and thanks for coming."

Kole doesn't look the slightest bit apologetic, but he does give a cheeky salute with a half-cocked smile.

We do a quick round of introductions for the new person, and everyone does one last check of their instrumentals and microphones before the lights outside the curtains dim.

"If anyone is going to throw up or back out, speak now or swallow it down, because I'm not eating these venue fees."

Every last one of us cracks a smile, Mara throws a drumstick at her brother, and Briah gives him a playful shove.

Any tension around the five of us evaporates into a thrill of anticipation.

It's only been a couple of months, but it hardly feels like a typical Shadows in Bloom performance without Oliver.

Still, there's the itch. The one that aches for strumming the chords and getting lost in the words.

Not even death can take this away from us.

Our privacy curtain is basically a big banner, and as Mara starts up a slow drum, Briah steps up to roll it away—and it honestly feels like I might puke.

A hand touches my arm, and for the briefest of seconds when I look over my shoulder, I see Oliver with his optimistic smile, but it's only Kole tugging me to the side so they can see around me.

"Try to keep up."

They laugh under their breath, and as Mace starts in behind Mara's beat, it feels like for the first time in a long while that things might be alright.

Even if just for this blip in time.

The first few songs go off without a hitch. The air is hot and singed with energy. Our two front people are bounding about the stage like they were born for it—fuck I missed this.

I love the stage where we're writing and regrouping, getting a handle on each other again, but nothing comes anywhere close to the thrill of performing.

We're all taking a quick water break when Mace flashes me a mischievous smile, and I know exactly what he's going to do before he even opens his mouth.

"You know, folks, my throat is kind of tired. Why don't I take back up for a bit and let our broody guitarist over here show you what he's been up to."

The fucker.

Mace mentioned wanting to add a certain song to the setlist. One I told him absolutely not more times than I can count, but Mace hardly takes no for an answer when it comes to our music.

Pushing boundaries and comfort zones and shit like that.

Mace tosses me his mic and disappears behind the stage to presumably mess with our in-ear settings. A few seconds later he comes back with my acoustic guitar and takes my electric one before I can complain.

Alright. Looks like we're doing this.

Somehow, the lights get even darker, but I focus on the strings and the soft sounds they emit.

"Blood red petals stain the sheets
Clenched between my thighs.
Poison ivy at my feet
Tangled with the bright moonlight.

You come in waves,
You come in dreams,
Only in the dark you stay
I'll set fire to the calvary
If you'll just give me my way.
It's so fucking embarrassing,
The things you do to me.
The way I let you climb inside,
I'm a puppet on your string.
I'm tired and I'm filthy
But I cannot look away
Your sweet temptation tastes like
All the things I hate."

The second verse starts up, and the keyboard kicks in behind me. A look over my shoulder shows Kole with his eyes closed, fingers flying over the keys, and a colossal wave of emotion crashes over me.

They don't know this song. The others have barely heard me fumbling through it. But here they are, playing along anyway.

Hearing the crowd pick up on some of the words after one listen is mindblowing, shouting back a chorus to me that I've only ever heard in my own head.

Mara joins in just before the bridge, and there's a swell of pride in my chest that nearly chokes me up.

These are my people, and I'd relive every heartbreak that's led me here to keep them in my life.

"Alchemic reactions your touch ignites,
breathes my broken body back to life.
You're in my dreams, you're in my head,
Like the ghost of what I can't forget.
Sweet temptation on my tongue,
Here lies where I always run."

With the lights in my eyes, most of the crowd is a blur of moving bodies and screaming voices. My chest heaves with every hurried breath, ready for one final adrenaline hit when something snags my attention.

It's someone at the front of the stage staring up with an unnerving intensity. They don't elicit any fear, and they aren't familiar in any way, yet I can't look away.

As soon as our eyes meet, a slow smile forms on their lips, and the pit in my stomach drops out from under me.

Ash.

I can't explain it, but somewhere deep in my gut, *I know*.

The high of performing, of meshing energies with my bandmates, with the crowd, has my nervous system soaring.

I rush over to the stairs at the edge of the stage and pass my guitar to Mace, who picks up the song without question. Bounding down the steps with mic in hand, I fist bump a couple of people dancing along before stopping in front of the non-stranger.

"It's so fucking embarrassing,
The things you do to me.
The way I let you climb inside,
I'm a puppet on your string.
You're in my dreams, you're in my head,
Like the ghost of what I can't forget.
Sweet temptation on my tongue,
Here lies where I always run."

As soon as the chords fade out with roars of shouts and applause, I hand the mic up to whichever bandmate is willing to take it from me and lean in close.

"You. Me. Now."

Their lips tip up, and there's no hesitation when they grab my hand and drag me through the throng of people. I'm sure my bandmates are all kinds of confused, but right now I can't bring myself to care.

It's been two months. Two, long, excruciating months.

I thought losing Oliver all over again would be the worst of it, and there are still nights I wake up screaming his name and end up crying on the bathroom floor, but the pure relief at seeing Ash, at *feeling* him here, ignites something deeper, darker inside of me.

We make it to the dingy bathroom hallway littered with random patrons, but before I can jump him and ask what the hell is going on, Ash leans over and whispers, "wait here," before disappearing into the bathroom.

I open my mouth to shout something indignant, but the door swings back open and—Oh.

It's Ash.

In that ugly maroon sweater with his silver hair half pulled back and a lazy smile that does butterfly-like things to my stomach.

Bright green eyes stare back at me as the door swings closed, and months of repressed emotions simmer to the surface.

“You absolute fucking asshole.”

That doesn’t hinder his grin in the slightest. In fact it gets even bigger as he corners me against the wall, bracing an arm above my head and a hand on my hip.

As if I’m some feral feline about to bolt.

“You recognized me.”

With a scoff, I dig my hands into the fabric of his sweater and crane my neck back to show off my scowl.

“I should kick your ass for trying to hide from me.”

He buries his grin in the side of my neck, and even as I slide a hand up into his hair and yank, I arch into the press of his lips.

It’s embarrassing how desperate I am for him to touch me, but it’s his own fault for disappearing for so long.

“Oh, how I missed you, little love.”

Ash’s tongue teases the hollow of my throat, teeth scraping my neck like a tantalizing promise.

“Sure have a shit way of showing it.”

He stops right in the middle of leaving a dark hickey I have no chance of hiding.

“I am sorry for taking your love away.”

Despite the hot breath warming my skin, the words send a chill down my spine. The cold seeps into my bones, pooling in my fingertips that I shove beneath his sweater.

“Don’t you dare bring Oliver up when I’m mad at you.”

His skin pebbles beneath my touch, even as I dig crescents into it. Our eyes meet when he pulls away, a tiny whimper escaping at his absence.

“Careful, little love, or I might get the impression you missed me, too.”

Blood floods my cheeks, and his haughty expression drops. For a moment, he’s caught off guard with his lips parted and his eyes wide.

“Blake.”

My fucking name. So much adoration shouldn’t be able to come from something so goddamn possessive.

I want him to kiss me. To make up for lost time and turn me inside out. I want his lips, his hands. Hell, I want to see the dick I felt but never got to touch.

He doesn't. We're perfectly secluded away, but that isn't enough for him. He drags me by the hand out to where people are dancing, jumping, shouting to whatever music is going through the speakers now that the band is finished up.

Ash pulls me to him with a smug little smile, twisting me in his arms to a position that mirrors our shower escapades too much.

An arm loops around my waist to keep me close, but as his hips start to rock, mine follow like they're magnetized.

The air quickly becomes heavy around us, my touch-starved body perking up at every point of contact. It hurts to breathe. My pants are tight.

I arch in his hold, and he laughs into the crook of my neck.

"I'll give you whatever you need, little love. Simply ask." He drags his lips across my jaw and groans into my ear.

My nails bite into his skin, but he doesn't flinch. That shouldn't turn me on, in fact nothing about this man should turn me on, but there's been a steady burn of arousal going in my gut since the moment I saw him from the stage.

"Sounds more like you want me to beg."

His tongue flicks across his grin.

"I wouldn't be opposed."

Fuck this. I'm past begging. Past asking for permission.

"If you don't kiss me right fucking now, I swear to whatever god or spirit you answer to that I will—"

Ash's mouth collides with mine, and for the first time in months, I'm breathing. Not just oxygen but *him*. The scent of soil and rose petals. Rough, calloused fingers stroking my hip bone.

He tastes like fucking honeysuckle, and damn if that doesn't make me want him more.

Fingers wrap around my throat and hold me still as he breaks away. My growl rumbles against his palm at the smile he brushes down my jaw.

I'm going to fucking bite him.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Ash."

The little nip of his teeth on my skin is also going to get him bitten.

“You’re rather cute when you’re desperate.”

My glare meets his amused, imploring gaze.

“Fuck you.”

His mouth closes over mine, but he doesn’t apply any pressure, only squeezing his fingers around my throat.

“Whatever you want, love.”

All of my self control withers away. All of the anger and aggression.

I don’t want to fight with him.

“I want you,” I say as my body finally sinks into his hold. “Just you.”

Ash hesitates. I feel it in the way his lips move slowly and steady on mine, in the loose hold of his arm around my waist, and the flex of his fingers on my throat.

When I try to kiss him back, he breaks away and drops his chin to my shoulder.

There are too many people. Too much noise.

I twist around in his arms and am surprised by how easily he lets me. His eyes flit up to mine, and I shove both hands into his hair to tug him closer.

“If you want me, take me. Before I change my mind.”

There’s no denial left in me. No doubt that there is something about Ash himself that draws me to him, not just his ability to look like Oliver.

I don’t understand it, but right now my body is on fire. Dying to be touched. Dying to be used.

“Oh, little love.” His mouth falls on top of mine, soft, patient. “*My love.*”

His. I’m his.

That one acceptance feels like surrender.

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eight

MY CHEST HITS THE COLD, hard brick of the alleyway, but the sting is quick to fade with soft, warm lips marking the column of my neck.

Ash's fingers have a death grip on my wrists, shoving them above my head to give him room to press every inch of his body against mine.

I gasp as the heel of his free hand presses on the swell of my erection.

"What are the chances—fuck—that you have lube and a condom?"

Ash's lips curve up against my neck. "You won't be needing those."

The words have my body breaking out in shivers, and though my dick likes the sound of bare and rough a hell of a lot, the rest of me does not.

"Ash." I twist enough to see his face, and he pauses his exploration to meet my gaze. "I haven't had anyone inside me since … in a really long time."

He watches me carefully, taking in what I have to say, and then nods.

"I will not hurt you in that way. Do not worry."

And then he does the worst—or possibly the best—thing and bites down on my shoulder.

My wrists ache from his hold, my hips are sore from the brick, and now my neck throbs from the pinch of his teeth—I *need* him to hurry up with the fucking.

"You can hurt me," I tell him. "Don't be soft with me. Some lube and fingering. The rest is fair game."

He smiles into my skin, and fucking finally he pops the button on my jeans and shoves them down to my thighs. My boxer-briefs are tight and straining, but he takes his time feeling the material over my dick and ass.

“Ash, please.” I arch back into him, and he chuckles into my ear.

“So desperate for me,” he groans, squeezing my wrists tighter. He palms my ass and pushes my hard on to the brick with a rough shove. “I wonder how much you’ll beg if I neglect you weeping little dick.”

His fingers slip beneath the band on my boxers and burrow between my cheeks. The pad of one touches my hole, and I hate how I gasp and coil in on myself.

“Breathe,” he whispers, followed by the strangest sensation of wetness pooling where his finger rubs circles on my hole. “Don’t fight.”

He pushes a finger inside, and my body just *gives* into him. I squirm because he’s moving so damn slow, and it feels strange, but then he’s pushing a second finger in, and once again my body accommodates the stretch.

“What are you—”

“Liquid aphrodisiac.” A third finger has my insides burning, but then the wetness increases and the pain fizzles out.

Right. He might look like it, but Ash isn’t human.

“Look at you, love. Trembling on my fingers.” He thrusts and spreads them inside me as deep as he can reach. “Do you think you can handle my cock?”

I have to bite down on my tongue to keep from giving him the satisfaction of hearing how fucking desperately I want it.

“Why don’t you fuck me and find out?”

His fingers disappear too suddenly, and then a hard smack lands on my ass cheeks.

“You’re a mouthy little brat.” There’s a smile in his voice, and the palm of his hand lands another slap on my ass. “Such pretty, pink skin. I wonder how dark it will bloom after I pound this needy, greedy little hole.”

Seconds pass without his touch, but it might as well be hours. It’s agonizing wondering if he’s going to touch me, smack me, or finally put his dick in me.

“Ash.” If he wants me to beg, I’ll fucking beg. “You left me for two months. Please. Don’t make me wait any more.”

A deep, guttural growl rumbles from his throat, and the head of his dick slips between my cheeks to prod at my thoroughly stretched hole.

“You are mine,” he rasps into my ear. “And I will do to you as I please.”

More of the aphrodisiac touches my skin, and the head of his dick pops past the first ring of muscles. I gasp, and it's all that I have time to do because his hips press forward and bury himself straight to the hilt.

There isn't a moment of respite. Fingers tighten on my wrists, rubbed raw and abraded by the brick, and he pulls the length of his dick all the way out to the tip before slamming it back inside.

Ash starts up a punishing pace that has my entire body on edge, pleasure and pain warring so strong that any hope I have of keeping composure is stripped away in an instant.

"Ah, ah, ah—fuck—harder!"

Something sharp and jagged twists around my wrists as Ash's hand falls to my throat. He pulls me back into his chest, pressing firm under my jaw.

"Good boy. Taking me like a good little human slut."

My insides burn.

Slut. Slut. Slut.

"Say it again."

His hips hit at a different, deeper angle, and a near feral scream tears from my throat.

Ash's lips meet the wetness on my cheek, descending to my mouth with a flick of his tongue.

"Squeeze that slutty, greedy hole around me. Just like that. Fucking perfect."

I'm useless, a puddle of greed and horniness, only able to take, take, take, everything he gives me.

"Mine," he punctuates with a harder thrust. "Mine." Again. "Mine." *Again.*

"Ash." I'm teetering on the edge of *something*. Not quite an orgasm, though the friction of my boxers and the wall keeps me *right there*, and not quite the need to stop.

It's full and consuming, my body ablaze and oversensitive to every touch. The smack of his hips on mine. Fingers dancing in their hold around my throat.

Ash smacks my ass right where he's been abusing, and a sob—gurgled and broken—scrapes from my lungs.

"Please."

I don't know what I'm begging for.

"Cry for me, little love. Tell me what you need."

I can hardly breathe through the tears, through the gasps and heavy pressure in my chest.

I throw my head back on his shoulder, delirium making the world spin.

“Kiss me.”

His mouth covers mine, tongue prodding inside while his fingers force my jaw still.

“Oh, how I love you, my sweet, filthy human.”

Oh. Oh no.

That something burgeoning inside me splinters. Stabs straight into my heart, jutting through my ribcage, and nothing I do is enough to quell it.

Crying. Screaming. Begging for it to stop.

Everything hurts, and yet that pain is laced with a sick sense of euphoria.

The moment Ash touches my cock, just brushes his fingers down the underside of my length, I tip over.

My body jerks, cum spurting and staining my boxers, ass squeezing so hard around Ash’s dick he has to slam a fist to the wall to hold himself still. His fingers hold my throat, and he’s buried so deep I feel every twitch.

The pulsing of his cock is in time with the beating of my heart. As soon as the wave passes, as the orgasm simmers and my body starts to relax, warmth floods my insides.

Ash grips a handful of my ass, grinding against me as his cock swells and fills me with his release.

We stay connected as we both come down. The restraints on my wrists fall away, and Ash soothes the stinging cuts and bruises with his thumbs.

“Blake.”

I tip my head back and meet the ghost of a kiss he hovers above my mouth.

“Don’t you dare leave me again.” There isn’t enough heat in my voice, too strung out and tired, but he smiles and gives me his lips anyway.

“I don’t think your ass will let me.”

“Damn right, it won’t.” I free a hand from his grip to tangle in his hair, tugging his lips to my neck. “Now fucking bite me again.”

His tongue flattens over my pulse. “As you wish.”

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nine

ASH'S FINGERS feel like fire on my skin. Scorch marks follow their path from my hipbone up to my shoulder blades, and against all reason, my body arches into the touch.

Maybe it's the way my lips are numb from contact with his, that numbness becoming lidocaine to my brain.

Maybe it's my dick with the permanent zipper imprint I'll be bitching about later.

Or maybe, *just maybe*, it's that guttural growl he feeds into my mouth mid-kiss—"*Good boy.*"

"Fuck you, Ash." My own hands are threaded into his hair, keeping him from pulling further away than what he needs to catch a breath. "I'm not a damn pet."

A hot huff meets my lips, and I catch his between my teeth with a warning nip.

"Of course you aren't, little love."

Little love. What is supposed to be endearing feels suspiciously patronizing, but all I can do is grumble my disapproval, because I'll be damned if I'm going to stop kissing long enough to complain.

"You coming up for air anytime soon?"

Mace's ill-humored snark will do it, though, and I'm pretty certain I draw blood when I snap away from Ash's mouth.

"How about you go fuck yourself."

With a roll of his eyes, Mace goes back to washing the pans we used for breakfast, and I turn back to a smirking Ash.

“Don’t you dare open that mouth unless it’s to shove your tongue in mine.”

His laugh is like gravel in my ears, but it’s his fingers stroking along my waist and the light scrape of his nails down my sides that has embers of arousal licking at my gut.

Do we have a rule about mounting our boyfriends on the dining table?

I dive down to nip the smirk right off his face when a hand on my shoulder drags me back.

“Wha—” A spoonful of eggs is shoved into my mouth, followed by a pat on my head, and Briah plopping into the chair next to me and Ash.

“Love that you’ve got the world’s grossest honeymoon phase going on, but you’ve still gotta eat more than dick, babes.”

Right on cue, my stomach grumbles, but I’m too damn comfortable to even think about moving. Ash must read my mind with his spirit magic nonsense—or maybe it’s the fact that I keep eyeing the plate out of the corner of my eye but refuse to move—because he grabs the fork and holds it in front of my face.

With narrowed eyes, I willingly open my mouth and let him feed me, because you know what? Why the hell not.

I could swear that I hear what sounds like a scoff coming from the sink, but I’m not entertaining that shit today. I’m going to sit here in Ash’s lap, being fed like the good boy I am—fuck him for putting that in my head—and maybe shimmy my ass over Ash’s hard on just to watch him squirm.

Which, of course, he does, and the slightly painful way his fingers dig into my skin while he does? At the first opportunity I’m jumping this man.

Spirit.

Whatever.

“So.” Mace’s voice is loud and clipped, all four of us stopping to look in his direction. “Oliver’s birthday is coming up. I kept the day free in case we wanted to do anything for him.”

Waves of nausea crash along my ribcage, and the horrid taste filling my mouth has me leaning further into Ash. His brows furrow, but he doesn’t hesitate to pull me into his chest.

“Are we going to bury him?” Mara asks in a hushed voice amongst the silence. “He can’t live in his old room forever.”

“Why not? I’ve got my momma in a locket.” Briah kicks her leg up on the table and fingers the locket around her neck.

Mara crinkles her nose. “I hope you take that off when you have sex.”

Briah grins. “Why? Don’t like an audience?”

I normally love my bandmate’s banter. It’s a highlight even when I’m feeling at my lowest moments. Right now, I can barely stand it.

Ash cups the back of my head and holds my face into the crook of his neck.

“Can you all take this seriously, please?”

The crack in Mace’s words hit us all like whiplash. All of my muscles atrophy, latched onto Ash as if he could be a lifeline in the brewing storm.

“We are,” Briah says with a conviction that challenges Mace’s plea. “A part of us is dead, Mace. We all know it. We feel it. Every moment.”

“This is hard for everyone,” Mara chimes in.

Mace scoffs, and somehow my shoulders get stiffer. “Sure looks real hard for the guy too busy giving his boytoy a hickey instead of paying attention.”

Hot breath deflates my chest and refuses to return. The voices get louder, but they’re nothing compared to the intense ringing in my ears and the burning in my lungs.

Arms clamp around me like an anchor to my anxiety running amuck.

Ash doesn’t speak up for me. He doesn’t add to the myriad of voices and loud noises.

He presses a kiss to the top of my head and without hesitation rises from his seat with me firmly held in his arms.

It isn’t until my back hits the bed that I finally gasp in a lungful of air, and it’s followed by a trembled, broken sob. Ash grasps my wrists when I try to dig my palms into my eyes to stop the tears, and he holds them loosely above my head while stroking my hipbone with the soothing fingers of his free hand.

“Breathe for me, little love.”

I’m trying. I’m really fucking trying, but breathing while crying only makes the pain in my chest worse, which only makes my sobs louder.

“Ash,” I manage to croak out, and when he leans in closer, I arch up to crash my lips into his. “Anything I want. That’s what you said.”

He hums into the kiss, tongue darting across the tears at the corners of my mouth. “Within reason.”

I tug on my hands, but he doesn’t budge, and that strangely settles some of the panic threatening to collapse on top of me.

“I need you to fuck me, and I need you to make it hurt.”

His green eyes glow an almost golden shade of yellow, much like when he’s changing forms.

“Define hurt, little love.”

My breaths are still rough and rattle my frame, but I do my best to look him straight in the eyes and hold my voice as steady as possible when I say,

“Make me bleed. Bruise me hard enough that people ask questions. I want to be raw and feeling it for days. I want you to tear me apart and put me back together.”

“Is that all?”

The humor in his voice is almost offensive, but I’m too much of a mess to care.

“Shut me off. I don’t want to feel this anymore.”

Lips descend on mine, much too soft for the depravity I’ve asked for.

“Poor, sweet human doesn’t know what he’s asking for.” Another kiss, this one with a growing smile. “But I’ll give it to him. I’ll make him cry and beg for mercy. And then I’ll kiss the wounds better again.”

Yes. Please. That’s exactly what I need.

My wrists are still marked and sore from our escapades in the alleyway, but when his grip transforms from his hands to prickly vines, the whimper in my throat is equal parts pain and relief.

“Tell me where it hurts the most.”

“My chest.” Where my heart is pounding, straining the strings and bruising the vessel, aching in an endless cycle.

Ash strokes a finger down the column of my throat, pressing his palm to my sternum and grasping the neck of my shirt in his fist. He rips it up over my head, tangling it with the vines at my wrist.

Cool fingers skitter along the skin of my chest, pressing and tugging and covering it in little red marks. It’s not painful but jarring, and I can’t help but to push up and meet the touch.

“Give it to me, sweet human.” He lowers his mouth to the marks, trailing his tongue over them. “Give me the pain, and I’ll give you the pleasure.”

My whole body shudders, mesmerized by his mouth as he licks, sucks, and bites along my skin until it breaks out in prickles of oversensitivity.

His teeth graze my nipple, hard and pebbled, and when my body jumps, he pulls it into his mouth. Suction has my body rising to meet him, but a

heavy hand comes down on my hip, tugs on my pants and boxers, and rips them clean off my body.

“Oh fuck.” My hard cock springs up, and immediately Ash wraps a hand around it.

“Does it feel good when I hurt you?” he whispers into the V of my hips, pumping my cock excruciatingly slowly.

His lips bypass the base of my cock to brush along my balls, and the only warning I get is a quick flash of his smirk before he’s pinching the skin between his teeth and sucking them into his mouth.

My hands are still held hostage, so there’s nothing to stop the shout of surprise that I make. Ash clearly has no intention of letting me be quiet, because as he sucks and nips at my ballsack, he’s pumping my cock with an increasingly aggressive fervor.

The skin is dry and raw, but still my cock weeps at the touch, throbbing and begging for the hot cavern of his mouth.

“Please,” I whine, eyes glued to his as they watch me, glowing a bright green.

The vines around my wrist tighten, and more slither across my shoulders and around my neck. They scrape across the skin, a thinly veiled threat, but don’t dig in.

“You’ll take what I give you, baby. All of it. And nothing more.”

If I so much a nod, a thorn will pierce my throat. I close my eyes and let my head fall back on the pillow.

His growl rumbles over the head of my dick. “Good boy.”

Lava forms in my gut, burning through me and giving birth to a wildfire of flames at the first swipe of his tongue through the mess at my tip.

I bite back a moan, hips jumping to chase his warmth, and his palm lands a stinging smack on my thigh.

My cock leaks as my skin burns, and by the time I feel his lips hit the base, I’m dangerously close to losing control.

I want to beg. I want to moan and whine and fuck myself into his mouth, but I can’t. All I can do is lay here and take it.

Take his mouth and tongue working me into a frenzy. Take his hands kneading my ass and thighs. Occasionally he pinches the skin, leaving angry, red welts in his wake.

An orgasm is waiting at the base of my spine, hovering just out of reach, and when he grips my balls in the vice of his fingers, pain cascading along

my nerves, I give in to the need to make a sound: a mix between a whimper and a moan.

The vines wrap tighter, scrapping my skin and drawing trickles of blood. There's a pressure on my windpipe that's threatening—thrilling even—but not restricting.

Ash pops off my dick, leaving kisses and lovebites down the straining length.

"Does my good boy need to come? Or does he want to be my toy for a while longer?"

I'm torn between wanting the high of the release and the elation of the haze he has me immersed in.

He's silent as he watches me, coming to a decision on his own.

"You can come, love, whenever you want. But I'll keep playing with you until I'm satisfied."

Yes, please. That's what I want.

The overwhelming need to find release vanishes. The feeling in my gut is still rising, but I'm no longer trying to fight it off or urge it forward.

Instead, I focus on the sting of the thorns, on the burn of Ash's fingers breaking skin, on the sinful sounds that leave his mouth while he sucks me deeper.

It's like floating in a sea of deprivation, all of the sensations colliding together to fry the nerves until there's nothing left to feel.

When I come, it's deep in Ash's throat while he hums encouragingly around me. My hips buck forward and are met with bruising slaps to the skin. My back bows, vines closing around my throat and blocking the oxygen.

It's all over in a matter of seconds, and then air is rushing into my lungs and the world becomes a fuzzy monochrome of grays and whites.

I know he's touching me. Softly. Reverently. But there's nothing left for me to give.

I close my eyes and let the world drift away, sinking into the depths of surrender.

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ten

THE MEMORIES ARE vague and tinted blue, warped like looking through a kaleidoscope. Squirming out of Ash's heavy, slumbered embrace. Padding down the hall and slipping into Oliver's room.

The mess of blankets beckoned me, and I crawled beneath them like a worm burrowing into its home.

That's where I've been. For hours. Days. Every time I open my eyes, the world feels like a weight strapped to my shoulders, and the waves of sleep pull me back under.

One or twice I've come to with arms wrapped around me, and each time I bury my face in their chest and breathe in the scent of wet grass and rose petals until I fall into another dream.

Most of the time I'm alone, but I hear the voices. Sometimes hushed. Sometimes hollered. But they almost never breach the doorway.

Almost.

"He needs to eat." It's so quiet, I wonder if it's even actually there.

"I've got him." It's Ash's voice, but softer than usual.

"We can't leave him like this. I know you care about him, but we've been through this before. The longer he wallows, the worse it gets."

"I don't want to hurt him."

"He's already hurting. It sounds cruel, but honestly, I'm half a thought away from getting a bucket of ice water and dunking it on him."

That's Briah. Always ready to tackle any problem with brute force.

It's the most awake I've felt in a while, and the light chuckle that falls out of Ash has my lips attempting a smile.

My limbs are lead, and the effort it takes to roll from my side to my back has a rib crushing groan gurgling from my throat.

The voices skitter to a stop, and then there's footsteps, a hand brushing through the tacky hair on my forehead, and a sigh heavy enough to roll a boulder down a hill.

“Little love.” Ash’s breath is a warm caress on my skin. “Drink for me.”

A part of me wants to protest, but the rest of me is too cold to muster the strength. There’s a straw pressed to my lips, and I only barely manage a few sips before I’m sputtering as my body jerks to the side.

My chest burns, throat stings, and even though the room is darker than a midnight sky, opening my eyes feels like being blinded.

“That’s it, baby. I’ve got you. Breathe.”

A groaned breath sets my body on fire, but the hand pressing into my shoulder turns my mind from a sensory hellscape to a memory playground.

Fingers digging into my skin. Holding me down. Closing around my neck. Lips sucking the air right out of my lungs.

A weight settles on top of me. Hands in my hair. Kisses placed down my neck.

“You’ve got to wake up, my love.”

Teeth pierce the skin at the juncture of my shoulder and throat, and the fog momentarily lifts.

My eyes snap open, staring at the gray darkness of the ceiling.

“Ash?”

“Stay with me for a bit. Can you do that for me?” A hand on my cheek turns my face to the side straight into Ash’s fiercely intense gaze.

“What's going on?”

His expression softens a fraction, forehead falling to rest on mine.

“Do you remember asking me to take it all away? The pain?”

I frown but nod.

He wets his lip, and my eyes track the movement.

“In order to do that, I had to microdose you with a special pheromone. One which makes you rather docile, but when it wears off you become … sad. I do not like you being sad.”

Should I find that sweet or creepy coming from a possessive plant spirit?

“So I get sad and you, what? Fuck me into a coma?”

That wolfish smile should be alarming. Why am I not alarmed?

“If it doesn't put you to sleep, yes, we usually fuck. But I am also happy to lay and hold you while you rest.”

That deep ache has found home under my ribcage, but I swallow down the swell of emotion.

“How long?”

“A couple of days.”

“How many?”

He seesaws his hand, and I narrow my eyes.

“What day is it?”

He tilts his head, blinks slowly, and then lays his head on my chest before speaking.

“The nineteenth.”

Oliver’s birthday.

“It's why I woke you up. Your friends are concerned, and I am aware this day is special to you.”

“Oh are you now?”

Ash’s fingers dance along my arms until they lace with my own.

“I am also aware that you are prickly when you are hurting.”

“Fuck you.”

He lifts his head and ghosts his lips over mine. “If that would ease your soul, my body is yours.”

Hot tears blur my vision, and I shake my head, because despite what my body might have to say about it, sex isn't going to magically make these awful feelings go away.

“If I ask you to do something, would you do it?”

I can practically hear the response before he says it, ringing through my head like an echo chamber.

~~*“Within reason.”*~~

“Yes.”

My neck makes an audible crack as I wind back to look him in the eyes.

“Yes?”

His smile is softer now, almost placating. Even the way he kisses my lips feels delicate and fragile.

“You want to see him. And I know that will hurt you, but it is a controlled hurt as opposed to the neverending pain you've been experiencing.”

My fingers seek out the soft touch of his skin, bare from the waist up likely to accommodate our *activities*. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, and he gives in easily as our chests connect.

"We won't have long," he whispers against my mouth. "His energy is here, but mine is depleted from the constant pheromone use."

I dig my nails into his shoulder blades, press my teeth into his bottom lip, and that's all it takes.

Ash's hand forms a loose hold around my throat, tipping my head back as his tongue dives into my mouth. There's a flash of golden orange and a tingling sensation spreading throughout my body, but within seconds it's gone.

Replaced by citrus and peppermint and a much lighter weight on my lap.

"Ollie." I push up onto my elbows, breaking the kiss to get a good look at the man in front of me.

Deeper green eyes. Pink hair forming a disheveled frame around his face.

He blinks slowly, letting me take him in.



Oliver rolls over so we're neatly tucked into one another, his chest plastered to my back.

"Why do you have to be so moody?"

I shrug my shoulders and try to shimmy out of his hold, but he only grips tighter.

"Have you ever heard of an afterglow? Orgasms are supposed to make you happy and loopy. Not grumpy and dodgy."

I want to shove him away, but his arms are warm, and the swirl of patterns he draws on my skin shrink my resolve to none.

"Hey." Fingers brush through the fluff of hair at my temple. "You'd tell me if this isn't working for you, right?"

The natural thing would be to assure him I'm happy with our arrangement, but all I feel is the dark clouds drawing in closer.



“I hated it,” I say, confusion drawing over Oliver’s face. “I hated every moment in each other’s beds where we pretended there wasn’t something catastrophic between us.”

“Catastrophic?”

He’s staring at me too quizzically. My heart twinges like it’s physically being torn in two.

“Like we weren’t going to destroy each other. Like we didn’t both want it to happen.”

“Blake—”

“We promised that if either of us ever went dark, we’d go out together.”

It’s a truth I’ve kept buried so far down it only rises to life in my nightmares. Memories of promises we made to save each other.

Because if we could keep our focus on keeping one another alive, we’d never have the time to end it ourselves.

“You went dark on me, and I couldn’t follow.”

Oliver’s eyes flash, and I throw my hands out to grab onto him—any part I can reach.

“Don’t you dare take him yet. I’m not done. You can mark your territory later.”

Just as quickly, his eyes return to normal, and I slide my hands up into his hair, feeling the cotton candy softness between my fingers.

“I love you.” Something in my chest cracks at the words. “How could you do that to me?”

Thump.

“How could you just *leave* me?”

Thump, thump.

“Where do you think this hurt is going to go? If I can’t pour it into loving you, what the hell am I supposed to do with it?”

Thump, thump, THUMP.

I grab his hand and press it to my ribs, to where Ash’s vines had stabbed thorns into the skin, squeezing tight enough to bruise and scar. The near scream that comes out has Oliver crowding in closer, squeezing his thighs around my waist and leaning his body over mine until I fall to the mattress.

“Blake Monroe.”

I shake my head, pressing harder on his hand until he pushes his fingers into the half-healed skin.

“I’ll let him destroy me.”

Back and forth his eyes flash, Ash warring with his promise to let me get this out.

“Because there’s nothing left to save. I don’t exist without you, so if Ash wants the shell, if he wants to hurt it, use it, whatever the hell he thinks he can get from it, I’m going to let him.”

It starts as a tickle in my throat, and evolves into a bout of coughs that won’t settle. Then it’s my lungs, acting like they’re completely closed off. Dark spots blot my vision, tears fill and fall, and right when all of my senses start to fade, something warm and wet is shoved at my lips.

The taste of copper spreads across my tongue, and though I try to jerk away, Ash presses in tighter.

“Don’t fight.”

Despite my brain juggling a million tabs at once, my body instinctually complies, and when I swallow the flood of liquid in my mouth, *something* has me lurching to the side and vomiting up my guts.

As my vision clears and a couple good gulps of air reach my lungs, I look down at the bed covered in splotches of red. At first, I think it’s blood. That I just vomited up half the blood in my body, and I’m about to die.

But no. Looking closer, as things come more into focus, it isn’t blood at all.

It’s rose petals.

“What?”

A hand touches the side of my neck, and when I turn, Oliver is gone.

Ash is the one half on top of me, his expression written in a language I don’t understand.

“What’s wrong?”

Still, he doesn’t answer. He leans over to pick up a fistful of petals and crumples them in his hands.

“You are mine,” he says. Slow and firm. No room for protest. “I will fix you.”

“Why?”

He leans down, mouth a centimeter from mine, lips shining with little droplets of red.

“Because, as you humans say, I love you. If I must ruin you to heal you, then I will happily be your destruction.”

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eleven

I DON'T WANT to go on tour.

I don't want to hear the music with Oliver's soul woven through every note.

I don't really want to do anything.

"Hey, Blake?"

Kole is fiddling with a chord on their keyboard, brows pinched tight and nose crinkled like a piglet.

"What's up, bud?" I crouch down beside him and see where the fraying chord held together with worn out duct tape has finally met its maker. "Ouch."

"Do we have any spares?"

"There's usually some in Oliver's …" The words drop off like a heavy stone in my gut. I lick my lips and avoid the pitying stare Kole throws my way. "I'll ask Mace."

Kole shakes their head and hops to their feet. They're small—five foot nothing really—and the movement reminds me of a bunny rabbit.

"I'll ask him. No worries."

They bounce away, and I pull out my phone to check my array of messages from Ash. He mostly hangs out in our gutted, old school bus we use to travel between shows, mostly so we don't distract each other, but partially because him being here sets Mace on edge.

Ash isn't the biggest fan of texting—human spelling isn't his favorite thing—so more often than not, I open my phone to a series of no-context pictures.

The most recent is Ash laying on my ratty travel mattress with a Murdoku book resting open on his chest while he wears an impressively big smile.

Pretty sure that means he found out who the murder was. It's pretty much his only pastime that doesn't involve his tongue in my mouth.

My throat constricts, but I muster up a cough and take a swig of my water to clear it. Now is not the time to be losing my voice or have an emotional identity crisis.

Usually I just peek at our chat and duck out, but maybe I can throw him a bone just this once.

I click open the camera, hold the phone out, and decide against any sort of forced smile. Resting doom and gloom face and all, Ash will just be happy I'm responding.

A few seconds later, an actual message comes through.

ASH:

You need some rest.

ME:

Keep your hands to yourself tonight, and maybe I will.

ASH:

Will give you sleep pollen.

ME:

Why does that sound like you still plan on touching me?

ASH:

Only if you ask, little love.

My dick presses painfully against my fly, and I stamp down on it with the palm of my hand.

Is that something I'm into?

ME:

Take pictures.

ASH:

Noted.

The next reply is another picture, so I take that conversation as finished and focus back on the set up at hand.

Sex with Ash has been a cathartic experience. Every time I get too in my head or start to feel too much, all I have to do is kiss him to get what I want.

There has been lots of kissing and lots of grimey bathroom fucks.

Usually prep work and performing is enough to distract me from whatever fucked up shit is going down in my brain, but with Oliver wrapped up in ever facet of our shows—from the equipment, to the songs, to the in memoriam speech Mace gives every night—there's no escape from the hell raging in my head.

The girls are taking their turn at the bar before we hit the stage, chatting up with some of the regulars who like to attend our shows, so I focus on making sure Mara's drums and Briah's guitar are ready for them.

Everything looks just about where it needs to be except for that one frayed cord on the keyboard.

Mace tends to hop around talking to the bar owner, the sound engineer, and anyone else helping put the tour together, so I have no doubt Kole has been given the run around trying to find him.

There's a supply closet with a broken handle right beside the one-stall backstage bathroom that doesn't even have a door, only a flimsy curtain.

If anywhere back here was going to have spare cords I'm betting it would be this room.

I bop the door with my hip and reach for the light switch only to come face to face with two of my bandmates.

Kole is standing pressed against a shelf, half tangled in cords, with Mace's arms wrapped around their body. Their face is tipped up toward his, eyes half closed that spring open with the flick of the light switch.

"Shit." They jerk back and knock their head into a shelf, and that seems to startle Mace into stepping back.

"Sorry, I—" That's when he spots me in the doorway, shame spreading across his features like a fog.

I want to say I feel nothing, the same I've been feeling for weeks on end, but that isn't true. No, the empty nothingness gives way to a seething anger.

Hot and burning the under layer of my skin.

Is this how Mace felt when he saw me with Ash?

It’s different. Ash is a distraction, a hideout from the hoard of painful memories.

Kole is our new bandmate.

Oliver’s replacement in more ways than one it would seem.

“You’re supposed to be missing him.”

Mace shakes his head like he’s denying what I witnessed with my own two eyes, but the guilt in his eyes only deepens.

“Is this how you mourn? Filling his spot in the band *and* in your bed?”

His sigh is as exasperated as I feel. “It’s not like that. Nothing happened. Kole got tangled, and I was only trying to—”

“Liar.”

Mace’s eyes snap to mine, this time with their own undercurrent of fury.

“Take a breath, Blake.”

I scoff, my throat starting to feel tight as my eyes begin to burn. “You’re a hypocrite.”

He doesn’t rise to the bait, entirely too calm against the cinders abrading my skin.

“We’re on in twenty. Go see Ash.”

“I don’t need Ash. I need you to stop trying to fuck our bandmates. You and Briah were a thing at one point. You were fucking Oliver behind our backs. Now Kole? Thank god Mara is your sister, or I’m sure you’d be sticking your dick there, too.”

Kole is the one who throws themself between us, arms held up placatingly.

“Woah now. I don’t need an intimate history lesson of your band, but I can tell you that Mace is right this time. He was helping me, that’s all.”

I want to bite back. I want to scathe and burn and turn them into just as ugly of monsters as I feel myself becoming, but there’s something about Kole that makes me bite my tongue.

They're innocent.

They haven’t fought the demons we’ve all battled together. They aren’t part of a bond forged in blood, tears, and melodies. They don’t deserve the lash out.

I stomp and weave my way through the ocean of people, hood pulled up to make my escape easier. By the time I push through the front doors, my lungs are full of smoke and ash.

I’m choking.

My lips are turning blue.

My fingers are cold, and my eyesight is blurry.

Why does everything have to be so hard?

Why is everyone moving forward—moving on—like half of our collective soul isn't *gone?*

Why are we playing his songs, singing his words, carrying his ashes around in our bus instead of burying it all in the dirt?

Why can't we let go?

Why can't we bring him back?

Why didn't we fucking notice he was broken and killing himself with the pieces?

I lurch forward, fall to my knees on the asphalt, and cough up a field of rose petals in the middle of the parking lot.

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twelve

THE WORLD COMES into focus like a bullet train. One moment everything is peaceful and dark, the next there's a pain so intense it's as if my body is being torn apart.

I roll to the side and violently vomit the contents of my stomach. This shit actually tastes like stomach acid and burns my throat coming up.

There's a scurry of feet and then someone is brushing the hair off my forehead with a wet rag, soothing a hand along my back, and then wiping my mouth with the cloth when I stop throwing up.

My eyes are crusted shut, and the bright white light in my face as I peel them open isn't any help.

"Who turned on the sun?" I croak, and whoa, my throat feels like sandpaper.

"Sorry." It's a female voice. Soft. Not one I recognize. "I'll turn it down."

A couple of seconds later, the intensity dims, and I'm able to blink my eyes into focus. The ceiling is white and speckled, with a rectangle light right above my head that has thankfully been turned off.

I frown, and when I look to the side, all of the color drains from my face.

There's an IV taped into the crook of my arm, and a nurse in pink scrubs with a patient smile standing beside my bed.

A quick glance around shows no sign of Ash or anyone else for that matter.

My heart hammers like a rattlesnake trapped in a cage.

“Where are my friends?” It comes out in a terrified whisper.

Pinpricks crawl along my skin, and my fingers twitch toward the IV like a bomb that needs defusing.

The woman’s smile softens, and that should ease the queasiness in my stomach, but it only makes the trepidation worse.

“You’re alright, sweetie. You have visitors in the waiting area. I can let them know you’re awake.”

Why am I here, I want to ask, but all I remember is the nighttime sky and street lamps lighting the way to the bus.

Pain.

Rose petals.

Nothing.

Minutes pass, and right when I think I’ve been forgotten, Mara’ bob of blond hair comes rolling into the room.

She wheels as close to the bed as she can and pushes to her feet, transferring to the tiny bit of space at the edge of my mattress and throwing her arms around me.

Briah steps in next, sitting at the very end of the bed with a hand on my ankle. She squeezes softly and reassuring.

I want to smile for them, show them I’m okay, but there’s a heaviness I can’t shake.

“Blake.” My name is spoken in a sigh of relief as Mace breaches the doorway, dragging a wide-eyed Kole behind him.

They have their teeth dug into their thumb, eyes raking over me in a hurried, frantic manner.

Guilt rises out of the confusion, and even though my body feels cold and numb, I open my arm for Kole to step into. They hesitate, but Mace nudges them forward, and they carefully arrange themself in the crook of my arm.

Everyone is quiet, and I can’t help the way my gaze keeps wandering back to the door. Waiting for … someone to come in.

Who’s missing?

My head pounds, throat itches and burns, and I look between everyone like if I count them enough the answer will pop into my head.

“What happened?”

When no one comes forward, just pass uneasy glances between each other, I turn the question on Mace, who is still standing in the door with his

hands in his pockets and sadness swimming in his expression.

“Why don’t we talk about it later?”

His voice is scratchy and comes out with a tremble.

“Blake?” I hear it in my head like light through a fog. *“Listen. I’m sorry. I know this is hard—”*

The memory garbles, and I close my eyes to bring it back into focus.

There’s hands on my arms and dozens of what feel like tiny needles piercing the skin where they touch.

It hurts, but when it hurts, I can breathe.

“Blake!”

The pain is gone, and I’m choking on air again.

“What the fuck are you doing? Get away from him.”

I’m jerked out of the daze by a hand on the back of my neck, squeezing just shy of discomfort. I look up, and Mace is there with his pinched brow and shoulders slumped in defeat.

“You scared the hell out of us.”

Given the cuddle pile I’m squished under, I’m inclined to believe him.

“Did I … did I hurt myself?”

It’s the way Mace’s lips form a hard line, the way his scrunched brows deepens that throws a stone into my gut.

“I’m sorry,” I say, the weight of everything settling on me.

After Oliver, we all kept a close eye on one another. We watched for each other’s tells and signs of relapses. Going on tour was supposed to shake us out of the brooding stupor we’d fallen into.

“I don’t know what happened, but I’m sorry.”

Four pairs of arms come around me, and it’s uncomfortable but welcomed.

These are the people who have saved my life time and time again. I’d go to the ends of the earth for them.

Why does it still feel like something’s missing?

Trickles of moonlight come through the half-blinded window near my bed, and it must be time for meds again because my skin is on fire.

I try to reach for my call button, but my fingers don’t respond. Even my eyes refuse to fully open, stuck in a state where I can only make out light and shadows.

Panic rattles in my chest, taking with it each breath in until there’s no room left for air in my lungs.

Shh. Shh.

Wind whistles through the room, blowing across my skin and raising the hair on my arms. It settles over me with a pressure that feels not quite solid but not imaginary either.

“Shh.” It’s in my ear this time, followed by something soft running from the shell of my ear down the length of my neck, coming to rest on my collarbone just above the hospital gown. *“I’ve got you, little love.”*

Why does that sound familiar?

Something sharp grazes my throat, but I’m still too out of breath to cry out. My mouth is met with a wet warmth. Soft but firm. My lips are parted, and the taste of copper drips onto my tongue.

Hands—unmistakably hands—grasp the side of my face. The lips on mine press down with intentional pressure, and the tongue in my mouth shoves around until a mix of spit and blood drips down my chin.

The burn fades. There’s no gasp of air, just a slow expansion in my chest and a trepid deflation.

Repeat.

“You are mine,” is whispered into the underside of my jaw. *“I won’t let them take what’s mine.”*

Something pinches the side of my neck hard enough that tears spring to my eyes, but then that soft, familiar tongue soothes along the spot before briefly passing over my lips again.

Whoever—or whatever—doesn’t say another word. In a whirl of wind, the pressure vanishes, and almost as if a switch were flipped, my body feels like mine again.

My fingers flex. My eyes flutter open.

The first thing I do is check the window. Closed. Blinds half drawn.

A glance around the room.

Empty.

I hover my thumb over the call button.

I’m not in pain anymore.

Huh.

I place the remote back on the side table and relax onto the pillows.

My tongue swipes across that copper tang, and when I wipe my thumb across the corner of my mouth, it comes back with a dark red splotch and splatters of pink.

Whatever that was, it wasn’t a dream.

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thirteen

MY FIRST SHOW out of the hospital is at a small venue in Nashville known for their hot wings.

It burns my throat like a motherfucker, but it's the only thing that clears away the lingering taste of blood. Every time I sleep, it gets worse, so I'm thankful the new meds feed my insomnia.

Most of the patrons have filtered out with it being after midnight, but the venue stays open until two, so while the others are packing everything back into the bus, I'm sitting on a stool stuffing my face with spicy goodness.

The upside of effectively being put on bed rest while I'm recovering.

"Blake?" Mara's tentative voice saddles up beside me with the *click* of her wheelchair locking into place. "How are you feeling?"

I shrug and hold out a wing to her, but she crinkles her nose at it.

"I feel fine. A little numb, but that's not always a bad thing considering."

Considering Oliver is dead, and I can't feel a damn thing about it.

"Mace told me not to bring it up, but …" She peers over her shoulder and leans in close. "Have you talked to Ash at all recently?"

The name fires off something itchy in my brain. A nagging, anxious feeling.

"Ash?"

Mara's brows pinch, and her lip pouts out, worry etched into every line of her face.

“My brother won’t give us any details, but he shuts us down any time we bring him up. And I know your memory is still fuzzy, but I hoped you might …”

I try to push past the haze that’s been crowding me since I woke up in the hospital, but it’s too dense and only rewards me with a headache.

“I’m sorry, I don’t. I don’t remember what happened, and I don’t know who Ash is.”

Worry wears a permanent line on her forehead. I hate that it’s there because of me.

She plasters on a forced smile. “Make sure you get some rest tonight. No doomscrolling.”

When she wheels away, the burning in my mouth has subsided, leaving behind that dull, metallic taste I’ve done everything to get rid of.

I wish I could sleep off the funk. Make this never ending shroud of forgetfulness fade away.

Someone takes up the seat beside me, and I push the basket of wings toward them.

“Here. Keep you from drinking on an empty stomach.”

The person chuckles, body angled more toward me than the bar.

“Nice to know there’s gentlemen in the rock industry.”

He’s got pretty eyes. Blueish green. Short, curly blond hair. I think he’s wearing lip gloss.

His tongue darts out with a grin. “Like what you see?”

Confident.

I’m not one much for the pretty type. Usually I go for someone who seems as fucked in the head as me—because at least our expectations match—but this constant state of apathy is wearing on me.

I plant my hands on my thighs and lean forward.

“Do you always hit on the first guy you meet at a bar?”

“Only the ones I’ve been ogling on stage all night.”

One of the most hard and fast rules of being a musician: no dating or sleeping with fans.

But it's not like I have Oliver to turn to anymore, and maybe hooking up with a stranger I'll never have to see again will fill this bottomless pit of emptiness.

“You've got my attention.” I raise my fingers to his cheek and watch him shiver, but there's an anticipatory hunger in his eyes. “How do you

want me?”



Pretty boy came prepared with a motel room.

“This isn’t the first show I’ve caught,” he says, turning on me as soon as the door shuts. “But it’s the first one where I could get you alone.”

He twists the fabric of my t-shirt between his fingers, tugging me forward as he steps back.

“Why me, huh?” I duck my head to ghost my lips over his, but can’t quite bring myself to close the distance.

Pretty boy has a grin like the Cheshire cat, and in one beat he has me spun around and pinned to the bed. My back hits the mattress just as his weight settles on my lap.

“Because damaged boys fuck the hardest.”

Soft, cherry flavored lips come down on mine, and despite knowing that I should, I can’t manage to return it. I rake my fingers into his hair to encourage him where my mouth can’t, and soon his hips start up a slow roll over mine.

I feel his body. Feel his warmth. Hands under my shirt and over my head. A hard length rutting on my stomach.

I feel it, but my body is just as numb as my mind.

What’s wrong with me?

An image flashes in my mind. A bruising grip on my wrists. Fingers in a loose hold around my throat.

Tighter.

I jolt with a gasp, and pretty boy must think it’s something he’s done, because he chuckles against my jaw where he’s been leaving little nips and kisses.

“Hmm. You like that?” The motel bed groans as he pushes to his knees and reaches back between my legs.

The moment his fingers touch my completely uninterested dick, his expression shifts into one of surprise quickly covered by a pout.

“Performance anxiety, little musician? Maybe you need a little oral encouragement.”

It’s like a brick slams straight into my ribs.

My little musician. Mine.

The air in the room is stifling. My lungs protest every inhale. I want to crawl out of my skin and shed the painful prickles that burst to the surface.

This is wrong.

The pretty stranger is on his knees before I can get him to stop. My jeans are tugged open, and my dick is pulled through the slit in my boxers. He sticks his tongue out, and the sense of pure devastation that rolls over me is nothing short of horrifying.

With his mouth hanging open, millimeters from fitting me into his mouth, the man starts to gag. He tries to clear his throat, but only a gurgling sound comes out.

His face turns red, the veins in his neck growing darker, almost glowing through his skin. Barely a whistle of sound makes it out of his throat, hands gripping as if they can pry away some invisible force.

I should help him. I should do anything other than lay here with my own chest concaving inward, but I'm paralyzed.

Something slithers across the floor, and my eyes ping to it. Thin, green, covered in sharp points and tiny rosebuds.

I'll let him destroy me.

Give him back, and you can have me.

Ash, I need you.

Shining green eyes light up my mind like a firework display. Shot after shot of jagged little moments, splintered in my brain and tearing at my head until they all culminate in a half gasp, half scream of a singular word.

"Ash!"

Right as a tangle of vine wrap around the stranger's neck and pop his head clean off.

Blood splatter whips me in the face, paints my chest and arms. Hell there's probably blood on my dick, but I don't bother to look.

Because standing behind the lifeless body that collapses to the ground at my feet is a creature made of bark and vines, pink petals creeping along the strangely humanoid body. There's wisps of heavy mist at the top of their head that mimics hair, with blood stained fingertips that reach forward as if calling out for something.

Deep in my bones, in the core of my soul, buried beneath memory and an ocean of grief, the beating organ in my chest recognizes the creature in front of me.

“Hello, little love.”

The world flickers. Black. Then, a shade of orange. Into focus with the sudden weight of all I had forgotten slamming into me like a charging bull.

“You motherfucker.”

Any rational person would be terrified to come face to face with the creature staring me down across the room, but rational is the last thing I am when it comes to him.

“You called for me.”

“I would have done it sooner if you hadn’t tree spirit wiped my memory.”

Ash tilts his head, raking his glowing eyes across my body. “I did no such thing. That was your warped little mind protecting itself.”

“From what? You?”

He steps closer, and it’s as if the world warps around him, the edges of reality soft and pliable wherever they meet.

“I do not enjoy seeing you in pain. My medicine has been overloading your system. That night in the parking lot, you were full of so much grief that the moment my magic touched you, it became too much.”

My tongue sits heavy in my mouth. “What does that mean?”

“It means you overdosed on pheromones, little love. I could not help you without hurting you more.”

There’s a strange sort of sweetness to his words like they’re dipped in honey.

“Where have you been? Why leave me alone until now?”

“You were never alone, my love. I was always near.”

All those nights where something came into my room, where they sucked the pain away but left me frozen in fear. Sleepless nights when he could have simply *been here.*

“Your pain was easier to manage from afar without me to indulge you.”

“Is that why you snuck in and fed me blood like a vampire?”

All that lies between us now is the dead body on the floor, and I have no doubt Ash would stand right on top of him to get to me if he needed to.

“You are addicted to my very soul. Not even modern medicine can detox you. You would have died.”

“Maybe you should have let me.”

He reaches out with red-dipped fingers and grips my jaw, bruising and breaking skin.

Anger, true unbridled anger flashes in his eyes, and then his mouth slams down on mine so hard my teeth ache. His tongue forces past my lips, and the hand on my jaw slides down to my neck.

“If I were to fuck you in this body, I would brutalize you beyond repair. Do not tempt me.”

Afraid.

I should be afraid.

There’s a dead body on the floor, blood splattered across my skin, and a creature straight out of a nightmare holding me like I’m both something precious and infuriating.

“Do it.”

I should be terrified.

Ash cocks his head to the side, his eyes glowing that bright, golden green color.

“I’m yours, right?” I crumple the cheap motel linen in my fists. “Show me who I belong to.”

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PART II

ash

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fourteen

MY LITTLE HUMAN never ceases to amaze me.

Here he is, all blood-soaked and bothered—I don't think he's noticed the way his cock has filled out his half open pants—making the magic in my veins pulse with the desire to sink inside of him.

"I can fuck you if that's what you need." I press my palm to the front of his throat and feel it bob with the slightest restriction. "But not like this."

"I can take it."

The last human my true form touched perished to dust beneath my willow.

"Stronger than you have tried, my love."

His nostrils flare, and his hands grip my vine and thorn covered forearm. The pungent aroma of his blood floods my senses.

"Ash, please." The breathless plea falls from his lips as his knees spread, and he bears his throat. "It hurts. I need you."

I drag my touch slow and steady down his pulse point, flattening my hand over the expanse of his chest and beckon the vines to slither up and wrap around his shoulders.

"Does it hurt, human?" His body quivers, and those pretty little eyes of his go hazy. "Or do you need it to hurt?"

He doesn't reply, but simply tenses his arms, causing the thorns to dig into his skin.

This poor, broken boy wants nothing more than for me to shut off his mind, to warp him so completely he won't even recognize himself.

I don’t like bringing him pain, but I love how every aggressive encounter turns his heart a little closer to me and further from the boy at the tree.

“If you think you can take it, little slut,” *oh, he likes that,* “open up.”

For just a moment, his lips part, but then the unsteady focus in his eyes sharpens, and his jaw snaps shut.

Sweet boy needs to fight.

My vines move along his body, scrapping the skin but not breaking through so long as he behaves. They loop around his neck, travel up his jaw, and I tap the edges of his lips with my fingers.

“Show me you can take it, and maybe I’ll give you my cock.”

Challenge flares to life in his eyes, but so does a glaring curiosity.

Gray irises flick their defiant gaze from my face down the length of my body to stop right at the collection of petals below my hip.

“Was beginning to wonder if you had one like this.” The words match his signature snark, but there’s a breathlessness that softens them.

“Open your mouth, Blake.”

With a sensual lick of his lips, he slowly parts them a fraction. If he thinks I’m going to ask again, he’s mistaken.

The vines holding steady at his jaw jut forward and hook right at the corners of his mouth. A mix of panic and surprise flash on his face as I force his mouth open wide.

I press the pads of my fingers to the tip of his tongue, gradually sinking in and applying more pressure until my knuckles hit the front of his teeth and his throat convulses around me.

“Good boy.”

Blake’s eyes flutter closed, relaxing into my touch. It causes the thorns to dig into his cheeks and my fingers to rest deeper into his mouth.

He doesn’t protest, but it makes me want to take on the human form he’s come to enjoy so much and take him apart where I have much more control.

Like this, my body does as nature pleases, and I can’t guarantee I’d be able to keep him safe.

I withdraw my fingers and call back the vines, and he nearly slumps forward without me holding his weight. He catches himself with his hands on my hips, and though he flinches at the thorns, he tightens his grip.

“This will hurt,” I say, dragging my fingers through his hair and holding him still. “It will hurt while your mouth is on me, and it will hurt after I come down that pretty little throat. But I promise that it will feel so good when I suck the poison out of you.”

His mouth falls open, tongue sticking out seductively, and that’s all the coaxing my cock needs to sprout from the petals at my hip. The shaft is like flower stock but wider around with the head like a firm bulb of the flower.

Blake’s eyes widen once it’s fully uncovered, and then those sweet, gray eyes flit up to mine. Desire swirls in their stormy depths, and my own body feels like it might combust from the dirty promises they convey.

He tips his head back and juts his tongue out further.

How filthy.

I place the tip of the bulb on his tongue, and he has to drop his mouth open a little wider to get his lips around it.

The velvet heat of his mouth soaks into the bulb of my cock, spreading tingles up the stem and into my pelvis.

“Mmm—Ah—mm.” He moans around the intrusion as I coax it deeper, eyes rolling and fluttering as the largest part of the bulb pops past his teeth.

For a moment, panic seizes his shoulders, but I cradle his jaw and tip his head back.

“Breathe through your nose,” I tell him and press my thumb to his bobbing Adam’s apple. “I’m not stopping until I feel it in your throat. If you need to breathe, tap my thigh.”

The way he nods is barely perceivable, but I can *feel* the understanding, the approval through the sliver of bond we’ve formed.

He closes his eyes and takes in a breath. Slowly lets it out. And sucks like a whore for hire until the bulb threatens to swell.

But I’m not ready yet. I have a promise to fulfill.

Holding him by the edges of his jaw, keeping him nice and open, I take my time stuffing my cock further into his wanton mouth.

A sharp intake of breath through his nose, and his hands lap onto my hips like suction cups.

No tap.

His throat constricts around the tip as it kisses the entrance, pushing past his gag reflex as his whole body trembles.

“You can take it,” I say, wrapping my hand around the bulge in his throat. “Good boy.”

He grapples for my ass, fingers digging in and begging me closer. As if I need an excuse to fill his bratty little mouth hole.

In. Out. He gags and gurgles around my cock, but I pump until the stock starts to bristle and the bulb flutters open at the tip.

I grip the head in his throat and meet his watering eyes as they glimmer up at me.

“Take my cum now, love. Like a good cock slut.”

The buildup of release explodes in my spine. The stem of my cock thickens, and the bulb expands, though only marginally enough to let the pollen pass.

Those eyes go glassy as the pollen releases into his throat. Nails dig into the petals at my hip and scratch them free. His nostrils flare, and his throat convulses, but pure adrenaline rages through me.

It has been decades—centuries even—since I have felt even a fraction of the feral obsession I feel for this human.

As his eyes roll back and start to close, I guide him off my retracting member, cradling the back of his head in my fingers. Tiny gasps for air wrack his frame, followed soon by the mewls of pain when he can finally breathe again.

His eyes shoot open, panic seeded in their gaze. I slide my touch to his cheek and hook my thumb under his chin, raising it slightly.

“I told you it would hurt. What you swallowed was drops of pollen containing little vine seeds. Those seeds are expanding in your lungs leaving scars on the tissue.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but a sob comes out instead.

“I know, my love. Listen here.”

I lower myself to my knees, not a natural feat in a form such as this, and hold his face level with my own.

“I’m going to take it away, and you will feel magnificent. You’ll want me to do it again just to experience the elation from the removal. But know this—”

I wrap my hand fully around his throat and squeeze until there’s a stream of tears down his cheeks.

“If you ever let anyone else touch you the way that I do, if you ever even think of letting your body or heart wander … I will fill your lungs with my pollen again and again until you’re begging to be put out of your misery.”

Fear. It radiates from him. Something he hasn't exuded since the day at the tree where we made our deal. When he was blissfully unaware of my observance over him.

"Relax, little love. I promise it'll be over soon."

I cover the pulse point on his throat with my mouth and *suck*.

At first it's just skin warming and bruising beneath my lips, but as the saliva soaks in, it begins to sizzle. A sour tang hits my tongue, but I swallow it down.

Again and again until he gasps. Moans. And then he's whimpering, trembling, clinging to my body as his own tries to make sense of the flood of sensation.

"Ash," he rasps, nearly choking on my name. "Ash."

I drag his body closer to mine, rubbing his arms in slow, soothing circles until his whines become cries of pleasure.

"Ash." He's panting, arching to get closer, closer to me still as if we are not chest to chest, skin to skin with his soul pulsing between my teeth.

One moment he's rocking his body into mine, and the next he's unraveling, cock spraying streams of milky white cum across my abdomen.

His breathing comes out ragged, and he shies away from my touch as oversensitivity sets in. As soon as the poison clears and his regular taste of musk and sweat are all I collect on my tongue, I give another solid suck to the skin and pull away.

Blake's gaze is hazy, lips parted as he heaves each breath.The entire right side of his neck is blood red, little yellow and purple splotches already forming.

It sends a primal satisfaction into my chest.

Claimed.

Mine.

I devour the needy little moans purring from his chest, licking into his mouth to taste the remnants of my release.

I've survived a near millennia without him, but a single moment more now that I've had a taste of him might be my ultimate downfall.

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fifteen

BLAKE IS A MESS. Not the fun kind of mess like when he submits to me, and not the sexy kind of mess when he has a bit of fight in him.

No, Blake is a mess in the most chaotic, exhausted sense of the word.

He's fallen asleep at the kitchen table three times, one of which was face first into his hashbrowns with ketchup smeared on his cheeks.

The cords lying across the grass in their outside rehearsal space have been a tripping hazard that he's tangled himself enough in that he's given up getting to his feet and simply lies on his back with guitar in hand.

Even that isn't running smoothly with all the scratch plays and screw ups.

It's Briah who stops playing first, who shoves a hand through her sweat-soaked hair and turns on Blake like he's grown a second head.

"Maybe you need more rest, babycakes, because you are *not* hitting it today."

The others are silent, trading looks but not words, and it's Blake who sighs and gives the morning sky a blank stare.

"I'm just rusting. Have to push through it."

"Briah has a point," Mara says with her usual soft voice. I like her voice. It's calm. "You've been through a lot with the overdose and the attack—"

Oh yes, Blake's story for what happened in the motel room. A fan who wanted to hook up and attacked him when he told them no.

"I'm not that fragile," Blake says with a tired twinge to his voice.

“We know,” Mace says, sitting on the grass beside him. “We also know that you process by locking yourself in your room and writing until you’ve turned your feelings inside out. You’ve been in your room, but I haven’t heard your guitar in days.”

Blake’s room is the only place we spend time together. What with none of his bandmates knowing that I’m around and Blake’s memories are back.

“I don’t want them to ask me questions. I want to move forward.”

So here I am, watching but unable to be seen. That’s fine. As entertaining as they are to be around in my human body, this works just as well.

“Maybe I just don’t have anything to say about it.”

“Bullshit. You’re shutting down and shutting us out.”

Blake’s face twists into an expression of hurt and disbelief, but even I can see the physical pain in his features when he pushes up onto his forearms.

“I’m tired, okay? I’m fucking traumatized. Sorry if I’d rather be sleeping than unpacking the shit that happened to me.”

The circle of friends go silent, and without another word Blake climbs to his feet and hurries off inside. Instinct tells me to follow, to corner and corral him, make him submit just to shut off that brain of his.

The tension left in his wake has my curiosity bubbling.

“I think we should call Ash.”

That comes from the newest, quietest member. Kole traces their fingers along the edge of their keyboard keys and speaks without looking up at the others.

“We’re not doing that.” Mace’s voice is firm and unrelenting.

“I’m with Kole on this one,” Mara says. “The guy may have been odd, but he’s been really solid for Blake through Ollie’s death.”

A moment of silence hangs heavy in the air, but Mace cuts through it with a sharp shake of his head.

“You didn’t see what I saw when I found him. How bad off he was. Ash sure as shit wasn’t helping then. He’s not coming back here.”

“Did you even talk to him?” Mara pushes away from her drum set and wheels toward her brother. “Or did you make an assumption and write him off?”

“I told you from the start he was bad for Blake, but no, you insisted that he needed someone else. That we weren’t enough.”

“He’s been grieving! Do you know how hard it is to grieve when everyone around you reminds you of who you lost?”

“Yes!” The projection in Mace’s voice makes the other three flinch. “Do you know how hard it is to hold everyone together when you’re one bad day from falling apart? I don’t want to be the bad guy. But I need—more than fucking anything—I need you all to be okay. I need to know that what happened to Oliver isn’t going to happen to you.”

Briah abandons her post to wrap her arms around Mace. Mara follows, climbing out of her chair to fold herself into her brother’s lap. Kole stands off to the side, watching, but not quite confident enough to offer their own condolences.

That’s enough.

I know when I’ve overstayed my welcome, when a moment isn’t for me to witness.

Being a spirit of the trees means mortal things like gravity and building structures mean nothing, and soon I’ve found myself in the cabin bathroom, catching Blake at the sink staring at his own reflection.

He’s got his container of pills in his hand, one of the tops flipped up, but he’s simply watching himself with a dull look in his eyes.

“I know you’re there.”

As he always does. A side effect of the pheromones and the pollen, our connection growing stronger on both ends. The more he takes me into his body, the more of me he can feel, can sense, and the more of him I taste, the stronger his feelings become to me.

“What do you need, my love?” When I materialize this time, it’s the human body he’s used to.

I step up behind him and wrap my arms around his middle. His body sags back at the contact, and his head falls back to my shoulder.

They’re right. He’s weak and tired, hardly has the strength to hold himself upright.

“Just you,” he says, and I’m more than happy to oblige.

Whether it’s sex or comfort that he needs—or something else entirely—I will give it to him. Anything. Everything.

Because Blake Monroe is mine, and he has done something no human or creature has accomplished before.

He has made me his.

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sixteen

OUT IN THE WORLD, with his body running on adrenaline and alcohol, with a crowd of people screaming and singing to his songs, Blake looks more alive than any moment we've spent in bed together.

It's endearing to watch his infectious energy travel through the band and weave amongst the crowd. Every so often our eyes meet, and though I'm not in a body he recognizes, his fills with a desire so strong it has me in a chokehold.

Fascinating the effect this one human has on me.



"He's in love with me," says a boy sitting at the base of my tree, plucking petals off a flower. "I care about him, too. But …"

He crumples the petals in his fist and slowly sprinkles them onto the grass.

"I can't love him back. I'm not capable."

His head thunks on my bark. "It'd be like feeding him poison."

The human sighs and pulls an open book into his lap. "But damn is he cute. And silly. Grumpier than the Grinch until I get him in my arms."

He closes his eyes and digs his palms into them. "Stupid Blake."



How much of how I've come to feel for him has to do with the energy seeped into my core by that lover of his?

Oliver. I feel his heart beating alongside mine. Not truly. The body is long since burned, and the soul wherever it happened to go. It's the ghost of emotions so potent that they linger in the essence of his death.

Those feelings that have haunted my human for what seems like an endless eternity appear to have lifted, if only for a period of time.

The more he gives himself to me, the lighter he becomes, but it's a dangerous trade off.

The addiction. The dependency. His energy and moods deplete at a rapid rate. But still he comes back for more. For that period of peace and clarity before he's sinking down again.

He handles it better than most. Handles *me* better than most, and that alone is addicting for me as well.

The band says their farewells to the stage, and it's only a handful of minutes later that I find Blake weaving through the crowd, bright and hungry eyes searching.

For me, perhaps?

Someone grabs hold of his arm, and that determination falters. His lips form a smile as turns to the person beside him.

A woman. Pale blonde hair streaked with pink paint. A short, frilly dress with a corset top.

She's short, non-menacing, but the way she leans into Blake, touches his arm, and moves her body just so his eyes ping right to her chest.

He flushes. From his cheeks to his ears, even down to the collar of his shirt. His laugh is stilted, but he sets a hand on her hip. Just one.

Keeping her at a respectable distance?

I feel nothing through our mutual connection. Not a hint of arousal or annoyance. Nothing that can tell me what he's thinking.

She presses up onto her toes to whisper something, and Blake leans down a fraction to hear her.

That's when she slips up.

Her smile brightens, and she plants a kiss on *my human's* cheek.

I am not familiar with jealousy. I have shared humans with others in the past. I have shared creatures. But there is something about this one that turns me inside out.

That man with his hands all over him. I hadn’t needed to kill him. I could have incapacitated him easily.

But Blake had felt … violated. Deep inside, I could feel it. How much he wanted the encounter to end.

Anyone who affected him to such a degree didn’t deserve to live.

This girl, however, is no threat. He isn’t distressed or uncomfortable.

That only makes the burning inside me worse.

He says something back to her, his face pinched, and then he’s dropping his hand from her side to cross over his stomach.

She frowns, reaches for his arm, and he squeezes his eyes shut tight enough I can feel the dizzying effect through our connection.

He shakes his head, mumbles what must be an apology, and then he’s darting away toward what appears to be an exit.

As if he’s tugged on a chain looped around me, I follow.

The door creaks open, Blake throws his body out, and I catch it with the heel of my foot just before it slams shut.

He’s retching and coughing onto the pavement, half crouched with his hands on his knees. His arms are bare and pebbled from the chilled air, the sleeveless t-shirt nothing against the October wind.

I’m not the nurturing type. Not like his bandmates who would stand beside him, rub their hands along his back and speak in soft voices of how he’ll be alright.

It’s not that I couldn’t comfort him, but right now my body is blood and vines and thorns itching to come out. Seeing him ill doesn’t make me worried for him.

It makes me want to cure him. The only way we know how.

I step up behind him, absorbing the shock of my steps into the earth beneath the concrete, and feel for the essence buried deep of the form I wish to take.

It is not possible to simply will myself into any appearance of my choosing. It must be one I’ve siphoned. One I hold a reservoir of if I cannot touch it to gain more.

Settled into the skin he’s most familiar with, I wrap my arms around his trembling body and hold him to my chest.

His first instinct is to fight, to knock an elbow into my sternum, and the swell of pride that follows only makes my growing desires stronger.

Mine.

I’m unfazed, and before he can make another attempt, I trap his arms against his body.

Quick, heavy breaths seesaw in and out of his lungs, and I press a kiss to the side of his neck to soothe him.

“Ash?”

Ever so slowly the tension in his body eases away, but I can’t loosen my hold. Not when I can still feel the tangle of ugly emotions sprouting in my chest from the way that woman touched him.

“Ash, you’re hurting me.”

Yet, there’s a spark of *something* flowing through our bond.

I release his arms but keep one of mine looped around his waist and slide the other up his body—under his shirt—to wrap my fingers around his throat.

That *something* pulses.

His cool skin warms under the drag of my tongue along his jaw.

He tastes like sweat and cherry blossoms.

Hot air hits my face as he turns his toward me. Gray eyes search for mine, lips parted like he’s still trying to catch his breath.

I lean in, but he ducks away with an awkward half-laugh that makes me growl.

“I was just puking my guts out. You don’t want to kiss me right now.”

Oh how wrong my human is.

“It wasn’t a request, little musician.”

His body stiffens, breaking out into a shiver, and I don’t give him the chance to surrender. Not this time.

Jaw pinched in between my fingers, I yank his head to the side and slam my mouth down on his. Immediate relief floods my veins, soothes over the burn marks marring my roots.

I need this human, and I’m going to make sure he needs me just as much.

Hands thread into my hair, fingers dig into my scalp, and the urge to *own him, mark him*, becomes overwhelming.

I break our kiss with a nip to his bottom lip, and Blake gasps with his eyes blown wide and staring to glaze.

“On your knees,” I tell him, loosening my hold to push him toward the ground.

He doesn’t budge. Lips forming a disbelieving smile as his fingers tear at my hair to keep him upright.

“Right now? You want me right here? In a dirty, grimy alleyway?”

My chest rumbles at his amusement.

“Behave before I spear you open with my vines. Just hold that hole gaping and ready for me to annihilate.”

There is no fear. No hesitation. Just a pure, adrenaline-fueled laugh as he tugs my mouth back to his.

I don’t kiss him, and he simply grins.

“You wanna fuck me, Ash? Rut me into the concrete? Come fucking get me, you monster.”

He pushes away, watching me as if he’s the hunter and not the prey. Slowly, he backs down the alley toward the darkness, eyes blazing into mine the whole time.

If he thinks he can tease me and I’ll play fair, he is so very *very* mistaken.

I let go of the body I’m in, let the light and magic of the earth wisp it away to another plane, and mend myself with the soil in the cracks that line the buildings, in the bits of plantlife growing along the sidewalk.

The connection we’ve built pulses with the spark of what I’m discovering is arousal. The quiet kind. The one that makes you look at yourself like there must be some hidden depravity in your heart.

Seconds tick by as I follow the glowing string of energy through the alleyway. Eventually, he runs into a dead end, and it’s right then. That strike of fear that sends his pulse rocketing, that’s when I rise from the earth, calling vines forth to slither along his body before he can bother to run.

Circles around his ankles, up the leg of his pants to dig into his thighs. Blake gasps and plants his hands on the brick wall in front of him, lower half immobilized by my vegetation.

“Ash—” He twists at the waist to search me out, but with the flick of a wrist, vines shoot from the wall and loop around his throat, jerking him back forward.

For good measure, a set attaches themselves to his wrists so his hands are useless as well.

I don’t even need to touch him to feel the frantic pitter patter of his heart. It echoes in my head, thrums down our bond like a note on his guitar.

“Are you going to be a good little hole now and let me claim you?”

He scoffs, intent clear through the bond, but it sounds more like choking on his own spit.

“Claim me? I’ve let you vine-fuck my throat. What more do you want?”

You. You. All of you.

Blake quiets, sitting in the reality of his situation. Hunted down like an animal. Held hostage by the very things that normally bring him pleasure and pain bundled together.

“You are *mine*, Blake.”

His confusion at the use of his name slams into me, and I urge my vines to move. The ones on his wrists travel up his arms. The ones on his thighs move up … up … slip through the slit in his boxers, and—

Blake cries out, unable to move as a vine circles his hard, eager dick and probes the tip with its blunt head.

“Only I can touch you. Can bring you pleasure. Pain. Only me who can make you scream.”

His body shivers and shakes the more the plant appendage rubs through the precum practically pouring from his slit and strokes along the shaft.

Fully standing behind him in human form, I reach around and slide down the zipper on his pants. A tiny breath in that he holds, letting his chest catch fire as I agonizingly slow pull his skin tight, black jeans down to his calves.

His cock is an angry red, curved up and twitching at every miniscule movement of the vine.

“I may be a monster, little love,” I whisper into his ear, slipping a hand beneath his shirt to drag my nails over his ribcage. “But you are a monster’s whore.”

He jolts when I sink my teeth into his neck. Barely hard enough to draw blood, but as copper and cherry blossom mingle on my tongue I roll out a wave of pheromones strong enough to make him whimper.

“You asshole,” he pants as the need takes hold.

A nice, warm flush spreads throughout his body, arching into the vine’s hold.

“I wonder which is more torturous,” I say, exploring his exposed skin with my fingertips. “Fucking you raw and letting you hump the dirty alley wall? Or seeing just how much of my vines you can take in your dick hole?”

His cock jumps, precum practically squirting as he writhes. I take my hand and wrap it gently around him and the vine, using slow strokes to amp up the need eating away at his fight.

The vines around his neck loosen so his head can fall back on my shoulder. Glassy eyes gaze up at me, puffs and moans falling from his lips so sweet I have to catch them in my mouth.

He moans against me, and I stroke him harder. Thorns bite into my palm, purposefully smooth where they touch him, and the blood from the cuts adds to the roughness of how I jerk him.

A frantic grunt has him yanking his head away, lip splitting as it catches on my teeth.

“Don’t wanna come like this,” he grits out, trying to still his hips to no avail. The pheromones flooding his system are too strong. “Fuck me, dammit!”

He rubs his ass on my crotch, and I still my hand to hear his desperate, broken whine.

“I don’t think you’ve earned it.” I kiss his neck where a dark purple vine mark blooms. “Flirting with other humans when you know you belong to me. Body and soul, my love.”

Every fiber of his wants to protest. It hammers down the bond, makes him squirm in my hold, but that animal desire to be taken apart, to be claimed and used, it’s stronger than his pathetic resolve.

“Say it, Blake. Tell me who owns this body, this cock, this beating organ in your chest.”

He rolls his hips into my fist, but the sound he makes is a shuddered cry.

“That isn’t fair, and you know it.”

“Say it, and I’ll give you exactly what you want.”

“*I’m yours*, Ash. Please.I need you. It hurts so bad.”

“Not good enough. *Say it.*”

We’re bordering on the edge of dangerous territory. Another dose of pheromones, and he might be barreling toward another overdose.

His body is just so willing. Eager. Even his mind likes the games we play.

It’s that pesky heart not following suit.

“I can’t,” he bites out, and it’s time for leniency to be over.

The vines around his neck snap back into place, making him scream. The ones on his arms wrap tighter and yank him into the wall. A cry of pure

agony fills the space around us, and I smooth a hand down the arch of his back, dig my fingers into the meat of his ass.

“You still love him,” I say as I broach his rim with the pad of my thumb. “Silly human. If it’s Oliver that you want, why didn’t you just ask?”

His throat bobs on a heavy, dry swallow. Tears are in his eyes moments from falling down, and I’m sure his front is covered in scrapes and bruises.

“Don’t,” he whispers, but it’s too late. I’ve already pulled for the fraying thread at the edge of my consciousness, that tiny spark of the form I’m running out of time to hold.

I’ve oddly come to feel at home in the other body, the one permanently labelled *Ash* between us. This one, though? It gives birth to a heady ego with just one look in Blake’s eyes.

“No. Ash, I’ll give you anything else, *everything else*, please don’t.”

I step to the side so he can see this body clearly, and the heartbreak clearly etched into his face screams down our connection.

“Don’t talk to Ash, talk to me.” I slide my palm up his cheek and smile. “Tell *me* that you don’t want me.”

“Ollie.” Blake chokes on the tears that finally escape.

But he doesn’t put up a fight. Doesn’t tell me to stop again.

The anger inside me breaks in two, leaving something jagged and hollow.

I call back the vines, and every single one drops in an instant.

Blake sags against the wall, and I wrap my other arm around his waist, tugging until he folds into me like wet paper.

All of the pain and anguish living inside him, it’s found its way to me. Not just passing between us but sinking its teeth in and burning me from the inside out.

“I love you,” I whisper into his ear as he clings tightly to the body of his friend. “I won’t hurt you. Not like that.”

For a moment, I had relished in the thought of causing him pain. True, soul aching pain.

It would have broken him.

“I am sorry.”

He lifts his eyes to mine, red rimmed and cloudy, and brushes a hesitant kiss across my lips.

“Come back, please.”

I can’t quite make out if he’s talking to his friend or me, so I remain stock still in the growing fear that I might spook him.

That I might hurt him like I almost did.

“Take me home, Ash.”

In the quiet of the night, I hold him to me, and I take the swirl of emotions that have always seemed so foreign to me and lock them out of my immediate reach.

Whatever monster this human has awakened inside of me, it’s not one I’m familiar with. Not one I know how to control.

For the first time in my long existence, I am terrified.



Blake is lying in a bath with water up to his chin, staring down at all of the marks on his body from the bricks and vines.

Each new apology has been met with a glare, so I’ve existed with him in silence while he cleans himself up.

“Oliver never topped,” he says in a rasped voice. “It was trauma related. That was okay with me, because I was happy to do both.”

His smile is aimed at the water, but there’s no light to it. Sadness seeps into every facet of him.

“You can be rough with me. You can chase me down and force-fuck me. But not Ollie. I don’t want to remember him like that.”

Something cold creeps through my veins. I think this might be … shame.

“I am sorry.”

This time, he accepts it. Aims that weak smile at me before closing his eyes and sinking under the water.

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seventeen

RESTING in my tree is always a bittersweet endeavor. On the one hand, it is my home, my window of the world. On the other, I cannot bring Blake with me, and while I've always known it makes him sad, I had never truly experienced the same before.

Wanting to be with him and truly missing him are two different degrees of feelings. The latter, one I hadn't known I lacked in experience.

Using my abilities as I did in the alley, along with all the body transformations as I follow them from show to show, it has depleted my reserve far beyond what I've used before.

Time isn't nearly as straightforward here, and by the time I'm awake enough to consider taking on a physical form, the ground is littered with colorful leaves, and the trees of the wood nearly barren.

My human is waiting near the water's edge, fingers drawing ripples while his head rests with half-lidded eyes near the dirt.

"If you sleep there, the pixies might sprinkle dust in your eyes."

My antics don't surprise him anymore, because those tired, pretty eyes opening to blink up at me are the only response I get.

"Hello, my love."

"About time."

I thought, perhaps, there might be a layer of fear. The bodies I normally call on are tired, sore, and require feeding off my rested energy to be usable again.

So, here I am, in the form of the 'monster' as he calls it, holding a branch to duck beneath, and there is no surprise, no trepidation anywhere

on his features or in the bond.

He climbs to his feet and dusts off his palms, walking to the tree with a steady purpose. I am much too tall for him like this, so when he points a finger up at me and back down at the ground, I make myself a little more … proportionate for his liking.

“Better?”

I’m still taller than him, but not so much so that he can’t clasp his fingers behind my neck and pull my mouth down to his.

It’s soft, quick, but with only one puff of air when we disconnect and he’s jumping back in, tearing at my petals with his fingernails.

I wrap an arm around his waist to keep us upright, though he seems determined to challenge that position, pushing until my back hits the tree to stop us from falling.

“Blake.” His name is both a curse and a plea on my tongue. “What has gotten into you?”

His smile tastes like soil and sunshine.

“You’re home,” he says, the words seeping into my being like a bloodstain. “Not used to me being happy, Monster Cock?”

My laughter brings out an even warmer smile. “Is that what you’re calling me now?”

“Mhm. I figure you can earn back the use of your name.”

“Oh?”

There’s a rumble in my throat, an insatiable hunger that only this human can fill.

“But first: get the fuck down so I can sit in your lap. You interrupted my nap.”

And so we end up on the ground, Blake’s legs bracketing my hips, and his sweet little ass planted right in my lap, sliding his touch along my vines and petals.

“Does it feel better like this? Than in your other forms?”

I tip my head against the base of the tree so his fingers can pick and poke at the petals on my neck.

“More intimate, yes. But as long as it’s you, any form will do.”

His lips brush mine once again with the softest moan vibrating his chest.

“I like the way you feel.” A blush spans his cheeks, and I take a firm hold of his hips as they wiggle.

“Are you horny, baby?”

His head drops to my shoulder. “No. Not really. I just …” A sigh meets a groan, and then those big, beautiful eyes are peering up at me. “Can I sit on your dick while we talk?”

Leave it to this human to render me speechless.

“No, hear me out.” He loops his arms around my neck and shimmies his hips again. This time, I let him, and the heat in my core sparks to life. “You were gone, and your petals helped with, you know, the attention addiction and all that jazz, but I still missed *you*. Sex has always been how we connect, so yeah, maybe while I ask you about your *three week vacation*, I want to cockwarm your plant dick.”

Oh, my love. You never cease to amaze me.

“As you wish.”

I slip my hands into the back of his sweatpants and tug them down. His hole is warm and inviting, soft to the touch when I rub over it with a slicked up finger.

“Oh.” A soft moan parts his lips, eyes fluttering closed. “I forgot your body basically makes its own lube.”

“More like aloe, but just as effective.”

He’s surprisingly calm and still as I work him open. One finger becomes two. Three. It's when he makes that nearly inaudible sigh of relief that I know he's ready.

I lift his hips as the petals at my pelvis part, the thick stock and bulb of my cock sprouting out.

Blake is watching with his tongue doing laps around the pillow softness of his lips. Not horny, perhaps, but always needy for what I can give him.

He reaches between us and gives it a slow, sensual stroke.

“This is fucking hot, and you’re going to fuck me with it one day.”

“Keep it up and that day will be today.”

Those eyes burn like coals as he situates himself over the bulb head of my cock and eases it into his tight, eager heat.

It’s a long drawn out moment filled with choked up moans until the full head pops past that first ring of muscles, and then his sigh is just as long while sinking down the length of the stock.

My body hums and buzzes with the sheer pleasure of how he feels wrapped around me, and I force the wave of desire down to a simmer before it gets carried away.

We both spend several minutes simply breathing and settling ourselves. Blake's hands play with the transition of petals to stem-like skin on my bicep, and I feel around the smooth skin of his waist, keeping him still.

"Would you like to talk now, my love?"

His ears burn scarlet, staring down between our bodies where we're connected.

"Don't tease me," he snaps. "Tell me about your bodies."

"What would you like to know about them?"

He shrugs, eyes still wandering, and I pinch his chin between my thumb and forefinger, bringing his gaze to my face.

"Blake."

He shivers, but doesn't break from my hold. "This is naturally what you look like when you take a physical form? Did you get to choose it?"

I shake my head. "It changes of its own accord around the plantlife in the woods. The only constant is my willow, and every so many years the fauna reinvents itself."

"Do you wish you could control it?"

"No. How I appear is unimportant in the grand scheme of things. My soul is the same, and the woods remembers it."

He dips his face to rest it in the palm of my hand, pressing featherlight kisses to the inside of my wrist.

"What about your human body? You once said it was modeled after a human who used to visit you?"

It's not a story I ever deemed worth explaining, but the reverent curiosity in his eyes brings out my desire to give him anything he asks for.

"I no longer remember his name. It was much before modern civilization as we know it, but he was a traveler. He liked the tree and the spring, spent many nights under the canopy of leaves. I'd never left the comfort of my bark before, but something about the way he kept coming back intrigued me. So one day, I followed him. I hadn't learned to make my form physical, yet, so I was just a spirit in the breeze."

Blake leans in to rest his head on my chest, hole fluttering around my cock. I wrap an arm around his shoulder and gently stroke the spot our bodies connect.

"What did you see?"

"Another tree spirit—a Leech is our species name—this one physical. They were bothering the human. Chastising him for using the wood's

resources. Do you know what he did? He didn’t cower or scream or anything of the sort. He laughed. Right in the Leech’s face, and I, my love, was enamored.”

His head pops up so fast he nearly headbutts my chin, and his eyes are wide with a shimmer of curiosity.

“Is this the first human you banged? Am I having sex with a guy you used to have sex with?”

His hair is fine between my fingers, growing past his ears now and easier to latch onto. One quick snap of my hips and tug of the wrist has his body bowing and the sweetest cry falling from his lips.

“You are being fucked by me and only me. No matter what body I take.”

I roll my hips slowly into his, over and over until his skin is beat red and his breaths come out fast and quipped.

Then, I still and yank his face to mine. “Yes. I took that human as a lover. As my first. And I felt a myriad of emotions during his lifetime, but it doesn’t hold a candle to what you’ve opened up inside me.”

Blake’s fingers gravitate to my face, mapping out every line and every petal. “You love me? Have you ever been in love before? With that other human?”

I snatch his fingers in my own and weave them together. “Obsessed perhaps is the better word. Captivated. Aroused. All things I feel for you, but now there are … more. I don’t quite understand them all.”

His lips red from the constant flick of his tongue twitch into a smile. “Like the jealousy that led you to hunt me down and threaten to rape me?”

A primal growl rumbles in my throat, and Blake’s eyes blow wide at the sound, asshole clenching around me.

“Don’t pretend the fantasy doesn’t make you wet and hard. I feel your cock leaking and your hole trying to strangle me.”

For good measure, I pump my cock as deep into his body as I can reach, and he has to slap a hand over his mouth to catch the scream that comes out.

“You sound an awful lot like you need to be fucked.”

That quiet, desperate moan muffled by his hand is nearly reason enough for me to shove him to the ground and fill him again and again until we’re both sated, but the little bob of his throat as he lowers his hands to my shoulders gives me pause.

“No. Please, finish the story. I want to know.”

“Why are you so interested? Does it bother you? That I’ve had a human lover before?”

He shakes his head. “It’s you. Something important to you. Why wouldn’t I want to know?”

A perfume of sweet nectar waifs through the woods, carrying with it the smell of our anticipation and sex.

“I never borrowed a human form for him. I didn’t even know how. Barely managed to make myself tangible like now. Sometimes it was only enough to get inside him.”

Blake’s inviting mouth leans closer, focus intent and distracting my own.

“It was only a short while. Ten, twenty years perhaps of him coming and going. The other spirit had warned me that humans are not built to take our power in large doses. It overwhelms their system. Eventually, it turned out they were right. The human died in my arms from the weight of my abilities. I have not taken a true lover since.”

“Until me.”

“Yes. little love. Until you.”

Goosebumps break out along his flesh, and I slip my hands beneath the hem of his t-shirt and pull it clean off, feeling the way he pebbles under my touch.

He’s at his limit: head thrown back and hands death-gripped to my shoulders. His hips rock, breath coming out of him in frantic half lungfulls. I grip his nape, feel it strain and tremble in my hold, and pull him in so our mouths are nearly fused as one.

“Do you need me, little love?”

His eyes snap open with tears dotting the corners. “Yes,” he gasps. Another swirl of his hips.

I wish I could devour his desperation, feel the desire permanently carved into my bones.

“Ride me. Show me how much you missed me. Make me never want to leave you again.”

Those are the magic words that rocket him into motion. He lifts himself almost clean off my cock, reaching back to rub the underside of the bulb and spreading its wetness on his fingers.

A quick, shallow breath with a loose grip around his own cock, and he drops down, taking the entirety of my length in one move.

“Oh my god,” he groans, not bothering to take it slow or adjust. He bounces on my cock with fast, rough rolls of his hips, and it takes all of my self control to let him have his way.

The feeling of him around me is indescribable. It’s pleasurable in a human body, but this right here is an addiction forming in front of my very eyes.

My cock thickens inside of him, marginally at first, and then he lifts to slip out to only the tip and yelps when something inside *tugs*.

“Wha—” He slides back down, moaning like a whore, and when he rises up again— “What is that?”

He feels for where my shaft disappears into his hole, pressing at his rim with a finger and frowning at what he finds.

“That,” I say slowly, meeting his hand with my own, “would be the bud blooming.”

His eyes widen, and his hole tightens.

“Wha—inside me?”

The grin that forms on my lips only feeds the hunger in the way he watches me.

“So you can’t pull away before I pump you full of pollen.”

“Fuck,” falls from his lips as his body launches back into motion. “I didn’t know you could do that. Being trapped on your dick until you’re done with me? That’s so fucking hot.”

Pleasure courses through my veins, pooling at the base of my spine, and only making the bloom grow bigger.

A whimper skitters out of him with each tug on his stretched, sensitive rim. “It’s too big. I’m gonna fuckin’ burst.”

I drag my hands into his hair and pull him down to lick into his mouth.

“You can take it. Make me come. Make me fill you with my pollen.”

My teeth dig into his bottom lip just as he grinds down so hard on my dick it feels like I’m in his stomach.

His cock twitches where it’s trapped between us, and all it takes is one little vine traveling up the deep red underside and slipping hardly an inch into his leaking slit for him to erupt.

He slams his lips down on mine, and the pulse of his cum spurting past the vine makes my already swollen, aching cock beg for release.

Body strung taught and shaking from the overstimulation of my hand on his spent dick, I trust up into him one final time as the bloom finally hits its

peak—pump after pump of pollen releases into his hole, and the endorphins that follow zap any remaining energy he may have had.

Several minutes of merely breathing into each other's mouths fades into the barest of smiles from the human I have come to religiously adore.

"I'm yours," he says with his eyes sliding shut. "All of me. Whatever I don't give, I want you to take. Make me belong to you."

Sweet human. You already do.



The night is dark and quiet, Blake's peaceful, slumbering body tucked into mine beneath the covers.

I should have left by now, snuck away to the woods or the non-physical plane, but the longer I'm in this human's orbit, the more my body craves being near his.

At the very least, I bothered to wear my human skin as not to scar anyone who might discover us.

Pale moonlight trickles through the window, spilling over Blake's freckle dotted cheeks. The wind whistles through his parted lips, skin warm and soft to the touch.

"Being loved by Blake is like being buried in the world's fluffiest blanket. It's cozy and comfortable, easy to lose yourself in. But the pressure is suffocating at times."

For the briefest of moments, I got to experience that intensity. The heat of his full, unbridled attention.

But the clarity won't stay for long. His demons will drown him again, and I'll fish him out of the water, forcing air into his lungs until he can breathe on his own. The cycle will repeat.

Grief. Love. Obsession.

Life. Death. Heartache.

All inevitabilities for humans.

Even I cannot cure him from those.

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eighteen

BLAKE

Again. It's coming again. I steel my lungs, but the icy crash forces in a breath, and everything goes numb. Life comes in glimmering fractures, shooting through me like a camera reel on steroids.

Warmth wraps around my wrist, and then my head breaches the surface. I clamor for the grass and dirt, coughing up the ice shards from my chest.

The sky is dark, dotted with clouds and rolling thunder, and by the time I look up, reaching once more for whoever had pulled me ashore, it opens into a torrential downpour.

Everything around me is muddled, but the hand I find as I flounder is a beacon of familiarity. I want to envelop myself in it, disappear into its embrace, but as soon as I peer through the drops of rain, all of the warmth seeps away.

There's blood pouring out of the corners of his mouth. Dark rings around his sunken eyes. His fingertips are a decaying purple. Vines are wrapped like a noose around his neck.

Ollie no. No no no.

I turn to … run? Clear my head? Anything to make this nightmare end, but I turn straight into another figure.

Headless.

I can't scream.

My legs stop moving.

I'm crowded on either side by dead bodies.

Help.
Someone.
Fuck.
Please.
Ash. H—

ASH

—elp, me.

There’s a loud screeching in my head along with a pounding that sends me on high alert.

I’m in Blake’s room at the cabin he and his bandmates share. His smaller frame is tucked into my chest. My arm is draped protectively across his middle.

A quick scan of the room reveals no immediate dangers, but the pungent smell of fear still consumes the small space.

The old bed creaks under the weight of my shifting body, lying on my side to keep a better hold of the human.

I bury my nose in his hair, that beautiful ginger color that sticks out like static around the freckles on his face.

He smells like trees and dirt and rose petals. He smells like mine.

And a spike of spine tingling fear.

Light floods the room, the click of the door registering a moment too late.

“Blake. Are you alright? I heard screaming.”

In the doorway stands Mason Summers—the biggest hurdle in my human’s affections—with a hesitant Kole holding onto his overly large sleeve.

“I told you, I didn’t hear any—”

Mace’s eyes widen in the marginal light, blue irises locked on mine. A chill spreads throughout the room, like a layer of sea smoke.

“What are you doing here?”

It’s a reflex to tighten my arm around Blake’s sleeping form, a protective stab curdling in my gut. There is an aggression unbefitting of the situation circling us all, and I send out the barest hint of calming pheromones to combat it.

The human’s nostrils flare, and the room plummets from chilled to sub-zero.

Maybe not so human after all.

“What’s wrong with him? What did you do?”

I watch him with narrowed eyes, the anger giving way to a deep, heavy concern. My fingers slip beneath Blake’s shirt and find the space between his shoulder blades.

Clammy and cold.

I duck my face to feel the air in front of his slightly parted lips.

A tiny sliver of air comes every couple of seconds.

“Blake,” I whisper with his cheek in my palm. Roll my thumb along his skin.

That vague sense of unease that broke through my slumber. It grows thicker as I drop a hand to his chest and feel the nearly nonexistent rise and fall.

Too much. I’ve given him too much, and now he’s going to die.

Careful. I had been so careful with the pheromones I gave, with the energy I took in return.

There were no signs before he dozed in my arms.

What changed?

It doesn’t matter, because I will drain the forest of all its life to keep my love safe and breathing.

I gather him in my arms and rise from the bed, and the moment I do I’m met with the full force of the frozen wind making the room feel like a snow storm.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Mace is taking up the doorway with his arms crossed, chin tilted up as if the posturing could deter me in any way.

“Helping him. Out of the way.”

“Like how you helped him in that parking lot?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

He takes one step closer, Kole’s hand falling away as they back out of the doorway.

“Put him down.”

That’s when it hits me. The sickeningly sweet scent of butterscotch and toasted vanilla.

The cold that reeks of fear and trepidation.

The lack of reaction to my pheromones.

None have dared invade my pocket of the world in centuries. Somehow I missed one right under my nose.

I fold Blake's body tighter into my own, and crowd Mace's smaller form.

"Out of the way, incubus."

That knocks something loose; he loses his footing. I push past him into the hall and out the front door. Kole is behind me, steady feet filled with a wordless curiosity.

"Unless you wish to see something you can't come back from, I suggest you all stay here."

The tree is just out of sight of the cabin, and the lake beside it glistens in the moonlit glow. In my arms, Blake's body has started to tremble, breaths coming slow enough his lips are turning blue.

I lower him into the shallow end of the lake, half of his body submerged in the water and half propped on a boulder at the edge.

"Forgive me for this, my love." I brush back his damp hair and kiss the corner of his mouth where his dimple sits. "I have to drain the toxins out."

I strip him of his shirt and feel for the pulse point in his neck. Trail to the jut of his collarbone. To the first dip below.

A vine slithers across the grass like a snake, wrapping around my arm and fitting into the palm of my hand. A thorn points outward, and I hold it to his skin.

Silence as it pierces and silence as I drag it down the center of his chest, blood spilling over the opened wound.

I press my fingers into the cut and call to the poison, the powers, the magic, the curse in his blood threatening his life.

Out. Get out. You can't have him. He's mine.

My human body aches with the force of it as the energy recoils into me. If I don't change, this form will be destroyed forever, and both my lover and I have grown quite fond of it.

I let the mask slip away, the body of oak and bark and leaves taking the place of make believe. My control is better now; my senses are stronger.

It is impossible for me to have flooded his system to this degree in one day.

The petals. The empty jar beside his bed.

Even then, I don’t believe there was enough of my power in the petals made to tide him over to send him to the brink of death.

A slight pink hue starts to fill his cheeks, but his breaths are still abysmally low.

I take the vine in hand again and drag its tip across his wrist. It bleeds like a massacre into the water.

I lift it and press my mouth to the cut.

Pain and panic and fear—so much fear—floods my tongue. Still I suck at the hell finding home in his veins.

Out. Out. Cleansed by a body it cannot infect, a body that burns its intent on contact.

Once the bleeding has slowed from both of the wounds, there is an even rise and fall of his chest, though his body is still cold to the touch and his consciousness is too far from the surface.

Enough of the poison has cleared his system. His body can process the rest. Only now it’s too weak.

It needs energy to heal itself.

He isn’t strong enough to eat the petals, so I make a cut on my own wrist, bring my mouth to it, and suck until I can’t hold anymore.

Blake’s cheek is warm once more, and his soft lips part easily beneath the pad of my thumb, hot air hitting my skin.

I bring my mouth to his and part it wider with my tongue. The blood seeps from me to him, down his throat and into his body where it can heal. Replenish.

His mouth is my hostage until that first gasp of breath, until his hands throw out to grip my upper arms, until his eyes spring open full of tears.

Only then do I break our connection, meet the terror in his eyes, and kiss him once more—sweeter. Softer. He shivers in my hold, but his mouth molds to mine in return, and I hear the chanting in my head.

The connection from our blood makes the bond stronger.

Ash. Ash. Ash.

I’m here. I’ve got you. I won’t let anything hurt you ever again.

Fingernails bite into my skin, his tongue wars with my own, and I hold him as tightly to me as the universe allows.

When he pulls away, I look down at his angelic mess. His chest and arm are smeared with blood, and his mouth is stained red.

I grasp his face in my hands and smooth over the soft curves of his cheeks.

“Hold your breath for me, love.”

The man who would normally retort, push back in some way, doesn’t have the strength to fight. He takes in a breath, closes his eyes, and I push him fully beneath the water.

It’s only a handful of seconds, and an incandescent glow starts beneath the surface. The water grows hot, suffocatingly so, and before it can become unbearable, I raise him out of its hold and cradle the human to my chest.

His eyes are still closed, but he’s breathing again, and the cuts on his body have closed and scarred over. That sadly cannot be fixed.

“I love you, my human. Like the forest loves the trees. Like the grass loves morning dew. Like the water loves the wind to make its stillness flow. You are mine, but I am undoubtedly yours.”

Even exhausted as he must be, Blake tips his head back and smiles, lays his head on my shoulder, and if he didn’t need the rest, I’d kiss him again.

As we stand there at the water’s edge, wrapped in one another’s arms, there’s a familiar tingle on the tip of my tongue.

A taste to his blood that doesn’t belong. It’s not me, it’s not him, it’s *something else*, but I can’t place it.

At least he’s safe. At least he’s alive.

I feel eyes on me from across the way followed by the faint hint of butterscotch.

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nineteen

I HADN'T PLANNED on sharing a room with an incubus, but seeing as this one is my lover's best friend, there isn't much choice in the matter.

Even if said incubus is glaring daggers into my skull while his bedmate sips on a cup of coffee staring pointedly at the floor.

"What in the hell was that, and what in the hell are you?"

Also not ideal, but these people are important to Blake, therefore I respect that importance.

"That was a cleansing. An overabundance of energy in his system that needed to be removed. I've done it before on a smaller scale."

Mace narrows his eyes. "The hospital."

"I would never hurt him." *Unless he asked.* "I would protect him with my life."

That seems to be at least good enough to lower the other's guard, his crossed arms falling to his side.

"Why is this …" His voice cracks, the hard facade giving way to the familiar look of fear. "Why is this happening to him?"

"I fear that it's my own fault." I glance toward the closed door of Blake's room where he sleeps off the effects of the cleansing. "My energy is addictive. The more he takes, the more builds up in his system, and if I'm not taking as much as I'm giving, or if I'm taking too much, it seems to overload the body."

"It seems?" he snaps, tension filling his shoulders. "Blake isn't a damn experiment."

“No, he is not.” I raise the harshness in my voice while keeping the volume low, so as not to bother any of the sleeping humans, most of all Blake. “But I have only had one human lover before him. I am still learning.”

Mace’s wariness isn’t deterred, jaw still locked and eyes an icy storm.

I wonder if he notices the temperature dropping?

“I am a Leech. A spirit of the forest, of the trees, who feeds on the energy of the creatures in my habitat. Many times it is little piece from all over the woods, and nothing ever feels the effects. But to be physical, to borrow a human body, it requires much more energy.”

Like now. It would be easier to drop the human facade. To let my spirit reign free, but Blake would never forgive me if I traumatized more of his friends.

Mace will have to be the scapegoat.

“I feed on Blake, and he gets the pheromones, the endorphins that hold his mind out of the darkness. It’s a dangerous line, bordering addiction and obsession, but I am as careful as I know how.”

Worry and fear plunge the room into icy wonderland. I combat it with my own energy, watching Mace’s breath fog and disappear just as fast.

“He asks for it, incubus. Over and over. He doesn’t want to feel the pain. He doesn’t want to feel the grief. I will do everything in my power to take that from him.”

“Why do you …” He shakes his head, wrapping his arms around himself. “Why do you keep calling me that? *Incubus*.”

“Because that is what you are.” I shrug. “Even if you don’t know it.”

It isn’t unheard of for incubi hybrids to live their lives unaware of their lineage. Most full-blooded incubi are sterile, forged by the lust and greed of humans and creatures as opposed to procreated.

However, there are anomalies, and the hybrids are a result of that.

“It’s neither here nor there what you know of your inner demon, Mason. Right now, all I care about is Blake’s safety.”

That appears to snap him out of the stupor he’d sunk into. His shoulders straighten, and his eyes harden to alertness.

“Is he in danger?”

The taste of his blood, familiar yet not, still simmers on my tongue.

“I am unsure, but it is possible.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

There is a fierce protectiveness to him that isn't often associated with incubi. Maybe it's the human in him, or maybe there's something stronger at play. For now, I'll use it to my advantage.

"I need to go home. Search for the roots of this potential threat."

I don't imagine the brief hint of relief in his gaze. His trust in me has always been fragile, shattered after the incident in the parking lot.

Thankfully, it's my trust, not his, that we need.

"I need you to keep an eye on him. Protect him. He's going to want to wallow and spiral. You can't allow that."

For the first time all evening, Mace's lips perk into some semblance of a smile.

"I'm well acquainted with Blake's spirals. He's one of my people. I'd do anything for him."

That's what I'm counting on.

Something warm and wet touches the bottom of my feet, and I remember the little human sitting at the table. Their face is down, eyes shut, cup of coffee tilted and spilling across the floor.

"Perhaps you should lighten up on the bedroom activities."

Mace's face fills with a warm flush, and he springs into motion reaching for a dishtowel to start drying the floor.

"It's not like that—we aren't—" He huffs and scrubs a hand over his eyes from where he's crouched on the floor. "Kole has issues sleeping. Insomnia. Nightmares. He only feels safe with other people."

Strange to find the company of an incubus and a Leech comforting, but humans are a strange breed as it is.

"I am not fond of sharing. It makes you taste strange."

My human laughs into the crook of my neck, wiping the wetness from their arm down the length of their clothed body.

"Take it up with Oraco. He claimed me first."

The memory plays in my head, odd to drift up after centuries of absence.

Oraco. A spirit who had migrated north not long after the death of our shared human.

I force myself back into the present where Mace has gathered the sleeping Kole into his arms and is watching me with a guarded curiosity.

"I'll take care of them," he says. "I always do."

A promise or a threat? It's hard to tell.

It sparks a smile of my own.
Trusting an incubus. Oh, the things this human has done to me.

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PART III

duet

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CHAPTER TWENTY

blake

EVERYTHING FUCKING ITCHES.

Thank god it's cold weather, otherwise my fashion choices might get me a side-eye.

The sleeves are tight so I can't fit my fingers under them to scratch, and this is the only non-ripped pair of jeans that I own.

It's awful. If Ash were here, he'd reprimand me for the handful of petals I stuff in my mouth, but if he were here, I wouldn't *need* to stuff the damn things in my mouth.

I don't even understand why he needed to leave in the first place. He *just* got back, fucked my brains out, *sucked my literal blood*, and then poofed off to wherever it is he goes when he needs to regroup.

What the hell do tree spirits do other than seduce humans and kill people?

"You look like ass." There's my keeper, lounging on the couch with a freaking Sudoku in his hand like a 2000's grandpa.

"Takes one to know one." I flip him off as I make my way to the refrigerator and grab the second to last energy drink inside. "Tell your boyfriend to stop hogging all the carbonation."

My antics fall completely flat; Mace doesn't even bother to look up, much less meet my crabbiness with annoyance. We passed that point days ago.

"I'll be sure to ask *Kole* to pick up some more on their way in."

Unlike the rest of us, Kole doesn't live at the cabin. He has a home. A family. Somewhere to stay when we aren't playing a show.

He comes out to practice, hang out, and occasionally sleep in Mace's bed.

Totally platonically.

"This is bullshit." I drape myself over the back of the couch, smacking Mace's stupid number book to the floor and *still not getting a reaction.*

Motherfucker.

"I'll even let you take me to the cursed coffee shop. Just, please, get me the hell out of here."

Mace levels me with the most rage inducing stare known to man. It's neutral and patient and condescending all at the same time.

"You'd have no problem staying holed up in bed if you were getting laid."

I want to groan and throw myself on the floor like a toddler, but there is at least a shred of self control left in me. The teeniest bit.

"Are you offering?"

That one cracks him a little. Nothing big. A twitch of his brow. Crinkle of his nose. His temple is practically throbbing at my nonsense.

Like everyone else in the band, we've hooked up before. Traded blowjobs, rimjobs, even had a turn at each other's asses, but it's like scratching an itch. Only momentary relief.

"He'll be back. Relax."

It fucking itches.

I scratch at the underside of my chin, picking the little red bumps that keep popping up everywhere.

"Have you thought about detoxing?"

Slowly, my hands fall down to my side, and I turn back to Mace with a slack jaw. "Excuse me?"

Nothing at first. His brow is pinched and lips are pursed like he's mentally arguing with himself. Whatever it is must win out, because he nods to himself and pushes to his feet.

"I know codependency is your thing—"

"Fuck you."

"—but there are so many better options than a literal *monster in the woods*."

I blink.

Blink again.

One more time.

“What are you talking about?”

Mace rolls his eyes, and that alone makes me want to jump out of my skin and bite him. Hard.

“I know that Ash isn’t human. If he hadn’t explained himself, I’d think he was a vampire and that I was high as shit.”

Well damn. What the fuck happened while I was asleep?

Mace steps around the couch to stand beside me. “He said you asked for this … addiction. To whatever it is he does to you. I’m not condemning you, but I want to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. He makes me feel good. I like feeling good. End of story.”

His arm brushes against mine, and despite the tension, I lean into it.

“Any number of things makes you feel good, yet here you are, sober. I’d give you hell if you were downing a six pack every day, too.”

I tip my head back toward the ceiling and sigh. “Ash makes the pain stop. I haven’t … fuck I’ve barely thought about Oliver in weeks. Do you know how good it feels? Not to be in agony every second of every day?”

Mace goes quiet, and his hand finds mine, fingers tapping my wrist to the beat of my pulse.

“Is that what you want?” His voice is hesitant, layered over a hurt that echoes in the pit of my stomach. “To forget him? To forget how much you loved him?”

“Don’t you?” My voice cracks, and I’m seconds away from folding myself into Mace’s waiting embrace and letting the wave of grief creeping toward the surface swallow me whole. “Don’t you want to move on?”

“No. I don’t ever want to move on. I don’t want to forget. I don’t want Oliver to become another footnote in my lifetime of mistakes.”

The hurt is spiraling beneath my skin, and the scratching isn’t getting deep enough for me to dig it out. Warm blood dots my finger tips, and I press my hand to the newly opened wound on my neck.

“He’s dead,” I say, the words numb on my tongue. “He’s already a footnote anyway.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do!” I shout, finally turning on Mace and feeling the coil of tension in my body twist tighter. “I’m tired of hurting. If it isn’t Ash, it’ll be alcohol. If

it isn’t alcohol, it’ll be drugs. At least with Ash, I’m not going to end up fucking dead on the bathroom floor by the time winter hits.”

Shock shines like a missile launch in his eyes, but it steels over. Fortress engaged. Weapons loaded. We’re doing this.

“Twice. You’ve almost died twice because of the things you let him do to you. Both fucking times, it felt like my heart was the one that stopped. Seeing you lying there, cold and barely breathing? Goddamnit Blake. What’s it going to take to make you value your own life?”

Mace knows. He knows better than almost anyone—except for Oliver—how deeply ingrained these demons are. How stitched into the fabric of my soul is this intense hatred for being alive. For enduring all that I have and still having to take more.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a cluster of pink petals. The self control it takes not to toss them back is a testament to how badly I want him to understand. To see me in the way only one person ever has.

I hold my hand out. “I love Oliver, but he can’t hold onto my heart forever. Are you going to let him keep yours?”

The look on his face. The way his eyes widen and fill sadness, surprise, and … The pinch of his lips until they turn white.

“We’re a family,” he says softly. “We take care of each other. Through the highs and the lows. But if you’re going to do this, if you’re going to keep walking this path … then you need to leave.”

It hits me like a speeding train. The weight of *loss* looming over my head held up by a fraying rope.

My fingers curl around the petals. “Are you telling me to choose between Ash and the band?”

Mace shakes his head, but the depth of sadness in his eyes is unmistakable.

“I’m asking you to make the same choice you made when you joined. *Life. Healing.* Don’t let Oliver’s death bring you down with him.”

The pangs hitting my chest feel like someone taking a hammer to my ribcage. My lungs only half inflate as I fight back the tears forming a mist in my eyes.

This is my home. This is my family.

We’ve been each other’s balms, the bandaids holding one another together when we slip through the cracks.

Mace has been the rock everyone clings to.

Briah is the push we all need when we're stuck in our heads.

Mara is the ocean waves we float along until our hearts can settle again.

Even Kole, in the short time he's stuck around, has built a support pillar in the foundation of our lives.

But Ash? He makes me feel with an intensity I once thought only possible strung out on vices or with butterfly cuts along my arms.

It's sexual, but it's so much more. It's the ache in my chest when he's gone. The flutter in my stomach when he falls asleep first and I can touch him unassumingly.

It's the way my body becomes a burning ember when he calls me "little love". How kissing him is addictive all on its own.

Somewhere along the line I started to *feel* for the monster and not just the power inside him.

Could I give up the comfort he's blanketed me with in Oliver's absence? Maybe.

Could I give up the feeling of being irrevocably consumed, loved within an inch of my life even on the days my self-destructive tendencies win?

No.

I don't want to say something I'll regret. I don't want to inflict the kind of pain on Mace that his words have just lashed on me.

So, I stumble out the door and into the woods, sucking in the fresh fall air even as my vision wobbles.

The tree comes into focus, the quiet, lonely tree that has none of Ash's warmth because he's god knows where doing god knows what when *I need him to be right here.*

"Ash." I drop to my knees at the base of the tree and curl inward, pressing my face into the roots. "Ash. Please. Fuck. Come back. I need—I can't—"

The petals are still clenched in my fist. I shove them in my mouth. Chew. Swallow. But my throat still feels like it's being crushed.

I press my palms to the tears trailing a river down my cheeks, rocking in place, and fighting back the sobs that wrench out of my chest anyway.

Behind my closed eyes, there comes a slight glow, and a warm breeze that dances across my skin.

Something soft and tentative touches my spine. Wraps around my torso. Drapes across my back. A kiss to the ridge at the base of my skull.

Ash always said there was an invisible connection between us, one that went directly from his heart to mine, but I thought he was just being cryptic and poetic.

“I’ve got you. Breathe, little one.”

Easier said than done when my body is stuck in fight or flight. Freeze or fawn. Is it possible to do all four at once?

He’s gentle when he turns me, eases my back against the bark of the tree, tilts my head back with soft but firm fingers to my jaw.

I can hardly see through the tears that won’t let up, but Ash’s mouth covering mine is enough to force my lungs to fully function, even if it’s to breathe in the air from his own.

My heavy, leaded arms somehow manage to twine around his neck, keeping us close and connected.

I need him. God, do I need him. It isn’t the pheromones talking. It isn’t the addiction buzzing in my veins. It isn’t even my desperate need for contact to regulate my rapidly beating heart.

It’s just Ash. I need him.

Because I might have fallen in love with him.

I hate that my head is too fucked up to tell, but I know I can trust him to ease me through it.

The arm wrapped around my middle slides down to grip my ass, pressing our bodies together, and I moan into Ash’s hungry, demanding mouth.

Fingers slip into the back of my jeans, teasing through my crack until one presses lightly to my hole.

All of my nerves engage at once, muscles screaming even as he rubs in slow circles that feel like heaven.

I break away from the kiss, panting into Ash’s mouth and shake my head as much as his grip allows.

“Just hold me, please,” I whisper, tangling my legs over his hips and tightening my arms around his neck.

The hand on my jaw inches down to my throat, squeezing in a soft rhythm that makes my eyes flutter closed. Lips descend on mine again, and that acceptance is met with a rumble in his throat and a stronger grip on mine.

I gasp, but he plunges his tongue in my mouth to silence the cry that follows. It hurts, but when I try to pull away, he presses his thumb to the

spot just below my Adam's apple, and the pain becomes second to the sudden dire need to breathe.

He pulls back from my mouth with my lip trapped between his teeth, only letting go when it cuts and bleeds.

"Hush now, love. You want to be good for me, don't you?"

No.

No, that isn't what I want right now.

I try to shake my head, but he's holding me too tight, and the threat of little black spots make it hard to focus.

His other hand comes out of my pants to flick open the button on the front. Rips the material to get it over my hips. Then, reaches into my boxers and wraps around my masochistic dick: half hard from being manhandled.

Another kiss, and finally I can take in a breath. His grip shifts back to my jaw, and even though I'm breathing, the way he attacks my mouth makes it hard to get in more than shallow puffs of air.

He pumps my cock until it's leaking all over his hand and my underwear, until my balls are throbbing with the need to release, and my body is torn between pleasure and pain.

"Stop," I manage to croak out, jerking my head enough to the side to take in a big breath. "Please stop."

He's looking at me—no, staring at me with the most blank, disinterested expression.

"Does that normally work for you?" he asks, voice wrapped in a layer of frost. "Saying no to me?"

"Ash." It hurts to speak, like my vocal cords have been mangled by shattered glass.

The grip on my cock becomes painful, rough tugs that threaten to force me over, even as I try to hold it back.

I don't want this.

He touches my cheek, fingers feeling like leather, and for the first time, I see his eyes.

Not green.

Orange.

His smile is crooked, and his voice comes out like sandpaper.

"Don't you wish, little songbird."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ash

HOME IS a grayscale land of mist and fog, where creatures roam unbeknownst to the humans on the other side. It is a place to recharge our energy that the outside world depletes.

It is also where we are more capable of sensing another's presence.

Centuries may have passed, but I haven't forgotten the taste of tainted human blood.

Another Leech has been feeding on my lover, and that is unacceptable.

Locating the Leech, however, has been time consuming, tedious, and unfruitful.

I miss Blake, and I'm sure he'll have a furry like no other waiting for me upon my return. Which might be sooner than expected, because I'm all out of leads, and frankly would rather spend my time wrapped up in my human, protecting him from the comfort of his own bed.

"Leaving already? I just got back."

Thorns sprout along my skin, and the petals on my body bristle.

"You're a tough creature to track down," I say, keeping my voice even.

The scent of pine needles waifs through the air.

"I've been playing a game of cat and mouse in the human world. Apologies for the absence."

"Is that so? Have you taken another lover?"

Oraco's spirit form is much like mine but covered in pines as opposed to petals. Brown bark instead of green. He's sharper. More casually deadly.

“Something like that. Made quite the deal with those pesky nightmare hounds. They really are quite greedy little creatures.”

With a cautious edge, I ask, “And what’s that?”

He grins with teeth of splintered wood. “They let me borrow their power, and I’ll find their missing prince.”

“That sounds like a lot of work for petty revenge.”

One thing Oraco is not is a creature who rushes things. He likes to play with his food, torment his prey, but I’m not in a playful mood today.

“It might be petty,” he says, the bark on his body expanding, branching out to reveal a hollow cave-like structure. “But it sure is a delectable time.”

Inside is a bundle of shadows, chasing one another and swirling around a mass at the center.

My roots ache, and the pollen in my bloodstream rages.

“Oraco.”

“I brought you a present. Something you left behind. You really should keep a closer eye on your things.”

The ball of shadows floats out, dark and menacing, resting directly at the base of my tree.

If killing a forest spirit was as easy as killing a human, I’d do it in a heartbeat, because I don’t need to dispel the shadows to know what lies within them.

Or who.

It’s a chain link wrapped around the center of my chest, barbed wire digging into delicate muscle. It’s whispers in the back of my mind shouting, “*Mine. Mine. Mine.”*

Oraco’s bark closes, hellish smirk turning his entire face devious. “You broke mine, now I’ve broken yours.”

There one second and gone the next, the spirit will be lucky if I don’t burn his forest to the ground, but that will have to be another day, because I have a hoard of nightmare fiends and a petrified human to deal with.

I crouch beside the bundle of shadows and hold a hand out to be met with the sting of teeth when I dare touch their gathering.

“Now you listen to me, you nasty little creatures. Your end of the deal is done. Oraco has left you to me, and I am telling you to release the human or so help me I’ll drown you in the Earth’s sun.”

Whispers start out soft and get louder, wind whipping and screeching as the fiends twist tighter onto themselves. A few fly off from the hoard and

attach themselves to the vines around my body, but they only feel like yapping puppies that I easily swat away.

They aren’t a difficult bunch to tame, but they come by the dozens, all looking for a taste of fear and a dose of pain. Feeding on humans is their sustenance.

But not tonight.

Because this one is *mine.*

My body glows, a bit of orange, a bit of green, a tiny sliver of pink, and when I touch the swirl of creatures again, they scatter. They screech and fly off in every direction, leaving me with the shell of the boy I had sworn—and failed—to protect.

Blake is lying motionless, propped against the tree with his body covered in cuts, layered in bruises, and not a stitch of clothing on any part of him.

He’s breathing—thank heavens he’s breathing—but death is the least of your worries with nightmare fiends.

His body has already been brought to the brink and drug back once; I am unsure if it can survive a second attempt.

I fold his body into mine, and search for my blood in his veins. Faint, but there. It needs to be stronger.

Humans can only pass into our world when they are on death’s door, and by the look of him, he’s more than one foot in the grave.

The lake here is stronger than on the other side, but as he is now, it will devour him if he touches it.

I lay him down at the edge of the water and find a sharp rock to drag my arm across. The blood, a mixture of green and yellow, pours like a rapid from the wound.

Drinking it won’t get it in his system fast enough.

I hate to hurt him knowing the pain he is already in, but death is not an option I’m giving him.

There's a scar on his abdomen, jagged but shallow, and it gives way easily to the thorn I drag across it.

A scream rips out of Blake’s throat, and he tries to curl in on himself, but I hold him down.

“Breathe for me, love. It'll be over soon.”

His hands smack and claw at my body, but we’re in my domain, and he’s much too weak to land any sort of damage.

“What the hell are you doing? Get away! Stop touching me!”

If I could, I'd take his face in my hands and kiss away the panic eating him alive, reassure him that he’ll never have to worry about this again, because when I'm done with him, he’ll be nearly indestructible.

I cover his cut with my own, letting the thorns on my skin press into his.

He takes in a stuttered breath and goes silent, watching me with a horror that chills me to the core.

“I promise, love, it won’t hurt anymore.”

If the legends are true, and I pray to all the heavens that they are.

It’s not a simple trickle of my blood into his cut, but a magnetic pull, dredging the substance from my body into his—intermingling, fusing, joining together on a cellular level.

A string pulls taut in my chest, bringing my gaze to Blake’s slowly shuttering one. For a moment, his eyes close and the rise of his chest stills. Several beats, and then a warm, golden glow envelopes us both.

The blood beneath my arm burns to an almost dangerous degree, and I snatch my arm away with just enough time to see the shredded skin on Blake’s torso stitching itself closed.

As the glow fades and the scar turns an irritated pink, Blake’s eyes open again. The first beat is met with trepidation. The second is relief. The third?

“No. No, no, no.” He repeats himself over and over, fingers digging into the meat of my arm as his body begins to shake. “What did you do to me?”

In all of my time in this human’s presence, I have never felt a fear as consuming as this one.

“You need strength to get home,” I explain, resting my fingers on the swell of his cheek only for him to jerk away. “Blake.”

“Don't say my name,” he begs, hands coming up to cover his eyes. “Not with Ash’s voice.”

I'm hit with the distant familiarity of an earlier conversation.

“Not in Oliver’s voice. Not with Oliver’s body.”

What did he do to you, little love?

I free his body from the cage my arms had made and rest both of my palms on his cheeks. He recoils, but my hold is firm, and I lower my face to his.

“Thunder eyes, a storm cloud blue; how it aches to even look at you. A heart so fragile; crumpled to dust; who knew that love could hurt this much?”

It’s oh so hesitant how his fingers reach up to cover mine, body tense as every breath in feels like a fight. Slowly, his eyes close, and his touch moves to my wrist, grips there, takes another set of shuddered breaths, and travels up my arms until he grabs onto my shoulder blades.

“You’re you?” he asks, and my heart breaks into a million pieces for him.

“I am me, little love. I will not hurt you, and I will not let anyone hurt you again. But we must get you in the water so you can finish healing. My blood is only the start of the process.”

There are a hundred questions in his eyes, but for one reason or another, he doesn’t speak them. He merely nods and lifts himself ever so slightly to brush his lips to mine.

I lift him back into my arms, and together we sink under the water’s surface. Submerged just long enough for the wound on his torso and the one on my arm to glow, and then we’re above the water as little gold tendrils skate across the surface.

“What is this?”

“A bonding ceremony.”

His eyes flash up to mine, fingers curling around the vines on my chest.

“We are tying your life to mine. Nothing can kill you or harm you that would not do the same to me. As long as I live, so will you. We will feel each other even stronger than before. We are linked: souls, hearts, and lifelines.”

The tendrils floating alongside us wiggle their way up our bodies, wrapping around us like a spool of thread.

“It is the only way for you to return home. I am sorry he took your freedom from you, and I am sorry I was not there to stop him.”

Tears pool in Blake’s eyes, and his arms around me tug until our lips meet. The lake turns a deep, golden hue, warming until near uncomfortable, and then Blake is gasping in a breath and clutching at his chest, and I know my energy has finally taken hold.

“I am yours just as you are mine, forevermore, and for all time.”

A smile graces his face through the echoes of pain, and I barely refrain from kissing him again. He is healing but not fully healed.

“You aren’t allowed to be a better poet than me. I’m stealing that for a song.”

Even with a body in need of mending, a heart overflowing with grief, and a mind shrouded in darkness, he is still consumed by the need to bleed his thoughts onto a canvas.

It is endearing, and all the bits of love for him scattered throughout the pieces of my soul and the others that reside in me, it all fits into one radiant image of the man before me.

“If that makes you happy, little love.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

blake

I'VE NEVER SEEN Ash angry.

He's been jealous and frustrated, the kind where he wants to take it out on my body, bury himself inside of it. But genuine anger on him is … strange.

For a monster, he's surprisingly docile. Quiet. I can see the rage in his eyes.

Human. Green.

It's Ash.

I pinch the skin of my wrist for as long as I can stand, only letting go when Ash throws a hand on my knee, squeezing just shy of painful.

He isn't actually looking at me, instead at his phone as he types away with his free hand. Other than a handful of texts, I've never seen him use the thing.

"What are you doing?" I hate that I practically have no voice, rubbed raw from vines and petals. Ash says it will take time for the bond to heal all the damage done to my body, but I hate how broken I still feel.

Even worse is the emotional black hole left in the wake of my trip to whatever spirit-based hell I was dragged into. The memories are fuzzy, and there's a block of fresh pain that comes with trying to make it clearer, but sometimes I'll get a flash.

A flash of hands on my body where they don't belong. Bark and vines cutting into my skin. Horrible, nasty words scraped into my ears until they

bled.

It’s like I’m trapped in a vortex of pain and nothingness.

“Blake.”

Gentle fingers on my skin jolt me out of my thoughts, and even though my body instinctively tries to shy away, Ash doesn’t let me escape the touch.

Green eyes swim with concern, and I wish I could force a smile to make him feel better. To make him believe I’m doing better.

I’m not.

“You are safe.”

“Little human slut. Letting any creature into your body? Tsk. Tsk.”

“You are an abomination.”

“Do you think if I break your body, if it can no longer serve him, will your precious Ash still want you?”

Arms wrap around my middle and scoop me into Ash’s lap. He places a kiss to the side of my head, the tip of my ear, my cheek, my jaw. His hand slides under my shirt to follow the scar on my abdomen.

The other loosely rests on my throat, angling my head to give his lips better access to my neck.

Thorns press into the sides of my neck, digging deeper each time I thrash, pinching even when I breathe.

Tears spring to my eyes and fall just as fast, and my body is too frozen to wipe them away before Ash spots the trail on his lip’s descent.

“No matter how long it takes,” he whispers softly into my ears, “I will hunt Oraco down and find a way to burn him alive.”

It should be reassuring. The monster who hurt me is on my monster’s murder list.

But I can’t even remember what Oraco looks like. There is no face to the name. There wasn’t even a name until Ash gave him one.

He was just another spirit. Another Leech. Wearing Ash’s face.

While he beat me, raped me, and any number of unspeakable things that keep barging into my mind.

“We feed on those who touch our trees. Who reside in our forests. We leech your energy, and if you’re lucky we fill you with euphoria before you die.”

“Did you ever feed on Oliver?”

The room goes deathly silent, or maybe it’s just my pounding heart drowning the rest of the world out.

Ash stills against me, and for a split second, I think he’s going to hurt me. Hiss in my ear to shut up and stop talking about him. Squeeze me until I can’t breathe.

He doesn’t. He kisses my shoulder where the collar of my t-shirt has slipped down. Strokes the tear stain on my cheek.

“Yes. He spent a lot of time at my tree.”

My throat hurts. It throbs. Swallowing nearly brings a sob.

“Did it hurt him?”

“Eventually, yes.”

I twist in his arms, the need to be face to face winning out against the aching protest of my body.

“Did you know you were hurting him?”

The look in his eyes screams pain and remorse, and my heart feels like it might just shatter.

“I did not know how you felt for him, only what he felt for you.”

“What did he feel? About me?”

Ash’s eyes soften in a way I’ve never seen before. They stare into mine with an intensity that makes me dizzy.

He grasps my face in his hands and cradles me like I’m something precious.

“A love so intense, so consuming that I knew I had to have you.”

It isn’t romantic; it’s diabolical, but I’m too entangled in him to extract myself now. He wanted me. He got me. Even if Oliver had to pay the price.

“What happens when you take our energy?”

A slight crease forms in his brow, but he doesn’t waver. “Continual feeding often leads to erratic behavior. Depression.”

“Suicidal?”

The way he smiles is sad, and this is it: the moment I feel my heart breaking.

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

Ash anchors his touch to my hips as a tremble starts in my limbs.

“Was it on purpose?” The words taste like acid in my mouth. “Did you kill him to get to me?”

“No, my love.” His hand clamps around the back of my neck, holding me secure even though inside I’m falling apart. “In truth, I became addicted

to his feelings for you. To the way he thought of you."

He squeezes me tight, and how fucked up is it that the simple motion makes me feel secure?

"I didn't mean to take as much as I did from him. It was gradual, but I was greedy. I took more and more until that day happened. He spoke of his heartache, both in loving you and all the ways he hurt you."

"Like how he was sleeping with Mace?"

Ash makes a face almost like he wants to laugh. "I wouldn't blame that one on dear Oliver, though it's a shame he seemed to weigh that blame on himself."

His lips brush mine in a phantom of a kiss, instead skirting along my cheeks.

"I am sorry that I took him from you." He kisses the red splotches under my eyes. "I am sorry that I thought wearing his skin would be enough to heal your heart."

It's my turn to laugh, though it only makes me cry harder.

"Shut up." I pull him in and hold my mouth above his, a threat or a promise that's yet to be seen. "Why didn't you feed on me? If I'm the one you wanted."

A growl leaves his throat, and the fingers on my neck tighten. "Because I didn't want to risk happening to you what I knew would happen to him."

Dammit.

It hurts. It feels like someone carving up my insides and serving them to me on a platter. Like a million little stab wounds scarring over and leaving nasty craters in my heart.

"I need you to shut it off," I say as my voice cracks. "I want to tell you to fuck off, to never fucking touch me again, but at the same time I need you to make it quiet."

I swallow down a sob. "I want to hate you, but I love you too damn much."

I don't know that I've ever truly surprised Ash before, but his entire body goes lax at the confession.

I rock into him, chest pounding and aching, mouth desperate to feel him again.

There's something wrong with me.

Something broken that can never be fixed.

“Make me forgive you, Ash. Make me forget I ever belonged to anyone else but you.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

blake

THE WOODS ARE dark and cold, grass splattered with morning dew though the sun won't be up for a while yet. Gentle ripples form on the surface of the water in the wake of my fingers.

It's been an hour, maybe two, and my body is chilled to the bone. There's dirt caked between my toes and chafe marks on my thighs from the friction of my underwear and the temperature outside.

The waiting is supposed to heighten the anticipation, but the only thing rising is my frustration.

Though, alright, my dick has been hard for longer than likely recommended, but if Ash doesn't come claim my ass, I'm going to sleep and he can wake me up when the fun starts.

I say it, but I don't really mean it until my eyes start to close and my body finds the base of the willow tree as comfortable as my bed.

There isn't enough energy in me to fight the call of sleep, so I huff out an impatient breath and let the darkness climb in.

There you are, little songbird. I missed you.

Blood pounds in my ears as I jolt upright. I wasn't down for long; the sun hasn't started peeking into the treeline.

My body aches at the memory of Oraco's body on top of mine. Inside of mine. Forcing me onto his—

Stop. I don't want to think of *him* every time I'm seized by a panic.

Oliver’s death has had me strung out for months, but this creature, this *thing* that turned my need for pain into something twisted and gruesome?

Fuck him so fucking hard.

I just want Ash to fuck me. I want him to hurt me. Erase the monster from my mind and give me something else to hold onto.

What’s taking him so long?

A soft wind blows through the woods, whistling on the leaves and humming along the water’s surface. My skin prickles from more than just the cold, and I scan every visible inch around me.

“Ash?”

Grass crinkles in the wind, but I don’t see him. I take a deep breath and close my eyes again.

I’m safe. He’s here. He’ll be here.

Something tickles the bottom of my foot, and I jump. That *something* wraps around my ankle, pulling me back to the spot.

“I feel like that’s unnecessary,” I mutter, kicking at the vine with my other foot, but it doesn’t budge. Another climbs out of the earth to join it, trapping both legs together. “Hey now.”

“Give it up, little love.”

I hear his voice intermingled with the one in my head, but I don’t see him.

“Isn't the point of this that you’re supposed to *make me*? Besides, you wouldn’t like me if I just opened my legs and let anyone have their way with me.”

I can practically feel his smile through our bond.

“But you did,” he whispers, and it sets a sour taste in my mouth. “You let Oraco into your body. Let him touch you in places that belong only to me.”

My throat dries out in an instant. “That’s not true. I fought him. I did.”

“Did you? Or did you put up a farce like you do with me? You like being forced. You like being a slut and a whore. You like the pain.”

“Stop it.”

Don’t stop.

“You say you want me to replace the memories. Do you want to know what I think?”

“No.”

Yes.

His voice is in my ear, in my skull, but I still can't see him.

"I think you want to relive it. The helplessness. The fear. The violation."

My body burns. Aches. Like it's somehow both on fire and frozen at the same time.

"So what if I do?" My throat catches. "So what if I want to feel it again? So what if I want to feel that with you?"

The vines on my feet wrap around my legs, my thighs, hips, and then travel inward, slinking into my boxers and circling my thickening cock.

"Then, I will give that to you."

More vines spring up from the ground, trapping my back to the trunk and weaving along my arms, tying them together and looping around the tree to keep them placed above my head.

There isn't a single limb still mobile, and when I crane my neck down to watch the prickly things move beneath my boxers, a chuckle sounds in my ear.

"I don't think I'm going to touch you at all." Phantom lips press kisses down my neck. "Let my plants and our bond do all the work for me."

"No," I whine, though my attention is rapt and locked on the way the vines squeeze stroke along my dick. "I want you."

"Do you know what I want?" Two handprints appear on my abdomen, pressing the air from my lungs. "To see how many of my vines you can take in that greedy little hole. How much pain are you willing to bear for me?"

All of it.

I don't say it, simply grit my teeth and tear my gaze away, which earns me a hand—a tangible hand—around my throat.

It happens in a myriad of colors, like a kaleidoscope zooming into focus, but Ash is there in all of his plant monster glory, glaring at me as he bites down on an amused smile.

"You're going to watch while I stretch you open, baby. And if you can take all of my vines without coming or tapping out, you can have my dick."

"How many is all?"

Now his smile is free, and he presses it right to my lips. His fingers curl in the band of my boxers and *rip* the sides straight in half.

Why bother with underwear if he's just going to destroy them all?

"If it gets to be too much, you know your word."

A whole thicket of vines form under my ass, and one as thick around as a finger slips past my cheeks and goes straight for my hole.

No preamble, no teasing, no slow stretch. It practically shoots its plant lubricant right at my hole and pushes inside.

Deep. As deep as it can go. It feels weird, but not bad.

Another eases in beside it, and then a third, and I think I'm alright until there's five wrapped around each other hammering on my prostate.

"I know you can take more than that."

Ash is still on top of me, kissing and biting along my body as he pseudo-fucks me with his plants.

"Then stop playing with me."

"But that's half the fun."

"Ash."

He pulls back, hand resting loosely around my throat again. "Am I being too playful for you? Would you like me to be meaner?"

I scoff but can't help the way my dick throbs at the suggestion. "I don't think you've got it in you. You love me too—"

His fingers tighten around my throat until I can't breathe, and then there's five … six more vines forcing their way into my hole in quick succession.

There's no time to stretch, to adjust, it's the equivalent of two monster cocks shoved in my ass at the same time, and I can't even scream about it.

My mouth falls open, but only a choked gasp comes out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My dick *aches*, and as the army of vines pumps in and out of my hole, another slithers up, wrapping around my dick and sinking into the tip.

Ash's lips close over mine, the pressure leaves my throat, and I cry a raw, broken sob straight into his mouth.

Pain ripples through my system, shaking apart my foundation of safety and security, crumbling all of my fight to the ground.

My ass and dick are both being fucked, milked dry as the orgasm bursts through my insides with nowhere to go.

By the time the vine pulls out of my dick, it's sore and rapidly softening, but the ones in my ass are going strong, pounding every inch of space inside my hole until my spent dick shoots weak spurts of cum onto my stomach.

When they finally start emptying me out, I'm a moaning, panting mess barely able to keep my eyes open.

Ash is mouthing at the bruise around my neck, and when the vines holding me in place retract, I can feel every sting and scrape from the thorns having dug into my skin.

“I do love you,” Ash says, teasing the seam of my lips with his tongue. “Enough to visit every depraved fantasy in your head.”

Every inch of my body is thrumming with pain, but I still smile and press my mouth to his.

“I love you too, monster.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ash

BLAKE HAS NEVER LOOKED MORE delectable than when he's sporting my bruises with his head held high and a grin on his face.

"You look like you're feeling well."

He's fresh from a bath where we washed out his wounds, and I may have given his cock a taste while he finished up.

Now, we're back in his room, nothing but towels around our hips, and he swings a leg over mine to settle his pert ass right in my lap.

"My whole body is deceptively sore for how elated I feel. Is that the magic talking?"

"Hm." I wrap my arms around his middle and drag him down to me. "A bit perhaps. It wants you to know you are safe."

His contagious smile falls on top of mine.

"Even your blood is a simp for me."

"Do I need to ask the internet what that means?"

He laughs, the kind that fills his frame with a joy that seeps out and soaks into my own nervous system.

"It means you love me."

"That I do."

Our lips meet in what starts as soft and sweet but quickly transforms into needy and urgent, aided by Blake's hips rutting into my own.

"Love," I warn, squeezing his waist to keep his growing erection at bay. "You heal faster now, but you still need a respite."

A pout forms on his lips, and I kiss it away before it can weaken my resolve.

“You will not goad or sweet talk me into fucking you.”

He bumps his nose to mine, and I can’t deny the ray of happiness this casual affection lights in me.

“Is it the pheromones making me feel so good? Do I need to worry about choking on petals in my sleep?”

I shake my head and lean back against the headboard lest I find myself tempted by his treacherous ways.

“The physical addiction is near non-existent, because you could simply pull the energy from my body if you wished.”

“I could?”

“Don’t be getting any big ideas. It just means there is no risk of withdrawal should I need to step away or put you in your place.”

Goosebumps spread across his arms as he weaves them around my neck.

“Do you need to punish me, Ash?”

I slide my fingers beneath the knot in his towel and cup his ass. “I’m starting to think I do.”

He shivers, and a quick glance down reveals the tented outline of his cock.

“You are insatiable.”

“I am horny. I blame the bond. I can feel your desire for me thrumming under my skin.”

“That will take some getting used to. I’m still not going to fuck you. No matter how much you wiggle this cute little ass over my cock.”

His hips squeeze around mine, erection rutting on my stomach. “Lame.” But as I dig my fingers into his glutes, he starts to settle.

Soon, he lowers his weight to my lap and drops his head to my shoulder. Several long minutes pass, his fingers drawing patterns on my sternum, before he finally speaks up.

“Is it always going to be like this? This overwhelming urge to get closer, to be a part of you.”

I wrap gentle fingers around his nape and squeeze. “My blood will always call for me, but no. This desperation should fade with time.”

Gray eyes lift to mine for barely a moment before burying themselves in the crook of my neck.

“Am I still human?”

Anxiety laces the forced nonchalance in his voice. I squeeze him tighter.

“Yes. My blood flows through you, but you are still human. A human who may live longer than most, but a human all the same.”

His body shifts so we’re face to face, his soft, sweet mouth hovering deliciously close to mine.

“Are we immortal?”

I smile as his tongue darts out to lick his lips. “Not quite. I am at the mercy of the Earth. Should my willow’s roots ever be drug from the dirt, should it burn to the ground and take my forest with it, my soul would lose its home, its energy. I would wilt and die, and now I’d take you with me.”

He shivers, but I’m not sure it’s entirely unpleasant. “That tree isn’t going anywhere. It’s too important.”

The weight of his words aren’t meant only for me. The willow is my home, but it is also the place that holds the memory of Blake’s love for Oliver and Oliver’s love for him. It is a place full of heartache and despair but also hope and comfort.

“His energy is but an ember in my soul, little love. I can afford one more transformation, and it will be used up.”

Blake’s forehead drops to mine, eyes closed and lips wobbling as he shudders through a breath.

“Can I say goodbye?” he asks, voice soft and cracked. “I think I’m ready.”

My lips ghost his cheek, the corner of his mouth. “I think that is wise.”

“Smartass.” His pulls back, eyes misty and lip clamped between his teeth. “Let’s do this.”

I cup his cheek in my palm, and as his eyes flutter closed, I pull deep for the flicker of pink light in the corner of my soul. It’s a breath away from being snuffed out, but it accepts the invitation to take over my body one last time.

It spreads like a wildfire beneath my skin, and the room fills with a bright orange glow as the body I’m in shifts to that of another.

There is a constant hum of discontent that simmers beneath the surface of this form, perhaps a testament to the human’s soul being unsettled and not fully moved on, but I flood it with a sense of calm and security.

Only a few moments and you will be free. Free of pain, of the memories. You may meet your soul at the depths of the lake or the puff of the clouds,

but please let him have this last moment.

There is a quiet hum in the back of my mind. It whispers Blake's name on repeat like a prayer.

He opens his eyes, and there is a world of sadness within them.

"Ollie."

The body calls for him, reaches for him, palms itching to cradle his face in them. I oblige.

"Blake." I feel his name come from deep in my soul.

"I miss you, baby," he says, nuzzling into my palm. "It's good to see you."

I don't dare say anything in return, not wanting to ruin his illusion or drive for closure.

"Fuck, I love you so much." His voice wobbles, but he's smiling now. Such a bittersweet expression. "I'm not angry at you anymore. I'm sorry that I ever was."

He looks down, hands coming to rest on my—Oliver's—bare chest.

"You were so consuming. Pulling me from my shit into our own bubble. It was impossible not to fall in love with you."

Those fingers travel down a slow and sensual path, but there's no heat to the touch. Just a quiet exploration.

"You're magnetic. A planet with its own gravitational pull. All I wanted was to orbit around you. Maybe that's why I spiraled so hard. My anchor was gone."

Tears fill and fall from his lashline, and I smooth them away with my thumbs.

"I love you, Oliver Hale, and I will love you every day for the rest of my life."

His wandering hands find placement in my hair. "But I've come to find that my heart is bigger than I imagined. And there's enough room in here to love more than one person."

"Blake."

He shudders, a fresh set of tears tracking down his cheeks.

"Ash is an ass," he says with a little cheeky smile. "He hurts me, but only when I ask. He loves me. Somehow, someway, despite all the hell I've brought him."

"He is helplessly in love with you." The words are mine, but at the same time they are not.

Blake nods, drawing himself closer, curling in on the body until his face is inches away.

“I am recklessly in love with him. The way he touches me. Kisses me. Gives me what I need even when I fight him.”

His lips are so close, and it takes all of my self control not to capture them and hear him whine my name.

“Thank you for loving me,” he says. “Even if you couldn’t do it out loud. In a way, you still brought that love to me. Just in the form of a sunshine plant monster.”

A laugh catches in my throat, and his little half-cocked smile does something twisty to my insides.

“He prefers tree spirit, though he likes the sunshine bit.”

Blake’s smile widens. “Sunshine. I can work with that.”

His hands are on my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze.

“You need to rest, Ollie. Never forget that I love you, and I miss you, but I’m going to be okay without you. Some days will be hard. But I have Mace, and Mara, and Briah, and I think you would have liked Kole.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a shaky breath.

“Goodbye, baby.”

Something tugs at my chest, one hard, demanding pull, and I pull Blake in closer, mouths centimeters apart.

“Goodbye, sweetheart.”

Blake’s eyes blow wide, and then he’s kissing me. For a moment, I know it’s for Oliver. A goodbye kiss. A memory for him to latch onto.

The remnants of Oliver’s soul flickers, and then like a candle meeting a gust of wind, it’s snuffed out.

Blake gasps as my body is engulfed in a soft, golden light, and when I’m back in the body he’s come to know, he smiles at me full of sadness, but also full of hope.

“I love you,” he says before diving back in to kiss me again. Hands tug in my hair, hips move over my lap. “Ash. Ash.”

My name. It’s my name he calls out of passion and devotion. My name his lips whisper over and over as they descend on my skin.

As he makes love to my body, mine, not one I’ve borrowed. Vines, bark, petals, and thorns; his lips and hands make home of it all.

Maybe it is not the dirt where my roots lie that anchors me to this plane. Maybe it is the love—the heart beating in this human’s chest—that is truly

where my soul is tethered.

Forevermore and for all time.

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about the author

Rikki (they/he) is a trans author writing queer romance packed with heat and heartache, who loves exploring all facets of a character's identity and creating heartfelt stories that tear at the heartstrings. Their work has an emphasis on close-knit friendships, touchy-feely characters, and lots of hurt/comfort vibes!

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