

MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS



Palinogenesis

RAE STONE

Palingenesis

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OceanofPDF.com

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For the ones that feel stuck, on the edge of a rebirth, and
need a little reminder why you keep going. It matters. You
matter. Don't ever quit.

And for the monster fuckers out there that just like to dream
of barbed peens and fiery wings.

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BLUTZ

NEW TOWN. NEW PLACE.

It's small but it's exactly what I was looking for when I scoured the map for inspiration.

Coming to Bearcreek felt like a taste of the freedom I've been so desperately waiting for.

A town painted in celebration with a local legend is just a bonus.

A fresh start that was supposed to rejuvenate me.

But it's the past I brought along that might destroy me.

If I don't go up in flames first.

Palingenesis is a full-length MM dark monster romance and part of the Mayhem Manuscripts Cryptids multi-author collaboration. Get ready for dark themes including dream and psyche manipulation, monsters with wings, and stalking as a love language. This book is a standalone and includes an HEA.

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PLAYLIST

Theme Song:

Chemical—The Devil Wears Prada

Destroy Me—PRESIDENT

Check out the full playlist on [Spotify](#).

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THIS IS A WORK of fiction, covers dark topics, has a monster MC and is heavily character driven. Please do not use any part of this work as a reference to real life. The experiences that occur in the book are not the sole reference to any lived experiences and should not be taken as such.

Please keep an open mind when reading this book. While it is a *dark monster* romance, there are elements of this work that are open to interpretation. There's imagery with meaning, subtle hints and clues along the way. Lots of nuance to the way in which things come about. More detail is discussed in the Afterword section, but please just read with an open mind. Ilios likes it best that way ;)

As always, there will be a list of content warnings at the back of the book after the Afterword section (click [here](#)) and on my site, but the main one(s) in this book are on page Noncon & Dubcon. Domestic abuse. Dream and psyche manipulation. Honestly, this book is a little bit of a mindfuck with a lot of nightmares and some accidental shadow work. Please take care of yourself and mind the CW. If there is a topic in here that you believe should be in the CW and is not, please don't hesitate to reach out to me directly.

Another quick note before you jump in; this book includes an MC that is Hard of Hearing (HoH). There is sign language(ASL) used in the story, which holds an entirely different grammatical structure, and for the sake of this work has been formatted to English in most cases.

Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy!
<3Rae

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PROLOGUE

“ONCE UPON A TIME—”

“Oh, come *on*.”

The crowd collectively groans before the storyteller attempts to continue around his barely contained mirth. “—there once was a—”

“Are you serious right now?”

“You can’t start a story that way, bro.”

The round of displeasures disrupts the crackling of the fire, accompanied by the reflection of the flames in their rolling eyes. Snickers follow as the storyteller lifts his brown bottle and his brow, patiently waiting for his comrades to calm enough to keep going.

Stories told around a campfire such as this are familiar to most, rooted in some form of truth and travel like the wind from ear to ear, but never really *known* in their entirety. Tales are told and scattered, details dismissed and written over, the truth of them fading in time.

Some are meant to disappear, while others are not.

“There was a man that made a deal with the haze of a magical morning light, unknowing that it would be his first of many to come. Too many. For hundreds of years, he would have to watch the sun rise alone, waiting until it consumed him so wholly that not even the afterlife would accept what was left. Not his soul, his being, his essence. None of it.

“Over time, morality worn down, that man became a monster. Doomed to walk this earth for eternity with a dwindling hope. His body would give in, succumbing to sickness or war, stolen by time or humanity, and each time, he would return to this plane of existence to try again. To live another life in search of one thing. Times would change, the scenery, the world. All different, but never the man beneath the monster.”

“What the hell could be worth bargaining for *that*?” A fellow camper asks, head shaking in disbelief, the forest looming heavily behind him. “Endless pain and suffering? No, thanks.”

“Yeah,” another chimes in as she fishes in the cooler next to her for another beer. “There’s no way there’s anything worth—what? Being reborn over and over until the end of time? Is that really what you’re saying?”

The storyteller leans back, bottle propped on his knee as the others stare at him through the light of the fire that’s begun to dwindle between them.

Faint shadows flicker across their faces, the storyteller making eye contact with each one of the campers, a knowing silence blanketing them.

The air grows heavy, thickening with the mist of the forest beyond that crawls slowly closer.

“Isn’t there, though?”

CHAPTER 1

Shannon

SHARP, CHILLY WIND CUTS through the open windows, rushing through the longer-than-normal curls on my head. It's refreshing to cruise the open road with a taste of freedom, even if it's leaving my skin pebbled and my nose a little cold.

It feels almost borrowed, the liberty, because deep down, I know that it is.

The feeling is such a contrast to what I'm used to that it's almost unsettling, but the upcoming town is exactly what I was looking for. Something small. Expanding, but full of history and spirit.

There's an edge to the air, a few secrets laid in the foundation, and a bustling sense of community that's missing from big city living.

Moving from somewhere like Chicago to the middle of the nowhere mountain small town of Bearcreek, Montana—halfway across the country from the only place I've ever known—is going to be a feat. And it should be.

That's the point.

A fresh start, away from it all. That's what this is supposed to be. Somewhere far away from everything and everyone.

New walls. New streets. New stories to be told to anyone willing to listen.

The next chapter in my—our—life.

I've got to stop doing that.

It's *our* place we're moving to where *our* life can continue.

My gaze flicks to the rearview like I might be able to see all the things I left behind nipping at the hitch of my truck but of course, I see nothing on the vast expanse of highway separating me from Chicago stretching beyond the rusted bed. The moving totes are still there, filled with everything I own in just a few containers—the only pieces of my past I was willing to bring with me.

Sucking in a breath, I scrub a stiff hand across my jaw and readjust my non-dominant hand on the wheel. I hate when my digits hold the tension; a silent tell of the stress I can't yet release.

Nineteen hours is one hell of a trek, but it's almost over.

"It's almost over," I tell myself in sign with a flick of the wrist.

The realization of what "over" truly means leaves a sweet taste on my tongue, lightening my stomach in a way that's reminiscent of relief.

It's enough that I draw an easy breath.

Though fleeting, I let myself bask in the possibility of having left it *all* behind as I follow the onscreen instructions to turn, a wooden sign toting the few miles left in this journey. I imagine what it'll be like to accept the keys to my new place, *alone*, as I curve around the mountainside.

Another carved sign, this one separating from its post, is a marker of the final stretch and the sole reason for my jaw to unclench.

One would think that I'd be freaking out, having never spent much time out of the city and going straight into living somewhere I've only ever seen pictures of, fantasized about, but with every mile I put between me and my past, my chest is expanding. Each breath feels fresher, *easier*.

I relax in my seat; the tension begins to unravel in the base of my spine as the small town forms around me.

Glancing at my phone, I confirm the direction I already know by heart. I've studied it a million times, researched for hours on end and spent every waking moment for the last six months memorizing every aspect of this place I could, so much so that it feels like I already know what's coming next. It's like I've already lived here, not that I'm witnessing everything for the first time. It's like a balm to the small side of me that needs structure and stability while still giving my wild side a chance to thrive.

The flash of a notification catches my eye, letting me know that the realtor is waiting for me with keys in hand, and I let my smile ease.

Perfect timing.

It almost feels like kismet as I turn onto my new street only a moment later, my cheeks aching, a buzzing blooming beneath my skin.

And there it is—my new beginning.

I pull up the cracked driveway of my fixer-upper home, with all its faded glory and half hung shutters clinging to chipped paint, and a renewed sense of energy humming through my blood. The place needs a ton of work, but the distraction will be nice. I'll get to keep my hands busy while not having to explain myself.

Throwing the truck in park, I pause and take a moment to collect myself lest I terrify the poor older women selling me this place. It was already a feat to buy it through captioned video calls and emails since traveling before the move didn't fit my budget. Marge certainly already thinks I'm a loon of a city-slicker that won't last five minutes in Montana, but there's no reason to add to her judgment of me.

It'll be hard enough without any extra misconceptions.

Unfastening my belt with slow, calculated movements, I climb out of the truck and run a hand through my hair. My fingers get stuck in the tangles left behind from the drive and—*whatever*; the state of my hair won't impede the keys to my future being pressed into my palm in just a few short moments. The hefty down payment I wired over last week made sure of that.

The front door opens with a jittery swing I'll have to fix and my spine straightens, then stiffens when it's not a middle-aged woman that steps out.

Where I was expecting a vintage pantsuit and two cans worth of Aqua Net to greet me, there's nothing but animosity honing in on my old truck, and then me as I lean back against it. His sharp gaze narrows.

My stomach drops, that sweet-tasting air growing bitter.

He's already here.

CHAPTER 2

Shannon

MY HANDS START FLYING in sloppy, quick signs, echoing the spoken words that roll thickly off my lips. “I thought you were flying in *tonight*.” I emphasize *tonight*, as in *later*—so much later. My palms are sweating, fingers shaking as he tilts his chin up.

Judging by the look on Marge’s face, I’m a bit on the louder side. Silently excusing herself, she vanishes into the house, leaving me alone with *him*.

Henry.

My partner.

Housemate.

A tall, lanky man with nimble fingers and all the poise of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed lawyer.

The person I’m supposed to be madly in love with.

At some point, I was. I *know* that I was. His charm was something else. The ease in how he carried his thin frame, like it didn’t matter that he couldn’t lift anything heavier than his laptop, made him sexy. The confidence—the way he regaled his tales with an edge in his eyes, commanded every room he stepped into, and especially in bed—had me falling from my tower like he wasn’t the one that ripped me down by my hair.

But as he descends the porch steps, lips moving in a way he knows I can’t read, I see nothing but disdain staring back. Disgust at the old truck I

refused to sell, the disheveled hair on my head, and the way my hands move.

When he finally crosses the yard, stopping close enough to steal the space in front of me, he looks up at me with a purse to his lips and a coldness to his gaze.

And then he taps his ear.

Rolling my eyes, I huff before I can stop it.

It looks like an attitude but deep down, another piece of me shrivels up as I reach into my pocket and fish the small case loose. It's not much bigger than Henry's AirPods, though the buds inside are severely different. Longer, to extend farther into the ear canal, and equipped with enough power to amplify even the quietest of sounds.

They ache the moment I shove them in, the sudden rush of stimulation triggering a pain that shoots up both sides of my head.

"You should have started there."

I blink at the irritating grate of his voice, the transition from near silence to sudden noise takes a minute for me to adjust. Like putting spit-slicked contacts into dry eyes before you're awake enough to rub the sleep away. It burns. *Hurts*. Supplies a discomfort that not everyone would be willing to deal with, including me.

"I'm excited," I mumble, as if his demeaning tone requires a defense. I know that it doesn't, and yet ... "I forgot."

The lie rolls too easily off my tongue.

I had every intention of dealing with Marge sans hearing aids for so many reasons my housemate can't even begin to comprehend.

I've tried to explain it. He refuses to understand a single word.

But that's why we're here—in a new town that I chose, in the hopes that getting away from *normal* will aid in adjusting Henry's perspective. So we can get back to the way we were when we first met.

The chic, charismatic, do-gooder and his creative, hard of hearing, charity case.

Gods, I wish he hadn't chose this.

I never should have given him the ultimatum of coming with me or leaving, and he never should have chosen to move. I still don't understand why he did.

He had an opportunity to pick his side piece over me and stupidly, I thought his decision to come here would make a difference.

Judging by the smack of his teeth and turning on his heels, none of that managed to sink in during his several-hour-long flight. The one that wasn't supposed to drop him off in the same state as me until *tonight*, giving me a moment to exist for myself.

Sighing, my shoulders slumping, I follow him like the dog that I am up the short sidewalk to the leaning porch and into the house. Creaking of the door announces our entrance, and I add it to my mental to-do list before Henry can throw a fit about it.

The scent is what hits me first, musk with a hint of smoke that scrunches my brows, followed by the bitter-sweet air of cookies. They're not one in the same, but two very distinct smells from different events.

Marge rushes us before I can take in the place, her smile too big as she ushers us toward the bar that separates the kitchen from the living area.

"Now, I do have one more form for you to sign," she says, her voice smoother than I anticipated for someone who looks—and smells—like she smokes a pack a day. "And a flyer for y'all to look at. We have a very special festival coming up and it's tradition for everyone to attend." Her smile wavers at Henry's aggravated sigh, but that doesn't stop her from placing the orange paper in my outstretched hand. "Spring is Firebird season for Bearcreek and it's a hoot to celebrate with all the pretty colors just before summer kicks in. All the kids go nuts for it."

"We don't have any kids," Henry states evenly, ignoring the rest of her spiel to walk around the bar and open the oven. "Did you bake cookies?"

He's not bothering to look at her, so she turns her smile on me with a reassuring grip on my flyer-holding hand. "Yes! Another tradition around here. New homes get new cookies. It's a family recipe, too." She winks at me, her smile too warm not to return. "A treat as old as time."

Odd choice of description for some chocolate chip cookies, but I don't get to ruminate on it long before she's handing me the second page from the counter. This one is plain black text on white paper with an official letterhead, and as much as Henry has advised against doing so, I sign it without reading it.

"What's that?" he snaps as soon as I hand it to her, my signature already on the dotted line.

"Oh, it's just an affidavit," she answers sweetly as she tucks it into her bag and snaps it closed.

"For?"

“That you won’t sue for any damages you might find after I leave since you purchased this place sight unseen.”

Makes sense to me, though Henry’s fake-tanned complexion glows a cherry red.

“Is that not what the inspection I paid two grand was for?”

Marge teeters her shoulders, her smile firmly in place despite his accusatory tone as she inches closer to the door.

“Just to cover the bases! There was a fire in here at one point, but it’s all been fixed now. That was years ago.” She waves a dismissive hand, her body already halfway through the door—the *creaking* door.

Gotta fix that.

“Oh, and don’t forget to stop by the fountain in town square. This is the best time to drop the offering.” She wiggles her fingers, though there’s something in her eyes that seems suddenly... sinister. “Keys are in the bowl!” And then she’s gone.

A heavy silence falls over the space, almost ringing in its intensity.

“Did she say offerin—”

“Jesus Christ, Shannon.”

My gaze flicks to meet the dullness in Henry’s, the arms across his chest making him look bigger, darkening the air around him. And anything strange about the realtor’s words goes forgotten as my stomach tightens.

“What?”

He shakes his head and whispers, “I’m so fucking glad it’s not my name on this dump.”

Ouch, okay.

It’s not a *dump*. It just needs some tender love and care. Like most broken things, a little TLC from someone special goes a long fucking way. But I don’t think those words were meant for me to hear, because he beckons me over with one hand and undoes his belt with the other as soon as they’re off his lips.

“Now come suck my dick so I can forget that you’ve dragged me to the middle of nowhere.”

And as sad as it is, I go to him with an echo of hope in my steps that maybe he just needs some time to get used to it. Maybe he’ll adjust to this with me, and we’ll grow together like we used to talk about over coffee dates and after risqué fucks in the park bathrooms.

But as I sink to my knees and his cock comes out, I know I'm only fooling myself.

Fresh starts are for stories meant to continue and ours? It died a long time ago.

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CHAPTER 3

Shannon

MY THROAT BURNS, EVEN after stepping out of the steam-filled shower twenty minutes later. It was quick, just enough to rinse off the drive and the cum from my hair since my overnight bag is still in the truck, but it wasn't enough to ease the ache of bruised tonsils like I'd hoped.

I didn't even have a towel or change of clothes.

Sighing, I settle against the kitchen counter next to the stove, water dripping from my hair and onto my shirt. The baking sheet is tossed on top, a few of the cookies scattered like they tried to jump ship in the assault. Which is a feat considering all the times I've tried to bake some and they stuck to the metal.

Even through the steam dissipating on my glasses, I can see that Henry didn't bother to try one.

Knowing I'm going to regret attempting to eat with the way my throat aches, I snatch one anyway and nibble at the side out of obligation and respect for Marge's family recipe. As I suspected, it crumbles but not in the crispy way. The thing practically melts in my mouth, rushing my tastebuds with a sugary-rich sweet taste and a hint of bitter chocolate.

My throat vibrates with the groan I let loose, my stomach rumbling a moment later.

Oh, yeah. It's been hours since I ate anything.

I guess it's been about twelve of them since I stopped for a drive-through burger and a nap, but despite the long drive and the shitty attitude, I find that I'm more wired than I ever expected.

Orange catches my attention, and I bend to pick up the crumpled flyer from the floor, my damp tee clinging to its stretch across my shoulders.

The back has been fucking stepped on, and I roll my eyes as I shove the rest of the cookie into my mouth and flip the flyer over.

In bold letters that look handwritten and copied too many times, is a declaration of *Firebird* season with the festival's start time. Below that is a weird emblem of some kind that looks equally novice, maybe an old company logo that's long since been updated. Hopefully.

What the fuck is this?

I'm assuming it's in celebration of the phoenix legend, which seems odd. Most I know of are just a calendar marker of what used to be harvests of the local predominant agriculture, yearly reminders of dishes invented nearby, or area-specific music inspiration.

Or squatch. I've seen the love people have for the myth.

It's never been a make-believe bird that burns to death and regenerates from its own ashes.

Seems painful.

Setting the flyer aside, I grab another runaway cookie and fish the hearing aids from my pocket so I can find Henry.

He's in the second bedroom that will become my office, behind the desk I had delivered *for me*, with his laptop out and his phone against his ear.

He doesn't even bother to look up when I rap on the doorframe. "What?" he snaps. "I'm working."

His curt words and lack of eye contact are a jab that I shove down and step into the room.

"I'm gonna ride through town," I say quietly, clasping my hands in front of me so I don't sign to him accidentally without speaking out loud. "Grab some food. Check out the shops. See if I can't find a couch."

I hate that there's a question lacing my tone, a deep-down longing that he'd hear my statement and, I don't know, want to tag along with me like a proper couple would do. Maybe make the decisions together. Choosing our furniture and our meals jointly like it matters to both of us where we sit and what we eat.

But I don't bother asking him to come. He won't.

“Don’t pick out an ugly one.”

My already-slumped shoulders deflate. “Right.”

The automatic nod is more to myself than to him since he still hasn’t looked away from the screen, and I can’t help but feel that pull, yet again, to stop doing this. To stop reaching across the distance he keeps putting between us in hopes that one day he’ll grab my hand and come along.

It’s been like this for three goddamned years now, and he’s been cheating on me for two and a half of them.

Stupidly, I’d had hope that his attitude would change toward me, maybe even return to those first several months where things were good, and he’d forget all about the hole he left behind.

Yet I’m once again making my way out to my truck, alone, with a pit in my stomach and a void in my heart I know he’ll never fill again.

Shame on me.



IT TOOK LONGER TO unload my few belongings from my truck than it did to drive back toward town.

The sourness remains in my gut but with each passing property, the vibrance grows. Blooming flowers and banners become more frequent, signs of the impending festival like glitter on the town.

Yet as I drive deeper between the old buildings in search of somewhere to park, I can feel the stares. A truck that doesn’t belong. A new face behind the wheel.

A weirdo with a pocket full of homemade cookies.

I finally pull over and climb out, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

There’s something heavy in the air, and maybe it’s just the mountains, but it feels ... denser than I expected.

It takes me a full sixty seconds to lock up the truck and take a step.

No one is outright staring at me, just flitting glances as I walk the path, though I can feel the weight of their analyzing gazes.

It's almost ... creepy to be surrounded by so many celebratory emblems, colors, depictions of flames and light, and yet be shrouded in something akin to dread.

Like putting confetti on a dead town and calling it alive.

But I suck it up and take the judgement by squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin. The locals can be weary of the newcomer, that's to be expected, though I refuse to keep letting this shit get to me.

This is *my* new beginning, too. Whether Henry decides to keep joining me in it or not.

The fact that my thoughts have drifted back to him steals some of the confidence I've mustered, and I end up dipping into the next store I can find.

And I'm immediately hit with the scent of a *bakery*. Fresh breads and buttery croissants mix with jams, glazes, and sickly-sweet frosting. Something savory pokes out from underneath all the sugars though and my stomach shakes with a hungry growl.

I tap my ear, turning on my devices, and I'm met with the sudden clank of a rushing kitchen coming to a halt. Voices cut off like someone pressed pause on a movie. For a moment, I question if the aids finally gave out, or if maybe I've lost my hearing capabilities all together before I look up to find the actual stares on me this time. Ones I can *see*, not just feel. Pointed. Not unkind but certainly confused.

"Well, that's new," the cashier blurts out and the older man beside him slaps a backhand across his chest. The gesture is friendly, familial, even if the sound of it landing made me internally cringe.

"Hi, how can we help you?" the older one asks as he wrings a towel in his grip.

I waft a hand in front of my nose, the tips of my fingers glancing off my chin next, then landing in the cradle of my left hand. "Something smells good."

"Holy shit, he just signed."

Realization draws heat all the way up to the tips of my ears.

"*Avery Jade*," the older man snaps, hip-checking the cashier away from his post and ushering me closer with a piece of paper.

Great. He thinks I can't communicate unless I'm writing it down.

That sour pit in my stomach grows until I'm worried I'd be sick—if there was anything left in my stomach to lose. Maybe it would be more likely that

I'd run out of the store with my tail between my legs, never to return again.

C'mon, Shannon, get your shit together.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, signing the words before accepting the paper. "I can speak and he—"

My breath hitches as my eyes catch on the words printed across the page, scratch that, it's a *menu*. A *printed* menu. With little check boxes next to each item with clear descriptions, legible fonts, and pricing that can be filled out.

Without taking my eyes off the words, I tap below my ear, and blink really hard against suddenly blurry vision.

"I have hearing aids," I say, my voice thick. "But I sign, too. Sorry."

I snag one of the pens in front of me and take my time filling out the menu. It's a distraction so I don't have to meet the eyes of these two men that have been more accessible than anyone in my past life—my fucking partner included.

It's like a punch to the gut knowing that kind people exist in the world and by the time I've finished filling in the boxes of what I want, I'm certain that I've added too many.

I'm not even sure what I chose in the end.

But then the older man winks at me when he accepts the page, nodding at my selections and hands it to the cashier.

"Family discount," the man mumbles as he walks toward the back.

The cashier grins at me. "How about a trade instead?" he suggests, watching me intently. "Teach me some signs and I'll buy your lunch completely."

With my stomach in my throat, I shake my head. "I can pay just fine."

"But if you show me, you won't need the paper or the hearing aids next time you come in."

My lips snap shut.

How can one set of men have more effort in their pinkies than my own parents? Exes? And why am I fawning over the ease of their character so damn willingly that I almost cave and ask for the guy's number? Not even in a hookup kind of way but, *fuck*, I don't even know. He's probably not even queer.

I'm just ... lost, I guess. Too used to the bar being in hell.

The concept of friendship has even eluded me for so long. One of the perks and downfalls of having a career that keeps me behind a desk in my

own home, I suppose.

Or having a partner that would rather see you couch rot than find any sort of camaraderie.

How do you ask a random stranger that was nice to you to be friends without it sounding really weird or severely desperate?

“Okay,” I say, reaching for the menu. “I’ll show you a few.”

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CHAPTER 4

Shannon

AS SUSPECTED, I'D ORDERED way too much food. Not only that, Avery and his dad, Chris, sent me with arms packed full of leftovers.

By the time I'd finished teaching Avery every sign for the menu—who not only picked them up with ease, he also downloaded an ASL app to learn more—the sun had set and the shop needed closing, along with the rest of the town.

Which means I missed my chance to shop for couches and handyman shit until tomorrow.

I almost stayed to help close up shop, if only to avoid the inevitable a little longer.

But with a sugar rush and a head full of stories, I find myself eagerly leaving the shop in search of the fountain.

It was nice to spend time with people that felt like friends, surrounded by genuine curiosity and leaving with not only the shop's number programmed into my phone, but their personal numbers as well.

For support, because I'm new here—imagine that.

And not once did they cringe when I SimCommed, fucking up the English words in the process, like Henry does. Or when I had to fuss with the way my hearing aids fit in my ear because the right one is always causing me problems.

Gods, what would it be like...

I shake my head, not even bothering to finish the thought as I gaze out my driver side window at the monument of a legend I've heard of throughout my life.

A mythology class in high school, Jean from X-Men and maybe in a few PNR reads here and there.

But something about this particular stone just seems ... different.

This one is more man-like than bird, with long talons for fingers, and flames shooting from his back. Tailfeathers that curl out and around his booted feet.

Though the statue itself, worn with time and well-loved, surrounded by streams of water that seems to defy logic, isn't entirely what's got me throwing my truck in park on a nearby side street.

It's all the adornments balanced around the raised edge of the gathering water that draws me closer.

Marge wasn't kidding.

There are pictures, jewelry, candles...

Fuck, there's even diamonds.

It all seems so personal.

And it makes the napkin-wrapped cookie in my pocket seem like chump change.

"Ah, fuck," I rumble as I step closer, eyes scanning the notes and letters attached to each offering.

I don't even know why I'm here, or what I expect to happen. It's just make believe bullshit, right?

But if ... If there's any chance that dropping a coin into a wishing fountain would work for luck, then this should just the same, right?

My thoughts trail back to home, to Henry, and how ridiculous he'd think I am for even entertaining the thought.

The night is as thick as the disappointment that swirls in my gut.

"Gods this is so stupid."

The back of my neck heats, and with shaking hands, I pull out the cookie.

I can feel that it's broken in half through the paper towel, and another wave of embarrassment rushes to my cheeks.

Not only am I entertaining the fantasy, I can't even do it right.

Henry can never know about this. I'll never hear the end of it.

He'll call me childish. Ignorant.

Stupid.

My jaw clenches.

The pit of my gut twists with the urge to turn and run away, to hide the quiet piece of me that *would* believe something like this and silence the hope deep inside me that yearns for something bigger than me to exist.

“There has to be something,” I mouth, setting the cookie on a small, open spot next to something that appears to be a locket, weathered with years longer than I’ve been alive. A family heirloom, maybe. It has a tiny, reluctant tug at the corner of my lips as I unfold the napkin and flatten the edges just enough to show what’s inside.

I breathe in a sigh that smells of richness and the same damp earth that seems to cling to Bearcreek even into the late-night hours and straighten to my full height.

“It’s not much,” I whisper up to the stone gaze that watches over the town. “But here.”

I gesture to the dessert as if the statue will understand and tap the tips of my clawed hand against my other palm, twice with a twist.

“Cookie,” I sign and say, then repeat it again. “Cookie.”

Heat floods my face and I lick my dried lips before shrugging and turning away.

As ridiculous as I feel for signing to a statue in the middle of the night, I suppose if I’ve got anything worth offering up, that would be it.

Just ... a piece of knowledge that not many attempt to obtain, but it’s so damn easy to find, to have.

All it takes is to try.

CHAPTER 5

Shannon

I LAID AWAKE LATE into the night, staring up at the shadows thrown across the ceiling. They almost tease me, something like a set of watchful eyes. I'm only still heated, my cheeks flushed, and so damn glad I was alone when I left those cookies.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Henry's been knocked out next to me for hours, his pressed pajamas in place, and not even a hint of reciprocating the head I gave him earlier.

Not that I really need it, or *want* it from him specifically, but fuck. It's been six months since he's bothered to even try. Our sex life has condensed to demands of me on my knees and his cock down my throat. Quick. Emotionless. Dull.

So fucking *dull*.

It's been almost as long since I was able to write anything of value.

Huffing, I roll over to face him and instead, find a wall of pillows wedged between us.

Go figure.

Letting loose another heavy breath, I climb out of bed in nothing but my comfy shorts and pad barefoot into the kitchen.

It's on the smaller side, in need of some serious updates, but it's functional, so I refuse to complain too much. The stack of pastry boxes that earned me a cringe when Henry saw them beckons me like a midnight

tempter from the bar, and I almost cave. I don't, and won't, thanks to the critical voice in my head that reminds me of carb consumption and body types and sounds suspiciously familiar.

Tapping my ear, I listen to see if I've disturbed him but all I hear are the faint sounds of him snoring.

Good.

The thought makes me cringe.

I shouldn't feel *better* that the person I share a life with is sound asleep without me, and I definitely shouldn't be hoping that it stays that way.

Growling in frustration, I scrub my hands down my face and make my way down the hall to my office. His shit is still set up like he's planning on coming back to it without asking me and the idea of it being here has a sizzle heating beneath my skin.

Would it not be common decency to just ask for once?

Instead of brushing it all to the floor like I want to, I gently close the laptop so I can stack his notepads on top of it and set it aside.

I take my time setting up my dual monitors, making sure the wires are clean and velcroed together behind the desk that leads to the tower and outlet. My keyboard and mouse come next, wireless, thankfully, then a few trinkets that act as fidget toys when I'm trying to think.

Later, when I have more brain power that isn't fueled by spite and sugar, I'll fill my bookshelves. I don't have much physical media but the ones I do have are signed and they're my most precious possessions.

Leaning back in the chair when my desk is complete, I nod my approval.

Gods, I'm still fucking wired.

For a moment, I consider jerking off just for the hell of it. The idea of breaking in my new office that way seems fun, though that thought dissipates as quickly as it came.

If Henry catches me again ...

Shaking off the memory of the consequences from last time, I tip my head back and stare at the way the darkness shifts across the ceiling. Time seems to melt away as the moon crosses the sky and the impending dawn announces its approach. I can see it all shining through the window and playing across the plastered ceiling like a movie.

My thoughts slow, and I let them, as my shoulders receded from their perch near my ears for the first time since I arrived.

The tranquility of a silent moment in a world full of noise beckons me, lulling me into a sense of disassociation instead of rest, where my mind can run free.

Visions of a forest fill my head, the lines of trees and bushes stretching for miles, their branches home to the buzzing of insects and skittering critters. Flowers have taken root this time, blooming a rich burgundy color that appears almost black against the darkness of night. The moonlight dances across their petals, and I find myself drawn to them, moving closer to run my fingertips over their silky leaves and stems. I'm careful not to disturb them too much, even as I pinch the smoothness of nature between my fingertips.

It's soft, velvety to the touch and I lean closer to smell the intense fragrance wafting from the centers.

Don't—

I jolt back, my elbow slamming into something hard enough to send a shockwave of pain down to my fingers. Groaning, I massage the joint and sit up, dampness clinging to my skin.

My nose fills with the early morning dew, a hint of wet grass and wood tickling my senses and I blink away the groggy fog of sleep.

The surface below my ass is hard and unforgiving and I—

“Oh, shit.”

My front lawn glows in the early-morning light, the soft rays reflecting off the humid air and the dew-slicked grass, leaving me drenched in an ethereal vapor.

There's always been something magical about first light but this feels ... different. Heavier, almost, as I stretch my legs out across the wooden steps that leads down to the cracked pathway. My truck is still where I left it, the branches from the large tree stretching over it in an attempt to shield it from the rising sun.

I should install a carport. Or maybe a garage.

Though of all the things to think about, vehicle storage should be last on my list.

First should be *why the hell I ended up outside, asleep on my porch, and how do I not recall moving so far?*

I'm not as surprised as I should be. It's not like rest and I have ever been good pals.

Groaning, I push my feet with a creak in my knees and an ache in my back and wander my way into the house where I find Henry, going about his morning routine as if nothing is amiss.

About time you showed yourself, he mouths, the words inaudible but clear as fucking day on his lips as if he knew I'd try to read them. That I've been practicing to get better at it.

"Shit. Hang on."

A flush takes over my cheeks, warming the chilled skin as I rush back to the bedroom where I left my charging case. It's a quick, yet painful switch from one set of hearing devices to the next, and I'm back in the kitchen before Henry can take his first sip of coffee.

"You weren't in bed," Henry mutters over the rim of his mug, his narrowed gaze aimed at me.

I know what comes next. In no way should I be surprised at the tone, or the silent accusation, and yet my shoulders still come back up to my ears as I pull the carafe from the burner and pour myself a mug. It's as bitter as the look in Henry's eyes when I turn away from the stove to face him.

"Couldn't sleep," I mumble from behind my hit of caffeine, the edge of desperation pitching up my words. They come out sounding almost like a question, filled with a gruffness, and earn me an eyeroll from Henry.

"Just say you'd rather spend all night with your little fantasies than in bed with me."

I can't help but scoff, only realizing it too late to cover it with a cough.

He slams his mug against the counter, and I jolt at the sloshing of coffee spilling over the rim, a mess he'll surely blame me for.

"I didn't even write," I rush out, a pit in my stomach growing with each second that his scathing eyes watch me. They bounce around my face and drop to my bare chest and comfy shorts. Then back up to where I'm certain it looks like a sweat built up on the small patch of hair between my pecs.

Resisting the urge to cross my arms and hide my body, I force myself to take a slow sip of coffee. Let him look at me. Think what he wants, even if I correct him.

Shitty as it may be, it's the most he's looked at me in weeks.

And admittedly, I secretly crave the attention of appreciative eyes on me. Gazing at me in wonder, or even lust, in my most natural state. I can ignore that it's indifference instead and pretend.

At least, that's what I tell myself when he quirks a brow and points at the floor. "Show me what you had your stupid little characters do to each other last night."

I don't bother correcting him; it's useless.

He'll never understand that I've stopped writing blowjobs into my books or why every character prefers anything *but* head. That when I write spice into my novels, it's slow and sweet and leaves my knees weaker than anything he's ever done to me.

But it's all fables. Make believe. Unrealistic in the real world. I know that.

People just don't operate that way.

Though it doesn't mean I'm not absolutely disgusted by my own actions as his head slips between my lips and his fingers drag uncaringly through my hair.

I used to love this, the edge of roughness that came with Henry, the control he exhibited. Some sick part of me still does, enough that my groin floods with the tingling of an erection that'll go untouched, and it turns my stomach sourly.

None of that stops me from giving him exactly what he's asked for, in the way that he's trained me to do.

On my knees and quietly.

CHAPTER 6

Shannon

SEEING THE SMALL TOWN, coated in remnants of times gone by, left the bitter taste of ash along my tongue.

Glaring at the typed words that refuse to feel *right*, I hover over the delete button for the third time in the last twenty minutes. I've been working on this same paragraph for hours—*scratch that*.

It's been weeks.

Days have stacked up so high that I've lost count since the last time I hit a flow state good enough to make any progress in this book.

I should be pounding out chapters of spice by now but the main love interests haven't even met yet. They're too busy living their lives and being traumatized by their pasts to see the stranger right in front of them.

Goddamn creative block.

It's another thing that I've mistakenly hoped would get better with time and distance and immersing myself into a similar setting as the story.

At least, that's what I told myself when I picked out Bearcreek on the map.

Yet here I am again, proving myself wrong with only a few thousand words staring back at me through my muted reflection on the screen.

Leaning forward in my chair, I scroll back to the beginning and start reading what I have, even though I know that I shouldn't. The time it'll take to comb through it all should be spent diving deeper into the plot or

scraping every word I can manage to tack onto the next chapter to keep things moving.

Eyes scanning, I ignore that inner voice and start reading.

“You can’t start a story with ‘once upon a time.’ This isn’t a fairytale, dude. I should be pissing myself by now.”

The round of chuckles seem amplified against the constant buzz of insects, multiple sets of glassy eyes on me, and I clear my throat.

“Fine. There once was a—”

“Bro!”

A gentle, humored huff releases from my nose and I scroll to the next page—which contains way too much descriptive prose about a campfire and not nearly enough dialogue or action.

Maybe I should switch the campfire out for an orgy. That’d be one hell of an opening.

“Who the fuck is Avery?”

I jolt hard enough that my mouse flies across the desk and clatters to the floor behind the desk where all the cords live.

“You scared the shit out of me,” I hiss, flattening my palm over my racing heart. “What did you ask me?”

Henry’s glare narrows on me, his cold eyes scanning me from the doorway in a way that makes me squirm in my seat and a flush rush to my face.

“I asked you—” He tosses my phone onto the desk, uncaring of the timeline I had there that’s now skewed to the left, “—who the *fuck* is Avery?”

My jaw snaps shut and I blink against dry eyes.

“I’m confused,” I say quietly, hands moving on autopilot with the signs at the same time before I can think to hold back.

“Don’t patronize me with your—” His hands flutter in front of him in a wildly inappropriate and offensive show of sign, “bullshit. Why the hell do you have some guy calling you?”

Scrunching my brows, I slowly pick up my phone, glancing at the screen when it lights up. There’s nothing in the notifications claiming any missed calls or texts, just a bunch of spam emails. It sours my stomach to see the lack of anyone reaching out from the outside world. Hell, I can’t even recall the last time I looked at this thing.

Slowly, I set the phone down and return my gaze to where Henry stands, closer now than before, his sharp eyes boring a hole through me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He scoffs, his hands thrown up and all. “Check the fucking call log, Shannon. He called you.”

Sighing, I force my fingers to still as I reach for the phone again, opening it up to see that I *did* get a call. Right there in green is the baker’s name, time stamped for about thirty minutes ago.

My skin feels too tight, my mouth gone dry.

“You fucking answered it?” I blurt out, too pissed to appease him right now. I slam my phone down so hard that I hear a crack. “Why didn’t you bring it to me?”

Henry’s jaw drops, that fake tan on his face reddening by the second until I’m sure his head will pop like a cherry.

“Am I your errand boy now? Fuck you mean *bring it to you*? So you can talk to your fuck buddy while I’m in the next room? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

My stomach twists and my hands shake.

This isn’t the first time Henry has assumed or *accused* me of doing exactly what he practically parades around in front of my face. So long as I don’t mention it, he gets what he wants, and I get to suffer.

I didn’t do anything wrong.

Hell, I’m not even insecure enough to have cared that he shared his body with others so long as his heart belonged to me.

And yet, as he commands the space on the other side of my desk, I can’t stop the knowing from creeping in.

So many words stick to my tongue, every nasty thing I’ve squashed down for three fucking years bubbling to the surface. I know that I should just keep quiet and swallow them like I always do. It’ll be over sooner so long as I do.

But I can’t.

“Like that’s not exactly what you’ve done?” I shoot back evenly and push to my feet. “Unlike you, I can have a friend I’m not sleeping with.”

The vein pops in his forehead and I know I’ve struck a cord I can’t backpedal from.

“You think you know, do you?” he hisses through the tick in his jaw. “What it takes to do this shit with you?” He rounds the desk, cornering me.

“Feeding you, putting this roof over your fucking head and fulfilling *your needs*.” The smile that splits his lips is anything but friendly as he crowds me, his shouts getting louder, and my stomach drops out.

We’ve gone rounds before, slinging insults and verbal shit back and forth until one of us concedes. Enough that I knew I should have kept my mouth shut.

But as he steps into my space, close enough that I feel his chest pressing into mine, I know that this time is different.

“If you were so desperate for dick, all you had to do was ask.”

“I’m not sleeping with him,” I growl, my heart thumping hard in my chest when his hands land on my hips. I smack them away, only for him to grab me somewhere else. “He’s just a friend from town.”

Even I can hear the defensives in my voice.

He scoffs and yanks me away from the desk despite my wriggling, manhandling me until he’s pressed against my back. “Sure, he is.”

Rough fingers tug at the waistband of my shorts, and though I fight to keep them on, he manages to rip them off. Ass exposed, he shoves until my face smacks into the surface of the desk.

“Godsdammit, Henry.”

I swing an arm out in defense, sending one of my monitors crashing into the wall.

“Shut up, Shannon. I’m only giving you what you want.”

He kicks at my feet apart, then pins me to the desk with a strong grip on my dominant hand.

Pushing back, bucking against his hold only lands me a solid, stinging slap across my ass that leaves me howling. My spine arching. Skin burning.

“Henry,” I plead desperately, tears burning my eyes. “I’m sorry. Let’s just go to bed, okay? To the room and I can go down on you just how you like it. Please.”

“*Please, Henry,*” he mocks and strokes something blunt down my crease, stopping at my hole. “*I didn’t mean it. Please, please, please fuck me* is all I heard.”

He presses against me, ignoring the resistance that meets him, and pushes harder.

Forcing myself to relax, I think back to the stillness in front of the fountain, and breathe through the pain when he breaches me, his cock bare and mostly dry.

It fucking *hurts*.

Yet all I can do is lay there and take it. Watching my bookshelf as my body bounces to the cadence of his hips through the fog building in my eyes.

This isn't what I wanted. At least, not like this.

But as I stare at the spines of books I've written, stung by the slap of his skin against mine, I can't help but think that maybe he was right: True love is a fairytale for the naïve.

The weak believers of fantasy. Followers of long-gone legends.

And maybe this really is as good as it gets.

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CHAPTER 7

Shannon

CAKE DECORATING CONTEST. 7 pm. Come watch.

The text message from Avery sits dimmed on my phone, beckoning me to tap the screen and bring it back to life all over again.

My gut twists hard around the hope of sneaking out of here but judging by the soft knock on the bathroom door, that ship has sailed.

Last night was ... rough.

If not for the rain, I would have slept in the bed of my truck instead of passing out in my office chair in a fitful sleep behind a locked door.

I've avoided Henry all morning and though I've taken three showers since it all happened, I'm still disgusted with myself.

And him.

Three times, he used me like a ragdoll, and three times ... I let him.

"Shannon."

Hearing his gentle tone through the wood has my jaw and my grip on the vanity clenching.

"Go away," I tell him, grabbing the brand-new terrycloth from the rack.

Shaky fingers scrub my skin dry. My hair. It's quick and it ends up messier than I wanted but I'm just so ... done.

Jabbing my limbs through my wrinkled clothes, I ignore the aches that scream through my body and pocket my phone.

"Don't be like that."

Huffing, I stare at myself in the mirror. My eyes are puffy and dry, outlined by dark circles. Jaw is sharp. Pulse hammering in my neck.

And I hate it.

I hate that my curls are half frizzy and standing on end. That my face has thinned since I've been here and my collarbones stand a little more pronounced over the collar of my T-shirt.

The worst part of it all, though, are my eyes. A pale, silvery blue that once shone have dimmed behind the contact lenses.

Corrective eyewear I didn't want, but was asked to get.

Grinding my teeth, I pluck the lenses out and toss them in the trash.

"Shannon, c'mon. You can't hide in the bathroom forever."

I hadn't planned on it but since it's Henry asking me to emerge, I almost consider staying a little longer.

But then I'd be late.

And I'm so sick of putting everything I want on hold for someone who uses me more than he cares for me. To pad his ego and soften his edges.

Swinging open the door startles him, and though he recovers quickly, his gaze zeros in on the tortoiseshell glasses perched on my nose.

"Are you out of contacts?" he asks, feigning concern. His brows pull down and everything. "I'll order you some more."

I scoff and shove past him into the hallway, ignoring the burn of words that bubble up in the back of my throat.

The tick of my jaw intensifies at his laced sentiment, and I head straight for the bowl where my keys are. It's not until I'm halfway out the door that I look back at him.

He's put together, as if nothing is amiss, with perfectly coiffed hair and a pressed button-down shirt and slacks. So neat. Perfectly tidy.

He looks nothing like the monster he really is beneath it all.

And clearly, while I've spent all day considering every life choice I've made in the last year—*three* years—with him, he's not had a care in the fucking world.

I did that. I *let* that happen.

"I'm going out," I state evenly, though I feel the shakes threatening to take me over.

He bristles, a dainty hand pressing to his chest. "You can't be serious."

Gripping the doorjamb to hold myself up—or back, I'm not sure—I use my other to sign my words in tandem as I speak them. "I'll be late."

The yells—the *insults*—he slings after me as I walk the path to my truck are more blows to my already bleeding heart.

You dragged me out here.

What am I supposed to do while you're off fucking other men?

How dare you do this to us!

There's more; phrases that cut far deeper that slide so easily from his lips that I reach up and pluck the devices from my ears.

Tears collect on my lashes, clouding my vision and refusing to fall even after I've pulled away from the house.

I won't let him see my emotions.

He's lost all right to.

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CHAPTER 8

Shannon

BY THE TIME I make it to the bakery, the place is packed and my eyes feel like sandpaper. My body aches and, well, just walking through the door tweaks my lower half enough to almost make it unbearable.

There's a bruise on my ass that curves around to my hip, and even the thought of my shoulders makes them ache.

It just ... it all hurts.

If it weren't for the waving hand peeking through the throngs of people, I would have left immediately.

But Avery comes barreling over, his apron flapping around his knees and his hands moving before I can slip back through the door.

"You okay?" he signs.

I'm not sure if it's the genuine worry I see in his eyes when he asks me that, or maybe that he's asking me at all, *in sign* at that, but it has my nose burning and my chest clenching.

I don't get a chance to respond before he's hauling me through the crowd by the arm he hooks around mine.

Absently, as we pass through the kitchen where Avery's dad and a few others are working, I reach up to press the power button on my hearing aids.

As much as I expected Avery to be speaking to me, I'm equally surprised to find he's not.

It makes my eyes well up all over again.

He leads me all the way through the back of his shop, past displays and racks of bulk bakery shit and it's not until I feel the damp night air hit my cheeks that I realize we've burst out of the back door.

Maybe to put me out of my misery.

There's a light above the door, but it doesn't do much to tame the darkness pressing in the second we take a step just far enough away from the exit to not be hit by the door.

Finally, Avery turns to me and signs it again. "You okay?"

The growing thickness in my throat makes it hard to speak.

He watches as I hold my hands out in front of me, preparing to tell him, wanting so desperately to spill everything and anything but stuck inside me with nothing more than shaky fingers.

Never once have I spoken ill of my partner.

Not to family or friends or colleagues.

In the three years I've been with Henry, I've never even considered it. Every one of our arguments was just because he had a bad day, or there was a misunderstanding, or simply because I was different.

That being with me was difficult.

I always tried to make it easier for him.

Be quieter for him.

Smaller.

Smarter.

I blamed it on the language barriers, and that someone so logically minded just couldn't understand the needs of someone more creative.

That my stories are my life—my work. And I'm just lucky enough to be able to pay some bills with them.

I'm not bestselling—yet. What if my next one is?

What if my art could also make my living comfortable?

I'd be willing to starve to make that a reality, which is just another tick on the list of things Henry refuses to *get*.

And yet, as I consider all those things, while standing in front of a perfect stranger, I can't help the tears that rush over.

"Thank you," I sign and swipe at my face then clear my throat. "Sorry."

Avery pinches his first two fingers against his thumb, his brows turning inward. "No apologizing. Wanna talk about it?" His hands are choppy and his signs are short, but I appreciate them regardless.

"Maybe later."

He nods, tucking his arms into his chest and turns to look out at the expansive night that's thick enough it feels like it could reach out and grab us.

Mirroring his stance and with my eyes now adjusted to the darkness, I see that the backside of the building butts up against a thick forest. There's only a thin alleyway separating where we are from the edge of it, though the looming trees still aren't tall enough to block out the sprawling mountains behind them.

A thin fog begins to spread between the foliage, slowly building and seemingly absorbing any remnants of light from the hanging moon rather than reflecting it. Like the forest is eating it alive and spitting out an inky blanket of blackness.

"Do you ever feel like there's something in there watching you?" I ask aloud, my voice raw and grating.

Avery's chuckle is thick, but when I glance at him, he's smiling. "Definitely. I was used to it until I heard the story of the mines about ten miles that way." He points in the general direction, and a chill runs down my spine.

I want to look. The urge is strong to follow his gesture, but I can't bear the idea of finding something staring back at me when I do.

"I don't think I wanna know that story."

Call it an overactive imagination or too many years reading thrillers and fantasies, but I'd like to keep myself out of the plot of the next one.

My nightmares are already bad enough.

"So, you're not from here?" I ask aloud, distracting us both, and Avery shakes his head. The move swishes his hair back and forth over his forehead, the light curls parting just enough to show off a faint yellow kiss print on his skin. It makes me snort. "You know you have icing on your forehead?"

He smacks his lips and groans at the sky. "My husband thinks he's funny."

The smile on his face when he drops his gaze back to mine makes my stomach twist and my heart thump.

"Husband?"

"Yeah. To answer your first question, I moved here four years ago. Been married for three of them. Before that I was in Arizona with my dads and before *that*, we were in Ohio."

“Oh.” My face heats and I nod, though I can feel the weight of his stare on the side of my head.

“You’re not a homophobe are you?”

“What? Gods, no.” My snicker comes out thick. “I’m queer. My partner is—p-partner is male.”

“Ah, boy troubles.” I catch his knowing nod in my periphery before his words sink in.

My gaze snaps to his and I blink rapidly. “Um...”

“You totally don’t have to talk about it,” he rushes out, hands held up in front of him.

“Are you and your husband ... good?”

Yeah, that wasn’t the greatest segue into anything other than what’s waiting for me at home, but I never said I was good with words. Or people. Just books.

“He annoys me to death, but I love him dearly,” Avery answers without missing a beat. “Stupid walking green flag is the reason I’m here.” There’s something about those words that feel heavier than just location wise, but I don’t want to pry. Pretty sure my heart couldn’t take it if I did.

What would it be like to be loved so wholly? To be the reason someone stayed? Fuck, to have a reason to stay...

An ache blossoms inside my chest, and I rub at it faintly. “That’s good,” I mumble and clear my throat.

A loaded silence settles between us, and I take the time to really look at the forestry surrounding us. It just feels ... heavy. The air is thick and damp, landing like a touch to the exposed skin of my face.

Like there’s someone—or *something*—hidden just beyond the brush, watching.

Waiting.

A chill rushes down my spine and I find myself leaning closer to Avery on instinct. He’s not big by any means. In fact, his head stops near my shoulders, but he’s familiar. He knows the area and as much as I hate to admit it, connecting with a stranger has been easier than trusting myself.

“W-we should go back in,” he murmurs lowly. “Morgan’s gotta be done torturing my cake by now.”

There’s a rush to his words that should pique my curiosity, but I’d be a liar if I wasn’t feeling a little rattled.

Maybe it's just the new space, the town or simply remnants of what happened with Henry crawling across my skin.

But I follow Avery back into the safety of the building, my neck hairs on end, without looking back.

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CHAPTER 9

The Legend

FROM AFAR, THE SHADOWS as my veil, I find myself enthralled by the way the baker chooses to communicate. It's not a language I have seen before, though neither is the one that's responding to him in kind.

The newcomer seems to understand it without hesitation.

It is intriguing to observe; the fluttering hands and twirling fingers. From hip to waist, forehead to chest.

I wish to know these hand gestures.

I attempt to replicate the movements, yet it feels nothing like what I see on them.

Taking a small bite of my crumbling cookie, I cannot help but inch closer and risk edging myself into the light when the two disappear into the structure.

I yearn to follow.

The feeling hollows out in my stomach, snapping my spine straight as I retreat to the shadows, the haze thickening around me. It grows denser, filling in the gaps between my fingers and curling up my arm. Absently, I pet at the tail end of a tendril that forms.

Recognition strikes the back of my mind, my gaze flicking to the essence ringing my forearm, muting the color of my exposed skin in stripes.

"You are changing," I mention as it pulses in response to my attention. "Interesting."

It is not the first time that my essence has begun to expand past this physical form, slowly growing into something tangible. Controllable.

My jaw ticks but my grin stretches, the veins beneath my skin illuminating the longer I stay hidden. Close.

Finding my way around the housing hiding the him from me, I follow the pull that calls to me.

The newcomer.

A warmth expands at my back, reaching over my shoulders and trailing down my spine simultaneously. Like the touch of a lover, it engulfs me, leaving me shuddering.

“Must get closer.”

The fates, the universe, the gods whichever controlling entity is left must hear my plea and deem it worthy of being answered by showing me the newcomer through the front entrance of the bakery.

He’s conversing with another as I slip between the streetlamps, masked by the shadows. His shoulders are tight; lips spread in a cursory smile. It is pleasant, but something about it makes my head tilt.

This human ... He is different than the rest and they do not give notice to it as he walks among them.

There is a light to him that I cannot look away from, though it is shrouded in a haze thicker than my smoke in full form.

Dampened.

Heavy.

He wears it like armor against those that come close to him—even the baker that knows his secret language.

I must learn these secrets.

Penetrate this shield and know what lies beneath.

Through the glass storefront, his blue gaze flicks my direction, as if he senses me. Squinting, but cannot see what hides in the dark.

I am covered, waiting, as he returns to his discussion among the mortals, exchanging pleasantries and shaking hands.

And then I receive a blessing in the form of his leaving the event. The human steps out of the structure once more, his gait sure as he walks the pavement, shoulders still tight to his ears.

There are mercies left to receive.

He’s alone, slowing upon the approach of what I assume is his vehicle, the device all humankind demented to now in his hand.

The occupation of his digits infuriates me. It should be crushed for distracting him from his ability to speak with his hands, never to steal his words again.

Admittedly, I enjoy that it lights up his face, showing me the blue of his irises behind his spectacles and casting deep shadows over his thin face. Hair from his head hangs over part of his forehead, kinked and ratty looking. Like he has spent too much time touching it, mussing it. Running talented hands through the strands until it raised from his scalp like a halo.

“Stressed, human?” I ask lowly, my smoke clenching around my arm, the distance between us too great for him to hear it clearly.

I find myself moving closer until I’m perching across the street from where he stands, blanketed only by the haze of smoke that follows me, and the night.

The human looks up, scanning what is ahead of him instead of beside and finally climbs inside the vehicle.

He seems shakier as he makes the engine rumble, and I cannot help myself.

My talons tingle with each stride that grants me proximity to him, my mind reaching out to flirt with his.

“Will you let me in, human?”

Unknowing of me, he begins to drive away.

I know this because his movements are stiff. Slow. Deliberate. As if he would rather do anything except drive the vehicle to his intended destination.

Had he felt my presence, my prodding of his mind, he would have run. Escaped as quickly as possible. All others have except for one.

Maybe I shall follow.

An innocent peeking into what makes the human that used his hands to speak tick.

“I will keep my distance for now.”

CHAPTER 10

Shannon

I STILL CAN'T SHAKE the feeling of eyes watching me.

Even as I tiptoe through my front door and into the silent house, long after the moment with Avery outside his shop.

It's dark except for the light above the stove that casts a glow so gentle it barely reaches across the range.

The night has never bothered me, but I guess having lived in the city my whole life has never lent itself access to true *darkness* like it does here. Where the stars shine bright past the clouds, visible only due to the lack of light pollution.

At least, they are when the town isn't blanketed in a fog so heavy, it blocks almost everything out and leaves a rich scent so thick it's reminiscent of smoke.

Shaking it off, my body twinges with the aches of the day—of last night. It brings a fresh wave of heat to my eyes that I blink away quickly.

If Henry sees me losing my shit, it'll only make things worse.

I swallow hard, burying the weight of the last words he said to me before gently placing my keys into the bowl and shucking my jacket.

He should be here, probably fuming, and though I don't want to see him, I find myself seeking him out. Wondering what hell he got up to while I was gone.

Worry mars my brow and dread silences each of my steps that lead me closer to him.

I need to know if he's still here.

Fuck, the air is so thick down the hallway that it feels like the fog followed me inside.

I know it didn't. It *can't*. Yet, I still hold my breath as I push open the bedroom door with slow, jerky movements and a sickening hope swirling in my belly.

It's so still. Maybe he ... waited for me? Plans to apologize? I mean ... answering my phone was no big deal in retrospect, and I can understand his *lack* of understanding when someone else called me. If he would have taken a breath and asked me, I would have answered him easily. I was never trying to hide Avery.

But I find the bed empty, covers tossed back the way Henry leaves them every time he gets up, and my shoulders slump.

The sound of my own sigh crackles around me.

I shouldn't have stayed out so late.

That feeling that was turning in my gut churns and twists until it's coiled so tight that it turns to stone. Crossing the hallway to my office feels like dragging a boulder up a mountain. The knob feels oddly cold when I turn it, like there's nothing but an arctic wave waiting for me on the other side.

Silence. Darkness.

The room opens up, the moon strains through the sheer curtains, enough to outline Henry's blacked-out figure in my desk chair

His hands are full of something, and when he flips them, the flash of white leaves me frozen.

Pages whip through the pale light, his deep sigh loud enough that I catch it easily before he stops and holds the book closer to his face.

His voice, gravely and unamused, drifts across the distance between us as he begins to read the printed words that I wrote.

"His touch is like a live wire, electric as he strokes me. It's like I can feel every bit of his emotions in just the singular point of contact. And it makes me feel alive."

I hold my breath as he flips to another scene in the book, my throat too dry to swallow, too stuck to speak.

"Filled up, I slump over, his cum leaking—this is the kind of shit you write?" I can almost make out the twitch of his jaw in the low light. "And

I'm the bad guy?"

My swallow clicks in the too-quiet space as he stands, slowly straightening, my book crinkling in his grasp.

"Yes," I whisper.

I flinch, the sound of my book slamming against the desk with a loud crack.

"You. You fucking *begged* me for this. To come here and be with you *in the middle of nowhere*. So that you can sit here, night after night and make up shit like this?" The longer he speaks, the louder he gets, each decibel his voice rises stacking up and leaving me wincing. "Goddammit, Shannon, I had a fucking *life*."

"T-then ..."

I shake hard, my hands twisting over each other, the urge to sign the shit sitting on my tongue strong enough that I squeeze my own fingers so hard it hurts.

"*T-then* what?" he spits. "Say it. Go ahead."

Huffing doesn't quell the ache, or the need, to keep the words to myself like I have so many times over the last *three years*.

If anything, it draws them closer to the surface, so close to tumbling out that it's impossible to stop them.

My stomach churns but my lips and tongue move as if I'm not trembling like a leaf beneath his stare. "Then go back to it!"

Henry jolts, my words landing like a slap.

Though, the man doesn't recoil. He never has. Opposition has always done the opposite for Henry.

Makes him venomous.

"That's what you want, huh?" His words drip with the resentment from his upturned lips, the kind of smile that has me seeking out the nearest exit. I'm halfway out of it when he rounds the desk, his hard gaze set on me—*no*.

My bookshelf.

He reaches for another paperback, tipping the special edition off the shelf to turn it over in his hands.

"Just put it back," I plead. "And go if that's what you want. You d-don't have to stay here anymore."

He licks his sinisterly sneering lips and flips the book open.

My heart clenches at the sight of it in his hands.

I know it's just a book. Paper bound with glue and card stock.

But it's also a signed copy.

An out-of-print cover.

I won it in an online auction.

One of very few ever printed and *mine*.

"Henry, please."

The laugh that bursts out of him is manic, and makes me jolt. It's distracting, concerning in a way that I can't react to fast enough when he snaps the book backwards and breaks the spine.

A wounded sound escapes me.

"You care more about *kindling*—bullshit made from dead trees—than me. But you forget." He keeps bending, yanking, ripping away. "I made you, Shannon. You would be nothing without me. You get to do this because of *me!*"

His grip changes, tearing the book nearly in half, and a strangled cry claws up my throat as I leap forward.

All I manage to do is shove the book into his chest, separating the final bits of glue keeping the pages together.

The tears blurring my vision is what I blame for not seeing what's coming next.

Though if I was being honest with myself, I should have known it was coming the moment I challenged him. With someone like Henry, it's only a matter of time before he snaps and the inevitable happens.

First, it's the pieces of my book landing against my shoulders, pebbling the side of my head.

And then his fists.

Hands that once soothed me and brought me pleasure now land with enough force to bruise muscle. To break skin. To make me bleed.

All the while pages flutter around us like feathers floating on an arctic wind.

"Henry, please," I beg, but I already know. Nothing I say will stop him. It never has.

If he loved me, he wouldn't do this.

Another blow lands on my chin, and I taste blood.

"Henry," I cry, tears burning my already swelling eye. "Stop."

I barely manage to get my arms up between us, the force of his hits making me stumble back into the door. The knob juts hard against my hip,

and I cry out, my feet stumbling under me.

He follows me down to the carpeted hallway, lithe body crouching over me and this time, the pages of my favorite book.

It's the last thing I see before I...

Just...

Close my eyes... and imagine stone-chiseled features.

Wish... on a flame-fueled wishing well.

Pray that my belief is stronger than his blows.

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CHAPTER 11

The Legend

I HAVE WATCHED FROM the shadows, perched high above the population of this small town for longer than I recall. The mountains have been a good home, the terrain difficult for most humans to venture too far into for long, leaving me to my secrecy for hundreds of years.

Though some dare wander into my territory with ill intention.

They believe they are alone when they do their deeds, transferring packages from one to another or daring to challenge the landscape of the wilderness out of human boredom I will never understand.

Some come here to ... mate. Make lewd acts to create their offspring in the deep blackness of the forest at night while the woods observe.

But others ... They believe this land is a cemetery for their unwanted.

Unusual as it may be, I have been witness to many lifeless forms left behind for the mountains to claim their sacrifice, the wildlife here tempted by the scent of an easy meal that hides the transgression that brought them here.

I know the cruel ways of the human, having studied them long enough that I've forgotten I once was one.

A man with a heart that I would sacrifice life itself to keep forever.

Mistakenly, I assumed forever would never end.

But where humanity ends, morality dissolves, and in its wake is nothing but the monster beneath it all, doomed to repeat the cycle until there's

nothing left.

Perhaps the humans that leave their dead here have lost their morality before their own bodies could have caught up.

Headlights.

Crouching low, I track the beams of light that slice across the forest. The vehicle is not designed to reach farther into the tightening woods, with good reason, yet the human behind the wheel attempts to advance his path. He finally comes to a stop, one wheel paused against the bark of a fallen tree and gets out of the contraption.

The energy that follows him is dark, his muttered curses ones I've heard from human lips many a time as he stretches from the cabin and runs thin fingers through his light hair.

This one ... seems *different* as he unfurls the back compartment of his vehicle to reveal more light. Inside it is a lifeless form he must be here to surrender to the wilderness.

"The *thing* can have you now, you prick," the man mutters as he drags the body from the back, his effort plentiful until the limp arms and legs thump to the ground. "There! It's a sacrifice to the mountain gods or whatever the fuck."

He looks up as if I would be at the peaks instead of observing him from a low perch among the very forest he's sacrificing to, arms stretched wide and breath labored.

A sinister laugh explodes from his lips, echoing off the trees, and a deep part of the forest responds.

He looks ... *deranged*. Unwell.

I have seen this before—a sickness of the mind—in walking among humankind. It seems that it can be controlled at times, easier now that humans have invented medicines, but it is not always a guarantee. This one seems to have failed at his attempts to treat himself.

The lump of flesh beside him groans, drawing both of our attention, and my gaze narrows when the assailant strikes with his foot.

From the ground, the man weakly cries out in pain before falling silent long enough for the other to get into his vehicle. It takes several attempts for him to flee, narrowly missing his "offering" to the wilderness left on the ground, though I suspect that the driver may have preferred it otherwise.

Released from the forest's hold, he takes the light with him and I tilt my head at the fading red lights until they disappear completely.

Observing the one left behind, head cocking at the silence, I wait.
And wait.

It takes some time for his weak cry to penetrate more than just the mountains, and I find myself stretching to my full height and moving in his direction. A vague voice in my mind suggests to remove myself, to let the humans be humans, but I cannot leave him to the animals when another soft whimper morphs into audible discomfort.

The pain in his voice is evident.

Approaching gently, I blanket the human with my mind, reaching into the depths of his psyche where he freely allows. Offering him moments of perceived solace, memories of peace. There is not much access that the human grants me, intriguing me farther, yet there is enough to encourage his form to ease.

I cannot see these moments held within his mind, more so feel them crawl across my skin in chilled pebbles. Still, I close the distance between us.

Explanation for my actions evades me as I kneel next to him, drawn closer by sheer curiosity.

I aim only to ease his suffering, to probe deeper into his mind.

Though being within arm's reach of him shifts my purpose quicker than intended when I recognize the same wild, unkept hair as the newcomer. The one I've been watching from a distance too great for his mind to understand.

The spectacles are missing, and I find that it upsets me.

One glazed eye takes me in, the other swollen shut.

"Tsk, ts, tsk." I click my tongue, a taloned digit rising to peel a tuft of his blood-soaked hair from his sight. "What have you gotten yourself into, human? Hm? Suppose ... you are—"

Mine now.

My lips spread as his breathing labors and his good eye rolls back.

The prophecy wills it so, and so do I.

CHAPTER 12

Shannon

INHALING IS LIKE DRINKING fire through a straw, the breath burning all the way from my throat down into my core.

My eye is swollen shut.

Even the air around me feels ... heated. Sparking with a warmth that doesn't feel natural. It's thick, rich, and flickering. It warbles behind my closed eyelids, the oranges and reds filling my aching sight.

The vibration of a groan escapes my throat unwillingly, grating over raw skin, and I once again find myself on a hard surface I don't recall laying on. It creaks beneath me, the muffled noise crackling and faraway as I attempt to prop myself up.

Only one of my eyes open when I force it.

"Do not rush."

I jolt, only to howl at the ripple of pain and collapse back to the floor. Instinctively, I curl in on myself, making my body as small as possible. The tears that leak out past my swollen lids burn, blurring what little bit of the blazing fireplace I can make out.

"I will not harm you, beloved."

Gods, I've got to be hallucinating.

Everything hurts so bad that I don't know if it's the fire itself speaking to me, or the voices in my head placating me through the pain like some sort

of fucked up disassociation. Like accepting magical flames is easier than recalling what—*who*—put me here in the first place.

Not that I know what *this place* really is ...

Nothing seems familiar.

The fireplace is indistinct. The floor out of focus. I can only make out blurry edges of dark walls and fuzzy furniture

My glasses ... Where are my glasses?

“Do not worry. I have your spectacles.”

I rear back, swallowing hard against the curse that lodges, and swing my gaze around.

The room blurs around me, making my head swim so hard I nearly black out again.

My breaths are deep and gulping as I attempt to form words that I can't hear when they pass my lips. I can only just feel the vibration of them.

“Where am I? Who are you?” My fingers instinctively move with the signs, though much smaller and tucked into my chest. “I can't see shit.”

“Your words are useless ...” The voice trails off into somewhat of a growl—no, more of a purr—that leaves trembles of fear in its wake. *How can I hear him and not myself?* “But your hands ...”

What the fuck!

Heat skitters down my forearm, tickling like a feather over my skin, and I jerk away.

Aches be damned, I scramble back until my spine crashes against another hard surface, knocking something over. I don't even bother flinching when it crashes to the floor next to me, scattering shards of porcelain across the room

“Where—” I growl in frustration and claw at the devices in my ears, the useless shits giving me no indication of my own voice. It sets off a different kind of alarm in my gut when I reset them, only to be met with a flashing orange light.

Low battery.

“Oh no,” I choke, the words nothing but the taste of their desperation on my tongue.

The faint sound of smacking lips echoes, startling me yet again at the sheer clarity of it, and I find myself pressing harder into the *thing* behind me.

“Your fear, beloved. It tastes *divine*.”

Smooth and clear as fucking day, the voice rumbles over my skin in a way that leaves the kind of goosebumps that could almost be mistaken as attraction.

None of that is possible, though, as I've never been one to add fear to my list of kinks, and I haven't heard the unencumbered voice of another since I was four.

"No, fuck this," I sign and push to my feet.

There's a limp to my steps that I can't quite feel, and a racing to my pulse as I practically throw myself at what appears to be a couch. I can barely make out the small table next to it, and scramble closer to find my glasses.

A rush of triumph floods my system when my fingers grasp at the frames, smudging the lenses in the process but shoving them onto my face anyway.

The nosepieces dig into my swollen bridge, centering my focus on the ache, and I use the distraction to find my bearings.

It's dark, save for the flickering light from the fireplace reflecting off the wall scones. A painting hangs above the mantle, another relic of the local legend that expresses his wild hair and clawed feet, and there's several chairs. A small couch. It's all old-style shit and creepy with deep shadows emphasizing the layer of dust. Or possibly ash...

But beyond that is a door. It's heavy and huge and I ignore that the voice doesn't seem to belong to any physical body in the room as I dive for it and rip it open. A deeper darkness greets me when I do.

I've never been one to be afraid of the dark. At least, not the ones that don't accompany the weighed pressure of caves in the mind, but this ...

This place.

It's as if it is an embodiment of dread, an open well into the unfathomable darkness.

The unsettling bewilderment that keeps tapping at my consciousness.

It all has me pausing at the threshold and gripping the jamb like I'm faced with a decision of great consequence.

Go forward and risk stumbling upon the source of the low laughter filling my head?

Or stay put and hope I wake up?

CHAPTER 13

The Legend

TERROR SEEPS FROM HIS pores, coating his skin in a delicious scent that calls to me more than his resting has.

He is a warrior beneath the armor.

The flight in his metaphorical feathers sends a thrill through me as he runs the halls of my home, choosing wrong at every chance he has been presented with and leading him deeper into the labyrinth of his mind as well as the hallways.

Giving chase appeals me, almost enough for me to engage in the act of tracking him down, but the twists he thinks up entice me more.

He knows of my presence, yet does not acknowledge it.

The human brain is a mystery, but this one holds far darker corners than I anticipated, reminiscent of very few I've tapped into before with deep traumas and hidden truths.

Dipping into his psyche when he cannot resist me is proving to be far grander than I ever imagined.

It seems as if his memories aren't as peaceful as I had guessed, the human having left him as an offering to me being so much more than an acquaintance to my new prey.

They had been lovers.

Shameful that this one was left as he was. His spirits are too entertaining. Enticing.

The fight in him makes me salivate.

“Let me have all of you.”

He doesn't speak, except for his hands fluttering in front of him in response to his own thoughts. Shaking with pain and fear I can taste.

It is rich and sweet, decadent on my tongue.

Probing his mind, I search for his answer only to find that ... his hands *are* the answer. The secret language he's been using is more than just a ruse with his new acquaintance. It is his preferred way of communicating with others, though he does not choose this for *their* benefit.

And he is desperate.

To be broken open. Allowed.

Bleed out the old in place of what could come anew.

Even if that means in another life.

I cannot see this life that he yearns for, the hopes that he barely believes himself, but I can taste its flavor on my tongue.

And it is just as rich as his fears.

I suppose I cannot be the only one in existence to be cursed to repeat the cycles of life, unending until the precipice of its heft is met or destroyed.

So why does he run?

From the recesses of his mind and from me, he sprints the opposite way, refusing to embrace the darkness that awaits him despite its long reach. Its fingers curl toward him at each step.

Claws that would sink in and relieve him of the pressure building inside his human mind, surely set to explode should he not.

“Tsk. Tsk.”

If only he knew that his own mind is what makes his journey so difficult. His imagination is the reason for his lack of direction, the paranoia boiling below his skin nothing but a distraction from seeing the path out.

All of it eases the edges of my own like a salve. Befitting and salivating, I relish in it. Bask in the density of the moment with a hard shaft and chilled skin, the feel of his memories and dreams coating my being.

“This is just the first course in our meal, human,” I mutter as he takes another turn, feet slipping. “And I cannot wait to sink my talons into you.”

I will get this prey to accept me, if it is the last thing that I do.

CHAPTER 14

Shannon

NEVER ENDING HALLWAYS SPIDERWEB their way through this place, leading to nothing but dead ends and locked doors.

It feels like it stretches for miles, the way I got here long lost to my disoriented senses. Still, I drag my busted body one limp at a time. My left ankle might be broken, dragging behind me with each advancement that just sends me deeper and deeper into the unknown darkness.

Though my sight has somewhat adjusted, it's still just too fucking dark, like there's a blackened fog covering the carpet that mutes each of my stumbling steps.

And I continue to throw myself forward. Searching walls by touch, grasping at anything that resembles knobs or handles, desperation clawing at my throat.

I might be screaming, but I can't tell.

The pain from my ankle finally buckles my knee radiating up my thigh, and I crash to the floor.

A tscking tongue rings across my brain like hot coals, cutting off as quick as it came, but leaving the burn of its path behind. I grasp at my temples, digging the heels of my palms into my skull. It does nothing to stop any of it, though I can't explain why I hoped it would.

Me and hope... We haven't exactly seen eye to eye for a long fucking time.

I recall the exact moment that it flickered, slowly dimming until the flame snuffed out.

A sob lodges in my throat and try as I might to forget, to stuff it so far down that it accompanies me to my grave, I know that I never will.

Flashes of the memory fill my head behind a film of static and instead of laying on this matted carpet, I'm in a fancy restaurant. My clothes aren't torn and bloodied, they're pressed and creased just right. My curls are tamed artfully instead of a knotted mess, and my heart pounds heavily in anticipation, excitement, in place of fear.

I remember smiling at Henry when he joined me at our table that night. Smitten while he ordered for us both, taking control and decision right out of my hands. I'd found it refreshing to not have to worry about the prices on the menu, the bill stacking up with each item added.

I felt taken care of for once.

Secure.

Until he snuck away to the bathroom for a quickie that hadn't included me.

I'd asked him about it, begged for honesty. I even swore I didn't care, I just wanted to know if I'd seen what I saw. If the disheveled waiter coming out right after him had someone else hiding inside, or if it'd been my partner that made him that way.

And that's when he redirected the focus and asked me to move in with him.

The shock still sits heavy in my chest now.

How naïve of me.

I curl tighter into myself, my back pressing into the wall of this strange labyrinth with tears streaming down my cheeks and any resolve I had left melts away.

My breathing slows.

My pulse calms into a dull lull.

And I just...

I accept it.

Whatever *this* is that's happening to me, as I have been for far too fucking long.

CHAPTER 15

Shannon

SMOKE .

The alarming twist of my gut snaps my eyes open, and I hiss at the searing of my retinas against the bright morning sun.

A haze clings to the air, reflecting the streams of light that pour through the open window, casting a glow over the room.

It's almost ... ethereal.

Or would be if I didn't once again find myself in an unfamiliar space, on a surface I don't recognize, with a head full of fuzz.

"At least this one's soft," I sigh with a purse to my lips, taking in the velvety comforter tossed over my shoulders and the silky-smooth sheets beneath me. They're cool to the touch, except where I have laid.

It's such a contrast to the clear nightmare I was having of being chased through the dark that my head spins.

I roll over and throw an arm over my eyes, shoving my glasses up to my forehead.

There's a tickle at the back of my mind, a subtle something that I can't quite put my finger on that flitters away as quickly as it came. Like grasping at smoke. Scrunching my brows and focusing on it only makes it more elusive, jumbling my thoughts. I sit up with a huff.

"Wait ..." I squint against the blinding rays, taking in my bruised and battered skin. My eye is still sore, so is my jaw and lip, but the swelling is

gone and the majority of the pain has dissipated. “What the fuck?”

Checking the rest of my exposed torso, I find a few spots of yellowed discoloration in place of the deep bruising my muscles phantom ache with. I was expecting so much worse.

It’s all just ... gone.

But I remember fighting with someone. Or getting hit, or...

A frantic spike in my pulse has me flipping back the comforter to continue inspecting the injuries I should have, that should still be painful, and find that I’m just here. In a strange bed. Naked and normal.

“What the fuck,” I sign, my hands moving along with my thoughts out of habit.

My pulse skyrockets at the lack of memory.

Whipping around and searching the room does me no good. There’s no answers in the Victorian-style furniture and four-post bed or the high ceilings and candle holders adorned to the walls. They look heavy. Old.

Dusty.

I’m still disoriented, and when I stand, I sway.

The rugged floor falls out from beneath me, and I land face down on the bed with my head spinning and the nipping of chilled air on my exposed taint.

It’s uncouth but I can’t find it in myself to care with that tickle in the back of my mind blossoming into a full-blown *ache*. One that sears across my forehead from one temple to the other.

Then the tapping starts.

A pressure thumping somewhere inside my head like a knocking on the door to my psyche. No, wait. *A pounding.*

Squeezing my eyes closed, palms digging into the sides of my head, I force myself to breathe deep. To focus on expanding my chest as I blink away the water gathering on my lashes.

It works for a moment, granting me a reprieve from the pain long enough to lift my gaze.

The air shifts, loose boards and slats around the room fluttering, wafting up clouds of dust. It lingers, thickening into a blanket over the room. Swirls dance over the wooden floorboards, across the ugly rug and slowly climbing the legs of the nightstand like it’s got a mind of its own and it’s gunning straight for me.

Closer, it coats the top of the table, gathering there before spreading to the bed. I scramble backward, back digging into the wood-carved headboard and I curl my knees up to my chest. It collects like smoke, gathering into one big, twisting plume, then jumps the short space between and curls around the disheveled duvet.

“Shit,” I sign, lips stretching over my bared teeth, my head pounding.

This has to be an illusion. Some fucked nightmare fueled by everything that ... everything with ...

Why can't I remember?

My heart thumps as the collection of smoke spirals, growing large enough to arch over me and filling the room with the scent of *burning*. It's so strong, sucking up all the oxygen around me and making my throat squeeze. My head throbs like I'm laying on a blacksmith's anvil, the heat and pressure building until something will surely pop or bend.

Vision pulsing behind my glasses, I watch the thing above me warp and grow denser, the tendrils circling tighter until a large silhouette forms. The edges of it waver, condensing and matching the rapid pounding of my heart.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp, pressing harder against the bed, as far back as I can but there's nowhere left to go with this thing looming over me. This *shadow* of smoke.

It swallows all the space surrounding it like it's feeding on it, pulling in the rays from the window and reflecting them, plunging us in deep, misty haze. Like the midwestern sky before a storm.

It's just *yellow* and ominous.

I cough as the room fills, my lungs and eyes burning.

C'mon, Shannon, wake the fuck up.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight. *Wake up*. My arms tremble—whether from the force of holding myself together or from fear, I'm uncertain—and a bead of sweat collects on my temple. *Fucking hell, c'mon!* I shiver as it rolls down my face, pausing at my jaw, and that's when I feel it. The ghost of a touch, like a feather-light finger smudging down the trail. Teasing me, touching me.

A deep ache blossoms in my chest—one that I can't make sense of—only half a second before I snap my eyes open and scream.

CHAPTER 16

Shannon

IT'S A MONSTER.

I'm not sure if it's instinct or a death wish, maybe even just out of habit, that has me waving my arms in front of me like a madman, slashing my limbs through the fog above with words I can't recognize on the tips of my fingers. I swing hard while signing my curses big, my mouth wide with a yell I desperately try to hear

It all just sounds like cotton—*feels* like cotton—as I scramble away from the thing and crash to the floor. An *oof* bursts out of my chest, though I'm not sure if the sound makes it past the lump wedged in my throat.

The thing ... *swirls* and slowly sways like magnets finding their way back together in this weird ethereal form, the edges of it tightening and defining limbs similar to that of ... a person—arms, legs, a *head*. It crouches low on the bed, joints popping and body morphing.

"Fuck," I sign with wide, bleary eyes and a pounding to my heart.

It's going to kill me.

This is no regular bad dream. It's got to be one of the night terrors I've read about where people relive trauma in some really fucked up way while they're sleeping. Nightmares happen, but I typically know where I am and how to get back, what it'll take to wake myself back up. *Who to run to and who to run from*. This is a whole other beast of something fucked going on in my psyche. Some form of torture I've concocted to deal with life.

A life... I can't recall.

Worrying about whether I've had some recent head trauma feels more like a future me problem though as my gaze flickers to the door. It's cracked open, beckoning me with its sliver of unknown darkness peeking between the panel and the jamb, just a few feet past the bed.

I can do this.

I can make that.

Sparing one final look at the thing lingering on the comforter, I launch from my spot on the floor, bare feet slipping on the hardwood as I haul ass for the exit.

The painting-adorned walls blur past, decorated with candle holders just as big as in the bedroom, and I dash down the stairs two at a time despite my still tender ankle. A foyer opens up at the bottom, expansive and mosaic tiled, that leads right to the glow of what has to be sunlight waiting just on the other side of the frosted glass entry.

Lungs pumping hard, I sprint for it, yanking it open with all my might. Hope springs anew when it gives way to exactly what I expected—a dewy morning reflecting first light.

“Ha-ha!” I sign wide, accompanying it with a real laugh I'm sure sounds just as manic as it feels as I run away from this nightmare, that house—completely nude.

I'd almost forgot.

Flipping it the middle finger just motivates me to run faster, smile harder, dick swinging in the wind.

It feels like I... *accomplished* something by getting away. Like I won. That I managed to do it by myself, even if this is just an illusion.

“Fuck you, subconsciousness.”

Another uncontrollable laugh bubbles up my throat when I glance over my shoulder and see the house shrinking between the trees, the forest slowly swallowing it up, and no sign of the creepy smoke silhouette.

“I did it. Suck it, nightmare!”

I grin so wide it hurts, whatever test I was putting myself through passed, and I turn back to face front when it all comes screeching to a halt.

I slam into something solid, skidding over the dirt path before I bounce backward, throwing my arms out to steady myself. My bare heels dig into the earth below for balance. Through all my efforts, my instincts fail me

and I feel myself falling; tilting. The air slices through my flailing limbs. Tensing, I brace for an impact that never comes.

Confused, I pry open my squeezed-shut eyes.

The ground is closer than it should be, packed soil and rocks close enough to smell, jutting root systems reaching out for my suspended frame as if they were prepared to catch me,

My skin tingles with an alarming awareness, centering in on my wrist and the way it pulls.

I'm righted with no effort on my part, the forest whirling around me before landing on *him*.

Impossibly red eyes stare back at me, a scar jutting through the bridge of his nose and across his cheek beneath them. They're so ... *enchanted*. Unreal. I find myself getting lost in the flecks of gold and orange that meld together in his irises, only noticeable with our extremely close proximity.

Nothing else seems to matter as I simply stand and stare at him, not even the events that lead me to be captured in his gaze, aside from my heavy breaths.

But then they flash, reflecting light like a flaring flame that makes me jolt and it all comes rushing back.

I'm shaking when his lips spread into a sinister smile and his grip on my wrist tightens. "Hello, beloved."

Watching his mouth move with the words almost makes it audible in my head, like my brain is tracking the sound waves of his voice, even if I can't hear it. My skin pebbles at the sentiment, something about it flowing over me with a familiarity I can't name before it shifts into an unease. I jerk against the grasp he still has on my wrist.

"I-I have a boyfriend," I lie and sign with my free hand, my fingers brushing over his chest as I do. He's so close that he's in the space I need to speak, which irks me more than I expect, and a huff vibrates my throat.

Those glowing eyes narrow to dangerous slits before the outside ring of his irises expand, turning black and swallowing the whites whole.

My throat clicks.

The air shifts, staining with the scent of *burning* as the wind picks up, bringing with it that blanketing haze I recall seeing, though I can't place where. Or when.

"Where am I?"

It's nothing but a distraction—for me and for this nightmarish creature with contorting features standing in front of me, holding me in place. I jerk in his grasp again, a bubble of panic rising up in my chest when he doesn't release me.

I look left, right, my wild gaze flickering all over the trees and brush surrounding us as that haze closes the distance until it's circling around us.

Oh, gods, is this the ...

Stupidly, *cowardly*, I land on the creature that's holding me in place with a dying plea on my lips.

It's not the unnaturally red hair flowing down to his shoulders, or the look in his blackened eyes, but that gnarly scar running down his face that stops me dead.

This isn't a dream. The thought knocks me out of my frozen state just enough to leave me trembling.

It's fucking real.

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CHAPTER 17

Shannon

I'D DROPPED MY WEIGHT and stopped thrashing halfway back to the house, when I realized that he wasn't going to let up on his grip no matter how much I fought. I made him drag me about two paces before he realized I wasn't willingly coming along.

The look in his eyes should have terrified me. If I'm being honest, there's a part of me that was, but there was also something else there, hidden behind a mask of annoyance at my sudden ragdoll state that I couldn't blame him for because *really?* Who *plays dead* when they're being kidnapped?

It might actually be effective as shit because he leans down, only releasing my wrist to grab my hips and hoist me up over his shoulder like a petulant child. Or a sack of potatoes—easily carried, easily manipulated.

I kind of feel like a child as I pound on his backside with closed fists, legs kicking in the air until I manage to squish my balls between my thighs on accident.

The howl rips out of my throat just as I'm carried through the foyer and back up the staircase I ran down just minutes ago.

"Fuck," I sign one-handed against his back, throat clicking, and making sure to dig my thumb hard into his spine so he feels at least an ounce of the discomfort he's putting me through.

He only adjusted me on his shoulder, bones and hard muscle digging into my gut with each step until we come to a stop inside a room that looks suspiciously similar to the one I woke up in.

The residual scent of smoke hangs in the air, as does that weird glowing haze, and I huff.

Square one. Fucking perfect.

My body bounces off the mattress, limbs flailing for purchase. The sound that leaves my throat on impact must be audible enough because it has my captor glancing over his shoulder, sharp gaze boring into me. His eyes have returned to semi-normal in the sense that they aren't pitch black any longer—but that fucking scar stands out like a stark contrast to the rest of his face; jagged and deep. Like a crack in chiseled marble.

I wonder how he got it ...

Swallowing hard, I watch as his gaze drift south, pausing at my bare chest before traveling downward. My face flushes and I instinctively cover myself with both hands. Not that it really matters, he's already seen me running through the woods sans clothes. *Still*. It matters now, in this moment, that he does not get anything else that I'm not willing to *give*.

Where the fuck did my clothes go anyway?

The combination of my discomfort and the lack of memory must draw a sound from me, because he flicks his attention back to my face.

I cross my legs to free up my hands.

"Where?" I demand with pinched brows and a wagging finger. "Me. My clothes. Where?" I sign short, clipped gestures on purpose, sure to mouth the words clearly along with my hands in the hopes that he'll get the gist. I would try speaking, but my hearing aids are dead and attempting to speak without knowing how long my voice has been off or the ability to hear some of what I'm saying to ensure it's understandable has me resorting to ASL. It's reliable enough that most hearing people panic and grab paper to write on or pull out their phones for me to text text. Or in some—very rare—cases, the recipient knows just enough basic phrases to understand me.

I never expect anyone to know sign. There's not many people in my life that do, but it sure as shit makes it easier to communicate when my devices go out.

One day, they won't work anymore, and although I've come to terms with that thanks to my early prognosis of profound hearing loss, it does still

frustrate the fuck out of me when I don't know for sure if it's officially happened yet ... or if I'm just out of power.

Even more so when I attempt to communicate and the recipient just fucking stares at me like I'm some circus monkey with a few tricks up his sleeve.

I wave an annoyed hand and sign again. "Where clothes?"

And just for good measure, because I'm annoyed as fuck at how much this fucked up vision has turned into reality, I make non-sensical signs, miming the act of dressing myself and pointing.

His eyes narrow, and a flush runs down my neck.

He's going to leave me here like this.

But just when I think he's going to haul ass, maybe even call the cops to come get me—as if I'm not here of my own volition—he holds up a darkened finger. A single, sharp, talon-like nail pointing to the sky.

Goosebumps blossom across my forearm at the idea that he picked me up with those nails and carried my wriggling body without a single scratch.

I also won't lie and say that there isn't some part of me that would love to watch those hands flutter about with meaning.

Gods, this has got to be the weirdest dream ever.

With just that notion, my captor leaves me naked and alone, with nothing but my wondering thoughts.

"What would it be like ..." I sign to myself, thinking out loud with my hands. "It's only a dream, right?"

Reaching between my legs feels like the most sinful thing to do in a moment like this, but I can't seem to stop myself from addressing the ache. Maybe this is exactly what mind-me needs. Just a little bit of dick pulling and the risk of getting caught by my captor.

There's just too much adrenaline in my system, and I've got nowhere else to put it.

Sounds like the plot to a fucking romance novel or something.

Snorting, I scoot back on the bed and under the covers—just in case my nightmare comes back too soon—and wrap my fist around the base of my rapidly filling dick.

The first touch sends sparks shooting down to my toes and a moan vibrating up my throat.

"Damn," I sign with my free hand, my breath catching.

This won't last long at all.

Visions of red eyes and fiery hair fill my head as I palm my balls, rolling them over the fingers of my non-dominant hand, the skin pulling taut with each of my strokes.

He's pretty.

In the chiseled, statue-esque way. Like, in a *he should be modeling for magazines and book covers* kind of way.

Is that what this is? My next book?

I try desperately to recall what I was reading last—hell, maybe even what I was writing, though PNR isn't normally my style—but my balls thump in protest at the redirect from spank bank material.

My dick, though, is just as along for the ride as I am.

Gripping harder, I work myself faster beneath the blanket, getting right up to the edge before stopping. Then doing it all over again.

It's my dream, I can risk it if I want to.

Besides, if I do this, then I should wake up. It's one of the f ticks I've learned with my brain over the years.

And I do, three more times before blowing all over the underside of the comforter.

Wiping my hands clean and moving away from the mess, I absently sign, "Fuck, that normally does the trick."

I look around the room with a huff, noting that it looks exactly the same as when I woke up, save for the way the light stretches across the walls. And that there's no smoke creature hovering over me, sending me into early cardiac arrest. There's still a faint haze, a soft, rich scent clinging to the air, but I find that I don't hate it this time around. Which means the illusion has shifted and I should be waking up any minute now.

Finally.

My breath is still a little shoddy and when I reach between my legs this time, I pinch a good bit of meat on the inside of my thigh for good measure.

"Fuck," I whine, the vocals getting stuck in my throat, and rub absently at the sting. We'll ignore that little bead of precum—or *is it postcum now*—that smears across the blanket for a full thought spiral later when I'm actually awake and not stuck in this odd state between consciousnesses.

Speaking of consciousness ...

I lean back against the headboard and dig deep into my memory with hopes that something will trigger how I ended up here, with healed wounds I don't remember getting—but know I had—and why I seem to have a

complete lack of self preservation in this strange place. The room feels oddly familiar, like I've been here for a while and just don't remember.

"Dream logic," I sign and roll my eyes. "Never makes any sense."

But I suppose my maladaptive daydreams rarely do either. There's always some deeper plot I'm chasing, some layered meaning that leads to words on pages.

The vision of a campfire fills my head, the flames surrounded by a group of pals with heads thrown back in laughter, the jovial bond of friendship clear in the air. It makes me smile along with them, even if I'm just hovering on the edge of their story, eager to watch it unfold like my own little movie.

"Okay, okay. It's dark and scary time. Someone tell a tale that makes my hair raise."

Mini marshmallows and crushed graham crackers accompany the giggles and goads that fly around the licking flames, all aimed at the speaker.

"Do not give me nightmares, please. Being in the woods is creepy enough."

"Fine, I'll start easy."

A chorus of agreement surrounds the speaker.

"With no cannibalistic big foot's."

"Uh-huh."

"Or serial killer moths."

The round of groans echo over the fire. In response, though, the crackling of interest arises.

"Instead, why don't I tell you a tale of a quasi-man made of marble? Perhaps a god of the light?"

"This isn't some mythology lesson, is it?"

The speaker's head tilts, a smug brow arching toward his hairline. "There once was a creature that was said to hold the shape of man and bird in kind. They said that he'd show himself, noted with hair and eyes the shade of rubies, to those worthy of the best gift a god could give."

Sarcasm meets the speaker's opening line. "And what's that?"

"Palingenesis."

I jolt as the word crosses my psyche like a sear, slamming me back to the present. To the room where a red-eyed man is staring back at me as if I summoned him with my thoughts alone.

“Jesus fuck!” The words rip off my tongue with a shake and I clutch the blanket to my chest. Not that it would provide any protection against those claws. I’m certain they would rip through flesh and bone in a way that would make the cotton bedspread cower in fear.

Narrowed eyes assess me, nostrils flaring with his inhale and sniffing the air before dropping a wad of things on the foot of the bed.

I expect him to leave again—to not bother trying to communicate with me until he can find a way to dump me off. Instead, he steps *closer*. Eyes locked on mine, he reaches for me and I flinch away, smacking his hand.

His nostrils flare again and his eyes flash a vibrant crimson.

Snatching my face between his dark fingers and thumb, I feel the sting of his talon tips dig into my cheeks.

There is no tenderness in the gesture or in the way he seems to stare *through* me.

I swallow hard.

He must feel it, because his heady gaze flicks down the column of my neck, and the whites of his eyes flood black.

That scent that seems to follow him everywhere intensifies, tickling my nose with its richness.

It’s all so much. *He’s* so much.

It’s terrifying all over again.

My earlier bravado is missing in action, leaving behind nothing but a trembling mess of a human.

Fuck this nightmare.

A cold sweat breaks out on my skin, pebbling beneath his heavy stare and sharp grasp, and *fuck I think this might be it.*

This is where it all goes sideways and he snaps my neck.

His touch grows hotter, lighting me up, and something about it just feels so real.

Like *real* real.

Tangible.

Not an illusion.

I can feel the blood drain from my face, the beat of my heart focused in on the exact two points where I can clearly feel him so intently I could count the ridges of his fingerprints.

There are none.

His full lips tip up a fraction, that scar pulling across his cheek.

“Hello, beloved,” he practically purrs.

And yet his mouth doesn’t form a single syllable of either word.

That’s not possible.

“Isn’t it?”

My eyes stretch open wide enough that I feel the chill of them drying.

A sudden flare of pain rips across my forehead, and I cry out.

Still, he watches me. Waiting. Leaning close enough that I feel the tickle of his breath on my lips.

“Let me in.”

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CHAPTER 18

Shannon

GASPING, I SHOOT UPRIGHT so fast that the room spins. Sweat dampens my temples and rolls down my spine, yet I'm overtaken by a chill that leaves me trembling.

My chest pumps so hard with my heaving breath that I clutch the tightness there. It's bare and wet, radiating a heat that feels feverish.

I swipe at my forehead and scan my surroundings.

Darkness greets me, though there's a sliver of moonlight streaking the far wall. The one with my dresser against it—one that I share.

Feeling the bed around me, my fingers tangle in the sheets and pillows, palm meeting warm skin.

I jerk away instinct.

A glow warms the room from the bedside lamp. Bright enough to make me squint.

When I open my eyes again, fully adjusted, my breath catches in my throat at the sight of *Henry* turned over his shoulder, facing me with a worried pinch to his blond brows.

Henry ... but *not* Henry.

I can't place it, but there's something off about the man lying next to me. Wrong. *Kinder*.

"What's wrong?" he asks me with his hands and clear lips. "Bad dream?"

I can't help but stare at him.

Henry never signs for me.

Stunned, I find myself nodding slowly.

“Sorry,” I sign by rubbing a closed, jerky fist over my chest. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

He shakes his head, his sleep-wrinkled face softening as he sits up and pulls the covers away from my still overheated body.

I almost grab it out of habit, if only to keep a barrier between us, but it easily slips through my fingers at the sight of his bare chest.

There’s no pillow wall between us. No pressed pajamas.

What in the fuck?

“Water,” Henry signs, tapping three fingers to his chin before jamming a thumb towards the door and climbing out of the bed.

Naked. He’s fucking naked.

Swinging my gaze away, I chew on my lower lip, my eyes bugging out of my head.

This has to be some kind of hallucination. Or maybe ... maybe it's that moment where someone capable of such heinous behavior as he is, attempts to make up for everything in a short-lived attempt to confuse me? To keep me?

Gaslighting... That’s got to be what this is.

But I don’t fucking remember anything. Not how we got in bed. Or how we ended up naked.

Did we... fool around?

My heart rate kicks up in my chest at the idea of touching Henry in that way ever again. Not after all the things he’s said—the things he’s *done*—but I just can’t *remember*.

There’s a somber smile on his face when he returns and offers me the glass.

He looks like a completely different person.

“Tell me,” he mouths when he’s sure I’m looking.

I swallow a long pull of cool liquid, working my throat in preparation to use my voice for the first time in gods know how long.

Though what comes out of my mouth stumps me just as much as him.

“The statue.” Short and thick, it rolls off my vocals with a vibration that tickles and I hope makes enough sense. “From town.”

His gaze flicks to my hands, still occupied by holding the glass, then narrows on my face.

“Use your hands,” he signs back, taking the glass from my grip and setting it on his side table. “Your voice sounds *pfft*.” His lips flutter with the last bit, something reminiscent of using ASL on a regular basis that I was in no way expecting to ever see from him.

It makes my chest pinch and I swallow hard.

“It was weird and long,” I tell him, “I recall pieces but the statue from town was in it, like a lot.”

“It was creepy,” he agrees.

My brows dip. “You saw it, too?”

His lips purse again. “Yes, silly, we were both there when we picked up the couch two weeks ago.”

The color drains from my face and makes me dizzy.

“Couch?”

Henry nods, one brow raised. “That’s when we met Avery.” He finger spells the name and my stomach churns. *No... no way I made it all up.* “Shannon, are you okay?”

The way he taps an S shape to his chest, a clear name sign for me, has everything in my stomach ready to revolt.

I jump up from the bed, snatching a pair of briefs from the floor as I go. Slamming the door behind me, I lock myself in the bathroom and lean heavily into the vanity.

Something is so very wrong here.

My lungs pump with my breath, too shallow and too quick.

“Mind games. It’s all fucked.”

Sliding to the floor, I clutch at my chest and squeeze my eyes closed.

This isn’t real. None of it is.

Though, at this point, I’m losing faith in my ability to tell the difference between delusion and reality. The fantasies seem like I’m awake, and each time I’m lucid is like a nightmare that has my heart pounding harder in my chest.

How the fuck do I tell the difference?

Tipping up my glasses and digging the heels of my palms into my eye sockets, I press until I see colors. Stars. Anything other than the bathroom floor and this version of reality.

If I could just... catch my breath. Calm my pulse.

Then I could think. Focus on anything that feels off. Maybe ask—

Henry won’t tell me the truth. But maybe... Avery can.

He'd tell me if he recalls standing outside his bakery during the cake decorating thing he was hosting with his husband.

"Okay," I sign for no one but myself.

I'll call him first thing in the morning.

And in the meantime, I'll ignore the disappointment welling in my gut that maybe I missed the town's festivities.

Henry almost looks defeated when I finally crawl back in bed, and I find myself battling a pull to my heart strings.

"Sorry, I kept you up late," I sign as I slip under the covers beside him. "I know you have to work."

He shakes his head and lays a gentle hand over mine, stopping me from speaking anymore. "I know ..." He pauses, fingers stuttering, eyes wide with hope. "It's been a while with the move and your book, my work, but ..." *Holy fuck he looks nervous.* "You used to rest better when I laid on you. You want that?"

That ugly hopeful flare twists in my gut and my frown deepens.

I don't know what alternate universe I landed in when I came to this time around, but it triggers a longing so deep in me that I find myself nodding before I can think better of it.

It's almost like all the things I ever wanted... They're *right here*. In the man I thought was incapable of anything close to what I wanted. What I needed.

But now he's smiling at me and practically diving across the bed to burrow into my chest.

The weight of him there, the sting of his not-quite stubble rubbing over my bare pec, has me draping an arm over his shoulders, holding him lightly.

Just get through the night.

He taps my sternum, his fist closed in the S shape, right over my heart.

My nose burns as I stare at the ceiling.

The ceiling that gets painted in all the colors of night.

I stare so long, sleep evading me, that I watch the blues and purples bleed into reds and pinks and then finally the brilliant light of the risen sun. All the while with the weight of my hopes and dreams pressing over my aching heart.

CHAPTER 19

Shannon

STEAM FILLS THE ROOM, swirls around my head, the tendrils of mist floating across the shower like it can teleport me back to the reverie where statues come alive and wounds heal by magic.

The spray on my shoulders should be relaxing, but it's not.

I'd hoped that I could wash away the fuzz from my brain, the grit sticking to my skin, and *let it all go*. Just be in this moment and take all the kind Henry I can get before it washes away.

Instead, I jump when a hand appears just inside the curtain, fingers fluttering for my attention.

Henry sticks his head in next. "Sorry. You've been in here for a while and I just wanted to check on you."

Sighing, I poke between my pecs with a thumb. "I'm fine."

The next signs are a little blurry without my glasses, and I'm sure I've misunderstood him when he asks, "Can I join you?"

It's been years since Henry attempted to be intimate, like *really* intimate, with me. Hell, I can't even recall if he's *ever* showered with me. Let alone after laying in my arms all night long.

My confusion must be broadcasted on my face judging by the way his face pinches briefly before softening again. "Dreams were really that bad?"

He seems genuinely concerned, purposeful in his signs as he asks and I have to admit that I'm just stunned.

It's the only justification I can find for why I nod and step back, making room for his thin frame beneath the spray.

Or maybe it's hope.

Longing.

The need to be connected to someone, understood by the one closest to me.

Suspicion teases the edges of my thoughts, but he's smiling as he steps in next to me, close enough that I feel the added heat of his skin.

He leans back slightly to sign in the small space between us. "I put your aids on the charger."

My gut clenches and a war rages inside of me at that statement, a mix of *of course Henry would mention those, and he's never offered to touch them before* that has my mouth agape.

The result of it has me launching forward, crushing my lips to his, if only to test the waters.

Will he finally stop acting?

Can I taste the transgressions on his tongue? Will his body betray him and finally tell me the truth I know exists somewhere?

Or will he disappear completely and leave me completely alone all over again?

He surprises the shit out of me by matching my intensity, hands curling around my neck to tug at my hair and nip at my bottom lip. It's *his* tongue that licks across the seam of mine, and I let him in.

Heat kicks up between us, his arousal grinding against my thigh.

I pop off his lips, desperate for air, and search his gaze.

"Are you real?" I find myself asking with both my hands and my voice.

His response is to wink and maneuver around me until his back is against my front.

"See," he signs over his shoulder then walks his hands down the shower wall, bending at the waist.

I'm a starved man. A *delirious* man.

Mad with a craving so deep, I can't put words to it. A yearning like nothing I've ever felt before.

There's a bottle of lube next to Henry's expensive shampoo. One I don't ever remember being in here before, but I snatch it before I can think twice and pour some onto my fingers; reaching between his cheeks in a way he's never let me before.

He's already stretched. Like maybe he was hopeful this would happen.

In the blink of an eye, I'm sliding home in him but there's a tickle at the back of my mind as I stare at the wall.

And as we both work to find a release, I can't help seeing nothing but red, scarred eyes staring back at me.

I'm distracted after, and we clean up on autopilot as we both dress and make our way out to my truck.

He's worried about me.

He's coming with me today.

The sentiment hangs thick in the air as I drive, eventually parking in front of Avery's bakery on instinct, the small window front filled with displays of sweet and savory treats. It's exactly how I remember it from that night.

The one that seems like such a far-fetched fever-fueled illusion that I'm shaking as I let myself out.

If it happened, Avery won't recognize Henry.

Right?

Hearing devices in place, my head filled with noise and Henry keeping up at my side, I pull open the door to the bakery. A low bell chime announces our entry.

"Hey, I'm gonna run down the block real quick." The sound of Henry's voice close to my ear makes me jolt but I hide it quickly. "I'll be right back."

I can't help the sigh of relief that floods me once he's gone, disappearing past the view from the windows.

Turning, light blue eyes lock on mine, and I rush towards him, a desperation and quickness making my words shaky. "Do you remember me?"

Avery's brows dip. He signs a yes. "That's a weird question. I know it's been awhile but damn. You okay?"

A while... The words stick in my brain like a dart, but I roll right over the inclination to ask about it and keep talking.

"Something happened and I've got no time to explain." His brows dip even farther, gaze flooding with confusion. "Do you know who that was with me?"

He fingerspells his name, then smacks the L shape on his forehead. *Loser.* I almost chuckle. "At least, I assume so."

I swallow hard, my own confusion pulling down my frown. “Do you... Do you remember standing out back? During the cake decorating thing you hosted?”

His mouth drops open to answer, hands shuddering in front of him. “Shannon, are you okay?”

“No!” I blurt out, shaking my head in apology—and a bit of disbelief. Maybe a little fear if I’m being completely honest. “I’m sorry. I’ve just been having weird nightmares and lapses in time, and nothing seems real.”

If I wasn’t in tune with body language the way that someone who’s fluent in ASL is, I may have missed it or explained it away, but Avery’s nostrils flare and his shoulders stiffen.

“Nightmares,” he signs. “What makes them weird?”

Blowing out a breath, I force my trembling hands to sign slowly. “Things like a forest. Statues. Red eyes.”

Avery holds up his hands to stop me. “Red?”

I nod.

“No.”

I rear back, my fingers shaking so hard I don’t bother trying to sign anymore. “What do you mean ‘no?’ What is it? What the fuck is wrong with me?”

He holds up a finger. “Just hang on a sec.”

My gut flares with irritation because I don’t feel like I have a second to spare. That at any moment, things will shift and I’ll be in another horror flick or abandoned house with no recollection of how I got there. Being watched by the eyes of some fantastical being with no recourse but to follow.

I want to follow it.

I swallow hard and I force a breath, nodding to Avery but he’s always walking towards the back.

A chill I can’t explain racks down my spine, the prickling of it clinging to the base of my neck. Rubbing at it absently, I turn to check for Henry, to see if he’s coming back yet. It feels like it’s been too long.

But instead, I see *him*.

CHAPTER 20

Shannon

I'M DRAWN TO HIM like a moth to a flame. The lure of the light too bright to resist.

Absently, I exit the store, though I couldn't tell if I passed anyone on the sidewalk or not. A horn blares dully behind me, but my feet still carry me across the pavement.

Dangerous.

Though I can't stop myself from staring into those burgundy eyes seeming to draw me in like a magnet.

I want answers, need them more than my next breath.

It's the only explanation for why I stop in front of him, out in the open, with a squareness to my shoulders that feels more natural than the last time I saw him.

Red strands frame his face, the sunlight beaming down on him in a way that makes him glisten. His whole presence seems... ethereal.

It's the clearest my head has felt all day.

"Who the fuck are you?" I growl, barely covering the wistfulness hidden beneath at being this close to him.

Those stunning eyes drop to my lips as I speak, a tilt to his own, before flicking to the side of my face.

The wire curling around my ear burns hot under his stare.

"Pity," he tsks and I scoff.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His eyes darken and he cocks his head. “You ask the wrong questions.”

Narrowing my gaze, I take a step closer—though there’s some part of me, some deep-down piece that’s screaming to run the opposite way—unable to resist the pull of intrigue, and maybe something even more dangerous lurking beneath. “What should I be asking?”

His smug grin twitches, flashing just enough teeth to be attractively creepy, and he lifts those black-smudged fingers, tips of two scraping down the stumble lining my jaw. I can’t help but shiver at the contact before I register the feel of him and slap his hand away.

“Don’t touch me,” I growl. “In fact, don’t come near me again. I don’t know what fucked timeline I landed in but leave me be.”

I take a full step back, our gazes locked, that invisible tether pulling tight in protest. Fighting it, I take another stride away. It’s so strong that I almost wave my hands in front of me, the physical act of dissolving any connection to this... whatever he is—more appealing by the second.

I finally have the version of Henry I always wanted. The one I needed.

The thought has me swallowing hard and turning away, severing the trance I was in, and everything rushes me at once. The noise of cars driving down the street, the bustle of bodies moving from one shop to the next, the chirp of insects and birds singing to the midday sun. Its bright and so *much*.

I even hear my name called over the noise of it all.

And yet, that ever-present dullness remains, a low hum that never really goes away, even when I’m wearing my hearing devices.

“You’re just making all the friends, aren’t you?” The smile on Henry’s face almost has me bracing for the inevitable comment I’m used to following an observation like that, but it never comes. His smile is soft and genuine when I stop in front of him, his eyes kind and sparkling.

It makes my chest ache.

“Yeah, uh, no. I just thought I recognized him.”

“He’s not a reader, is he?” Henry loops his arm around mine and starts walking, pulling me along without any indication that he feels the same resistance I do. “That would be cool.”

It takes what feels like an eternity for his words to sink in, and it’s not until we’re in front of the truck that it hits me and I freeze halfway into the cab. “What?”

Henry grins at me from across the bucket seat, nimble fingers clicking his seatbelt in place. “Seeing a reader in the wild has always been a dream of yours. It would be cool if we made it all the way here and it finally happened—like a sign or something.”

My throat bobs and my fingers start to shake. “Uh, yeah. Right.”

Jabbing the key into the ignition feels like turning on more than just my truck, my skin tightening and tingling with awareness.

I look up in time to catch Avery’s gaze through the window, his frown deeper than I’ve ever seen, and I pull away from the curb with a subtle shake to my head and a rock settling in my gut.

The entire drive back to the house leaves me in knots.

Something is very, *very* wrong.

But it’s not until I unlock the door to my—*our*—house that I realize how wrong things might be.

A single feather rests on the floor, the edges of it singed, and those rocks in my gut multiply so fast it makes me nauseous.

I’m losing it. Fucking losing it.

I rush to the bathroom, my last meal emptying into the toilet, my hands shaking so bad that I can barely support myself.

Vaguely, I’m aware of Henry rubbing my shoulder, cooing in a way that makes my skin crawl. Shrugging him off feels like a dick move, but he’s touching me too softly; too caring. Too much like someone that loves me.

Henry doesn’t love, he uses.

Another dry heave leaves me doubled over and panting, my chest clenching tight. So much so that I clutch at it, gripping my shirt in my fist.

I’ve never been the religious type, but as I bow over the porcelain throne with a racing heart and a spinning head, I start praying to anyone willing to listen. To *anything*.

If only I’d known it wasn’t the first mistake I’d made since coming to Bearcreek.

CHAPTER 21

Shannon

“I’M FINE,” I SIGN for the fifth time in as many minutes.

It doesn’t matter how many times I tell Henry, though, because he just keeps fucking hovering, asking what he can do or telling me that it’s probably “stress” and that I should go lay down.

Yeah, it’s fucking stress alright.

Stress from being manipulated by a fucking narcissist turned sweet lover, while also being toyed with by a godsdamn campfire-fairytale monstrosity that I also kind of wanna fuck.

Now that’s a thought I wasn’t expecting to have, godsdamn.

Send help.

I can see what it looks like, telling him I’m okay while I’m on the bathroom floor, bowed over the toilet. With an emptied stomach and so much unrest growing in my heart that it’s leeching from my skin in rivulets of sweat. Regrets staining me on the outside as he watches over me.

My back sticks to the wall I lean against, shirt gone, the shakes vibrating from the tips of my fingers to my hairline.

Even my glasses are fogging up.

“Shannon, do you really believe that?”

The way he asks, his voice thicker than it was a moment ago, draws my gaze up to his furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. It’s closer to the Henry I expected, the subtle disdain barely hidden by his effort to care, and I shoot

to my feet so fast that my head swims. I push past him into the hallway, my legs lagging behind my brain, and I stumble into the wall opposite the bathroom. The plaster feels too close, too small. Like it's closing in around me with every intention of burying me alive beneath its rubble.

"Tsk. Tsk. Tsk."

The click of disappointment echoes in my head, trailing me like smoke the entire way to the kitchen. I crash into the counter, gripping onto it for purchase, fingers of my dominant hand grazing something with a texture I can't name. Focusing on that, the feel of it in my palm, I curse when I realize it's the feather. Vibrant orange mottled with deep red, bordered by a blackened edge. *Burnt*. Like it was singed over a flame.

The rich scent fills the room, tickling my nose, and I cough against the assault.

It's not real.

None of this is. It can't be.

"I'm delusional," I mutter, crushing the feather in my fist and whirling toward the commanding presence behind me.

But it's not Henry standing there, eyes tracking my every move.

It's him.

The man of my nightmares.

With red eyes and fiery hair, and a dark smile curling his lips.

"Oh, my gods." My pulse thuds and I scramble backwards. "How are you here? How do you know *where I live*?"

That disappointed clicking returns and he shakes his head, stalking toward me in a way that keeps the same amount of distance between us no matter what I do. Closer, even, edging until I can almost feel the heat radiating from him. "Still asking the wrong questions."

"*What are the right ones?*" I yell, spittle flying off my trembling lips, and I grab the nearest sturdy thing. It's a fucking plastic water bottle, one of those reusable ones, and I throw it at his head. He deflects it with nothing more than a flick of his wrist without breaking eye contact.

He steps closer to me, and I swallow hard. "There's only one, Shannon." His head dips and I'm frozen in place, waiting and trembling.

"Wh-what is it?" I whisper, my heart thundering with the realization of the minimal space left between us. "What do you want from me?"

I'd damn near do anything at this point, just to get it to stop. To make sense.

That sharp-pointed talon scrapes down the side of my face again, tracing the same pattern as earlier, and I suppress another shiver.

“I want,” he murmurs, face mere millimeters from mine. “For you—” that finger trails down my neck, raising goosebumps in its wake, and I gasp, “—to *let me in*.”

His hand wraps around my throat, gripping tight enough that my eyes bulge and I claw at his wrist.

“For you to give me what’s mine,” he adds.

I fight against his hold, bucking into his body, every nerve ending in my own firing. Choking, I grasp at his pretty face, the scar carving his cheek rough against my palm.

“Fuck... you,” I gasp.

It just makes him smile wider. He drops his head, the tip of his nose dragging down the edge of my jawline and he’s close enough for even *me* to hear his deep inhale.

“Keep fighting me,” he murmurs, voice grating, and presses against me.

His hard cock drags against mine, and I barely manage to reel in the whimper that clogs my throat when I’m just as rigid against him.

“Godsdammit,” I press between gritted teeth, my body not my own as I grind my hips into him.

My hands scrabble at him, pushing and pulling, both desperate to get away and desperate for *more*. To feel something, anything, that’s fucking *real*.

To know for sure if I’ve lost it completely.

Or if it’s the lack of oxygen preceding an imminent death.

“Just kill me now,” I mutter, my cock flexing behind my zipper. “Get it over with.”

His grip on my throat tightens, immobilizing me, save for the way I tremble against him.

“Why would I kill you when I could *have you*?”

I jolt at sudden pressure over my groin, his palm pressing into my cock and drawing a rough gasp right out of me.

“Fuck,” I rasp, lips parting when he adds pressure with his hand.

There’s spit rolling down my chin, my heavy breathing filling the room, yet none of it matters when I stare into his heated gaze.

The room shrinks, my vision filling with spots, and all I can see is him. All I feel.

All I want.

Fuck, if I could shake the thoughts from my head, I would. This is all so illogical and consuming.

But isn't that the thing with desire? To feel yourself cave under the weight of something so surreal that it's difficult to believe it ever happened?

To know that there's something so profoundly encompassing simmering beneath your skin that only *you* can control it.

A hum of words fill my head, a mix of nonsensical phrases and signs, sentences I've written and heard. English and ASL funnel into one single thought that signals my hips to arch into his palm. Asking him for more. Begging for a release that feels like only he can give.

Eyes glimmering, seeming to throw sparks between us, his grin grows as he rubs me harder, holds me tighter and the scent of smoke fills what little air I can manage to inhale.

I'm so close to coming when I feel the tickle of something on my lip, though my nightmare hasn't closed the distance between us.

"Ask me," he whispers, voice barely audible, my gaze tracking the way his lips move around the words.

"How..." I choke out. "Do I... let you in?"

He slams me backwards, easing his grip on my throat enough for me to fill my lungs with a gasp, and suddenly I can feel him *everywhere*.

Like he's sprouted extra limbs to touch me with, I barely register the whisper of his touch at my waist in favor of the one clawing at my pants. He's curling around my ribs and holding me down, gripping my hair and my neck all at once. He's everywhere and nowhere, pulling sounds from my gut that should embarrass me.

But then he fills my mouth without moving his head, a rich taste bursting on my tongue that he caresses with something that doesn't seem human.

The front of my jeans tear under his desperation, his talons scratching denim and breaking skin until my cock springs free.

I drop my head, chin to my chest, and watch through the haze as drops of blood run down my waist and pool at the base of my shaft. It burns a little, but the sensation only adds to the building pressure in my balls.

Cursing, he finally grips me, his touch like a brand to my cock, and I cry out in a mix of pleasure and pain.

Those blackened digits encircle me and jerk me, spreading the blood around until I'm painted red.

Tendrils of smoke accompany his grip, moving like it's on just as much of a mission as he is to make me come, sprouting from his wrist and curling around my sac to pull it away from my body. It's like an extension of him that reaches back farther, disappearing where I can't see but *feel* it pressing into my taint.

"You will watch me—" His other hand, the actual one attached to his body, returns to my neck and guides my face back up to his, "—when I enter you."

I nod.

Fuck, if I don't nod, sheer desperation crackling under my skin.

Because that's exactly where he's managed to get—*under my skin*.

I succumb to his debilitating stare, relaxing my body as that whispered touch reaches between my cheeks and finds my hole.

He's still tugging on my cock, looking so deep into my eyes that I swear I'll never be the same after this, and his smoky extension presses into my entrance.

I moan and it grows inside me, stretching me wide open despite my pants, filling and petting my insides.

My entire body tingles with heat, blanketed by *him*, the vibration of filthy noises rolling off my vocal cords with every move he makes. Every in-sync stroke.

And when I come, I blow all over his chest, his groin, on a shout that shakes the windows.

He's slow to withdraw but when he does, it's an emptiness I've never known.

I'm spent, covered in blood and cum and residual tufts of smoke, the scent of it—*him*—clinging to my skin.

"I'll never be able to wash this off," I sign weakly, my throat aching, and when I look up in search of him, I find my living room empty.

Devoid of his searing gaze or warm hands, just the lingering crisp of burning in the air.

Even the sunlight crests through the window, bathing the room in light, taking over any shadows left behind.

And as I stand there, my cock hanging out and my skin coated in blood, I can't help but laugh.

It's manic and desperate and slightly depressing as it rumbles up my throat and bounces off the walls.

This is what it feels like, isn't it? To be completely off my rocker.

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CHAPTER 22

Shannon

THE GOOD THING ABOUT sitting alone at a bar is that I don't have to use my communication skills if I don't want to.

And right now, I don't.

Not after everything faded and the high of an orgasm drained any remaining justifications left in my head for what happened. How it happened. Where the hell the Henry of my fantasies went and why I was left with that *thing* instead.

After sitting at home, waiting for the next shoe to drop for way too long, I'd gotten in the truck and just... drove. I hadn't intended on a bar when I got behind the wheel, but it's about the only thing open and doing the trick to make me forget.

Or maybe that's the tequila clouding the fact that Henry is just gone and that there was a nightmare-worthy hallucination getting me off. It had to be the booze dulling the sensation of scrapes across my skin—easing the guilt that's slowly creeping in that I let him touch me.

I'm going to need some fucking therapy after this.

I signal the bartender for another round, and he comes with the bottle already in his grip.

He's big for a guy, scruff lining his jaw and hair on the longer side, his meaty fist taking up nearly the entire neck of the bottle as he pours my next drink.

“You’re Shannon, right?” I look around instinctively, searching for who he might be talking to on either side of me, but there’s only empty stools and neon signs.

“Uh, yeah,” I mutter, tipping the glass to my lips and ignoring the fact that his voice is a deep enough baritone that I normally have a hard time hearing. His, for some reason, seems to register just fine through the devices in my ears like someone else I know and I suppress another shiver. *Am I that desperate for touch?* “Wait, how’d you know that?”

He hums—another tone I’m surprised I can hear—and leans against the bar.

Pine and sugar rush my senses and I tip back the rest of my drink.

“Small town. New face.” He lifts a thick finger, pointing in the general vicinity of the side of my head. “Not many people our age with those.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s rude to point it out,” I mutter from behind my glass but instead of showing any kind of remorse, this guy leans closer. Strong arms prop himself against the deep mahogany wood so hard that it creaks beneath the pressure. Dark eyes stare right through me. “My husband learned a whole other language for you, but all I see is a sloppy fucking drunk.”

“Sloppy drunk? I’ve done nothing but sit there and—*wait*. Did you say *husband*?”

The color drains from my face because *of course* I’d meet my new friend’s partner on one of the worst days of my life, looking like I’ve been hit by a semi, and seemingly forgetting every social skill I’ve ever learned.

Clearly, I’ve stuck a nerve on top of it all, judging by the way he glowers at me.

“You’re Avery’s husband.”

He flashes his ring, a tattoo peeking out from under it. “Uh-huh.”

“And he told you about meeting me.”

“Yep.”

I swallow hard.

“He said he had a high IQ or something, that’s how he learned sign so fast.”

“My husband’s a genius, yes, but he’s also too fucking kind.” He sniffs the air, tilting his nose in my direction, nostrils flexing slowly and somehow I find that more intimidating than his dominating stare. “And you smell like a problem.”

My spine snaps straighter and I lift my hands in defense. “Whoa, now. I’m just glad to have found a pal that’s queer and sweet, and yeah, he’s cute —” *Gods, Shannon, shut up.* “—he’s nice! I mean, *he’s nice.*” Backing up only results in me bumping into the stool, which clatters to the ground, and Morgan rounds the bar. “*Morgan!* Your name is Morgan.”

I don’t know why that matters or how my brain thinks it might help, but I’m just about ready to make a run for it when my ass hits something solid and I freeze, pinned only by Morgan’s intense stare.

“And you’ve been avoiding meeting me for six months,” he growls.

“What? No.” I shake my head but don’t dare look away as the words tumble out of me. “I’ve only been here a few days. Two weeks tops. To be honest, the days have run together and I’ve lost some time but not *that* much.”

“Lost time?”

I swallow hard. “Yeah, look, I haven’t been avoiding you and I like your husband—” Morgan flinches like he’s about to lunge at me and I rush out, “—*as a friend, I swear*—but I don’t know. The move has fucked with me really bad, worse than anticipated, and being here just feels like... I don’t know. *Off.* And I’m having nightmares and—”

Gods, stop fucking talking, Shannon.

“Nightmares?”

“Uh... yeah. Hallucinations, weird fucking memories—” *Pull up, Shannon, fuck.* “Yeah anyway. I’m sorry.”

I stick my hand out between us, my other still up in the air in surrender, and Morgan just stares at my offering like I’ve sprinted a leg from my palm.

Then he inhales deeply, lip curling and I return my hands to their position of surrender.

“You smell the smoke?” he asks, his dark eyes assessing me *hard*. Like a predator does right before it decides if its opposition is friend or prey.

Letting out a deep sigh and accepting whatever fate comes next, I drop my arms to my sides and I nod. “I can’t *stop* smelling it—or seeing it. *Fucking tasting it.*”

Gods, do I taste it.

Rich, with a tang on my tongue that hasn’t subsided no matter how much I work it over with my spit. Not even the tequila has dulled it like I hoped for and I’ve just been enjoying the taste of smoked liquor since I sat down here.

“Did you let him in?” he asks, drawing my attention back to his bearded face.

My shoulders slump. “I couldn’t help it.”

The admission feels heavy on my tongue, the insanity of it all playing over and over in my head, and yet I still can’t seem to make any sense of it.

Why me? Why now?

What the fuck did I let in?

It all points to existence of the paranormal—or that I’ve finally lost my marbles. Neither of which I’m prepared to accept but as Morgan guides me back to the bar, his whole vibe shifting from overbearing to somewhat defeated, I can’t help but wonder.

Just because I can’t accept it, doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

Silently, Morgan slides another pour my way, then takes one for himself. He throws it back with a hiss and immediately pours another.

“Gods, this isn’t good,” I murmur and follow suit.

He eyes me for a moment, then downs another shot.

“My family has been here for a long time,” he finally says. “But not as long as other things.” The way he words it raises the hair on the back of my neck. “My kin flocked here for a reason. They always told the stories of land and privacy, but there’s something more to it.”

I lean against the bar, listening intently and waiting for more to come out of his mouth. An explanation, a reason—fucking anything to help put things into perspective.

“There’s a line, some manage to straddle it, but a line between human and... *other*. These woods—the mountains—make that line almost nonexistent.”

Blinking, I grip my glass tighter. “Say it,” I mutter. “Just fucking say it.”

“His legend is one that people tell over a campfire in the dead of night, one that leaves you trembling.”

My stomach drops out my ass, and sparks dance across my skin.

“A scary story?” I whisper, too afraid to give it more credit than that. “A bedtime tale.”

Morgan tosses back his next drink and slams the glass down so violently that it cracks.

Finally, he nods. “But all tales start with some root of the truth—a bear shitting in the woods, a bird made of flames.”

A flash of that singed feather fills my mind and I swallow hard. “Made of flames...”

Nodding, Morgan leans close. “A bird made of flames that burned this whole town to ashes almost two hundred years ago.”

My breath feels shallow, too shallow, and I ask the one question burning the forefront of my mind. “Why?”

He slams another shot, near breathless when he answers. “To find his mate.”

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CHAPTER 23

Shannon

I NOTE THAT MORGAN hadn't said lover.

Or boyfriend or girlfriend or simply partner.

Mate.

The kind that lasts a lifetime, maybe even many, and wields an undying connection between two souls.

A tethered string between hearts.

Animalistic in its intensity, undeniable in its essence.

The words rolls around in my brain, echoing over and over.

It's not until I find myself standing in the center of town, staring up at the marbled jaw of *Ilios*, that I register the scar. It cuts down his brow and below his eye, softened only by time.

He burned the town in 1829; collapsed the mines in 1941.

And now ... he wants *me*.

It's unfathomable and yet, I respectfully brush aside the trinkets and offerings left behind to make enough room to stand on the ledge. It's just a short wall that surrounds him, elevating him, and it's not nearly close enough to the stone-cold eyes I'm desperate to speak into.

Shuffling my feet around, I hone in on the crumbs atop a napkin that should have blown away in the wind by now. But it sits there, the broken cookie missing, and my jaw jumps with its clench.

This is ridiculous, but I'm desperate.

With no way to call for him, the *real* him, I climb up the statue of my tormentor until I'm level with his face.

Deep set eyes stare back, the stone cold against me as I hook my legs around his waist and cling to the solid strands of his hair to hold myself steady.

For a moment, one ever so brief, the organ in my chest stutters at the proximity. The intimacy of wrapping my body around another and feeling stiffness against me.

But it's the same feeling I'd have if it was *any* body between my legs. My attraction doesn't begin or end with some god-complex toting, red-headed fable of some backward town that's desperate to explain the events of the past.

He's just a made up legend.

A man with an ego.

"Fuck you," I grind out. "You don't own me or this place."

And then, I spit right in his stone face.

I watch the glob roll down his smooth cheek, cresting over his cupid's bow to gather at his bottom lip.

Nothing happens.

I don't know what I expected, but all I feel now is humiliated.

My ears burn as I glance around, somewhat hoping I'll see him lurking on the street like last time, but instead I find several townspeople looking on in horror.

"Nothing to see here."

Climbing down from the statue feels like walking through a crowd naked, but I scramble to do so before someone calls the cops.

Imagine explaining *that* to law enforcement.

"Sorry, officer, I thought I was saving the town and myself from the evil that lives in the woods."

I snort and brush my hands off when I land on solid ground, the onlookers rushing away to appear busier than they are.

"*Is he really evil, though?*" the tiny voice in the back of my mind wonders. I shove it back down, and make my way back to the truck.

Pain shoots across my forehead as I drive into the fading dusk, and I vaguely recall that I probably shouldn't be behind the wheel before the sensation subsides to a dull ache at the base of my skull.

I rub at it absently, squeezing the muscles to relax them as I pull up to the house.

The drive was a blur, yet another thing done on autopilot, and I curse myself for not paying more attention. Though, it's hard to focus on anything when my head pounds and the weight of the day, the last few weeks—*months?*—hangs around my neck like an anvil. It drags me down until I'm collapsing sideways on the mattress in my bedroom, eyes drooping, clothes still intact.

Time passes at a crawl, my thoughts wandering but not settling on any one thing enough to rest, and that's when I feel it—the low hum of something in the back of my mind.

It sounds vaguely like a voice, one I recognize, calling my name.

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CHAPTER 24

Ilios

HE IS SO PLIABLE when he rests.

Easy to move, to *manipulate*.

To watch as he slumbers atop the blankets, covered by the useless fabric of his clothes that prevent me from admiring the slopes and angles of his body.

There's sharp edges and rounded corners, slowly lifting with each of his steady breaths.

It's like unwrapping a gift, to remove the wrapping so slowly as to not disturb him. And not those silly offerings that the town leaves littering my statue, but one worthy of my admiration.

My patience.

I will not harm him, but I cannot resist the perky roundness of his backside when he leaves it arched out for me like this. He *must* know what it has done to me.

I would swear that he slumbers like this on purpose. Silently calling to me in slumber, despite his mind's rejection of me when awakened. His body knows as mine does.

Finally, I peel back the final soft layer of his underclothes, exposing his cheeks to the chilled air of the room. They pebble beneath my touch as I trace over their curves, bunching and warming the skin in my palms.

He groans, a restful sound that plays like music in my ears and I knead him again.

His breath is soft, and he bends one knee, drawing his leg up and spreading himself wide. Smatterings of hair coat his skin, soft to the touch, darkened in spots like the curls on his head. It thickens where his round backside meets at the crease, traveling down his spread legs.

The sight of his puckered hole beckons me, saliva collecting on my tongue.

It's like I can already taste him, and he's so, so sweet. An addiction I will willingly partake in until it ruins me.

He has already ruined you.

I nip at the hazy air over my shoulder, teeth snapping audibly, and it dissipates quickly, reforming solidly at my hip.

Then let me be ruined.

Diving between Shannon's cheeks, I lap at his hole, his salty sweetness sparking along my tongue. It elicits a groan of my own, one that must have vibrated his skin perfectly to extract such a delicious whimper from his throat.

Yet he does not wake.

He won't until will it so.

I take my time licking over his hole, softening the already malleable muscles, savoring the taste of him filling my mouth.

He lets me penetrate him easily, stretching over my tongue, widening perfectly for me.

Obscene licking and slurping fills the room, a filthy cacophony of desire accompanied by his muted vocal responses.

"He enjoys this," I murmur into his flesh, nipping at his cheek before plunging my tongue back inside him.

Wet and spread perfectly, I spear him with my mouth, edging him closer and closer to the precipice. I can smell the arousal leaking from his body, soaking into the blankets beneath him, encouraging me onward.

The urge to taste it, to claim him, wars inside me once more.

I cannot resist either.

His hips roll beneath me, seeking friction that only *I* can give him.

And I must.

It is time.

Kneeling between his spread legs, I gather a mouthful of saliva and spit it over his hole, just as he did my statue's face.

He has no idea that I watched him then, just as he has no clue that it's me doing this to him now. The human won't remember, but I will.

I notch myself along his entrance, my own shaft rigid and purple, and I push the soaked tip into his body. The feel of his velvety warmth surrounds me, swallows me, and I cannot hold back any longer.

Plunging deep, I don't stop until I meet his cheeks, the feel of him almost too much to bear.

His spine arches for me, his lips parting in a quiet gasp.

It's like watching art in real time, the red splotches blooming on his cheeks and spreading across his back. The freckles there vanish in the rosy hue of his flushed skin. His muscles, both relaxed and tense.

Pleasure. Pure *pleasure*.

He clenches around me when I trace a faint talon down the curve of his body, as if silently begging me for more.

And then he voices it, the singular word thick on his accented tongue as his arms move beneath him, speaking to me with his hands in ways I yearn to understand. "More..."

"I willingly take it," I murmur, blanketing his body with my own. My heated flesh slides against him, making him so slick with sweat that I dart my tongue out for a taste. The tang of salt bursts on my tastebuds, a hint of rich smoke hovering just below it, and I moan at our combined flavor. That our scents would meld so soon.

It drives me to madness, a certain sentence to allow this human to destroy me.

You swore never again.

I did, and I meant it.

But that was before Shannon strode into *my* town, took control of my every waking thought, and let me in to wreak havoc on his psyche. He has consumed me as much as I intend to consume him.

I'll die a thousand deaths to do it all over again.

A harumph echoes in the back of my mind but there's no time to argue when I'm inside my beloved, surrounded by his silky heat that melds to my length as if he were made for me. His muscles squeeze my shaft, encouraging movement, and I oblige by sliding mostly free from his heat.

And then slam back inside him again.

He takes it all, his body finding pleasure in the roughness, and it all feels...

Like perfection.

Friction of flesh on flesh ignites sparks beneath my skin as I thrust, tingling me from head to toes, the smoky haze filling the room around us in pulsing waves.

The sounds our bodies make are melodical and vulgar, dampened only by the haze that blankets us, and I feel my control slipping. My movements are less fluid, jittery. My hold on Shannon's mind is weakening.

He could wake at any moment.

Awareness taps at the base of my skull, a subtle reminder of the things my anatomy does when cresting such pleasure, and I shorten the strokes at which I enter him. My barb throbs from its hiding place beneath my shaft, requiring all of my power to prevent myself from piercing him with it.

I ache to release it, to feel it puncture his skin and mark him as mine. To make us one until my essence flows from his hole unencumbered.

I succumb to the thoughts that my beloved stirs inside me with a roar, leaving more of myself for him to find once he wakes.

Withdrawing quickly, I watch, enraptured, as his hole flexes around air, begging for my shaft yet again as he finds his own release in the covers.

Serves him right.

Chuckling, his body winking at me as I dress myself, I release the mental hold I've barely kept on his mind.

I cannot see what he does without joining him in slumber, but I can direct the paths his thoughts may lead.

Torture. Confusion. Sex.

The latter makes taking my pleasure in him like this easier.

He stirs, groaning deep as he stretches out his bare legs and hugs his arms around his pillow. For a moment, I watch him nuzzle the fabric, softened by what my actions have given him. A peace that leaves his skin coated in raised bumps, and his chest expanding fully.

Then he jolts, realization settling in.

There's no need for me to be quiet as I make my exit in the shadows, because my beloved human can't hear a single step.

CHAPTER 25

Shannon

HE WAS FUCKING HERE, I can feel it.

My muscles ache with a deliciousness I can't think about as I flail around in the covers, naked and disoriented—but I'm sure I passed out in my clothes.

The blankets tangle around me, coming along for the ride as I jump to my feet next to the bed.

I squirm at something cold smearing across my hip.

Swiping it away, my hand comes back covered in cum. *My cum.* That's still leaking from my tip like the wet dream I was having was real.

Mother fuck.

The room—hell, the entire *house*—feels charged as I wrap the sheet around my waist and search it for any presence, any clues on how long ago he was here.

Nothing.

No bodies hiding in the corners of the rooms or odd figures in the shadows.

I can't even find a trace that Henry has been home. He's just... vanished.

I should... call the cops. Right?

"Fuck."

My phone is also missing, discarded somewhere among the articles of my wardrobe instead of on the charger next to my hearing aids—*fuck.*

Those didn't make it to the charger either.

Cursing again, I yank on a pair of shorts and get my hearing aids into the case before I start crawling around on the floor in search of my phone. It's not until I look under the bed that I find it laying against the wall, and I'm half under the bed by the time I reach it.

Even when I do, I sit back on the mattress and stare at it with a crushing realization.

The time illuminates back at me, mocking me.

It's 3 am. Who the fuck am I gonna call?

My thoughts scream Ghostbusters but my heart weeps in reality.

If it was three in the afternoon, I still don't know who I'd reach out to. And what would I even say? That I'm having a mental breakdown? A complete lapse in my faculties?

That I had a fucking nightmare that made me come?

My so-called friends haven't bothered to speak to me since I left, not that they would have ever believed me. My estranged family has no idea that I even left the state. And now my partner is just... *gone*... yet I can't find it in me to care that he is.

The blackened screen blurs in my grip.

I am completely alone.

Sought after by some fucked up town legend my imagination has made up.

No one would believe me anyway.

Just as there's no one here to look sidelong at me as a manic laugh tumbles out of me, squeezing tears out along with it.

I'm not certain how long I stay like that, alternating between laughing and crying, but when the phone in my palm vibrates, I nearly throw the thing across the room.

But the name flashing on the screen urges my shaking fingers to answer it.

A video call opens, my side dark as shit, and I hurry to wipe my face as best as I can before sliding into frame.

Though the caller is already speaking judging by the captions that appear faster than I'm prepared to read.

"Hold," I manage to say, though it get picked up as *old*, and I scroll to read the text.

‘Hey, sorry this is Morgan on Avery’s phone. I think I didn’t think you’d answer a random number if you could and I promised him I check on you in the morning. I rushed. You rushed out really fast yesterday and when I told him he almost Old went after you. But I didn’t get to fit. Oh shit sorry you said hold. Oh wait.’

Rolling my eyes at the absolutely shit attempt captions do at their job, I reach over and flick on the bedside lamp, then show the blinking red light of my hearing aids.

When I turn the camera to show my face, I look just as bad as I feel.

Morgan’s kind, brown eyes squint and for a moment, I can easily see why Avery fell in love with him.

He’s hot. Thick in all the way that matter and sports a beard he clearly takes time to care for. Though it’s the eyes that really tell the truth.

But then he opens his mouth and starts talking faster than the closed captions can keep up with. It just sits there with a hyphen as his mouth moves, mustache making it impossible for me to read his lips.

I must huff out loud enough for it to be picked up because his brows dip and he moves the phone closer to his face.

Holding up a finger, I end the call and drop my location to him. If he wants to check on me, he can just come over. It would be so much easier than reading the garbage speech to text and if I’m lucky, he’ll bring Avery with him to ease things along.

Because while I don’t expect accommodations, it *is* nice to not have to struggle.

Life is fucking hard enough without being the only hard of hearing, or deaf, person in most situations. Let alone being the only one in the room *and* no one bothering to type up something or sign the words when my devices die.

My chest cracks open and warm wetness tracks down my face all over again.

Gods I’m a fucking mess.

I don’t even bother swiping it away this time when the doorbell alert flashes beside the light switch on the wall. Or when a meaty hand pushes open my bedroom door. And definitely not when the hands of a worried twink run all over me.

He brings the scent of pumpkin spice with him, bags under his eyes and furrowed brows.

“You look like shit,” I weakly sign to him and he huffs.

“I guess I dressed for the occasion. What are you doing?” he signs instead of *what’s wrong*, and my eyes get wetter.

“Thanks for coming,” I sign back, my movements small and clipped. “I’m fine, physically.”

Avery taps my temple with the questions tugging on his brows down. “Mentally.”

I blow a raspberry.

He chuckles but recovers quickly and makes himself comfortable beside me in the bed. Morgan is hovering hugely in the doorway, watching and waiting for either of us to clue him in to something. I can tell that there’s a big piece of him that hates how Avery’s shoulder brushes mine but he doesn’t mention it. I’m glad he doesn’t.

The connection is the only thing that’s managing to both hold me together and threatening to tear me apart.

“We’re going to help,” Avery tells me with his hands.

Nodding absently, I am only slightly filled with disbelief.

How do I know that this isn’t an illusion, too?

The thought has me lifting my glasses to dig the heels of my palms into my eye sockets hard enough that colors explode behind my eyelids, bursts of orange and red.

“There’s got to be some indication,” I sign and Avery waves in front of my face, telling me to explain. “A clue that I’m not making it all up.”

He still doesn’t get it because he’s *beside* me and not in front of me like he should be to properly see my hands, but I don’t make a fuss over it. He’s learning, and that’s more than anyone else has ever even tried in my life.

If this is a dream ... do I really want to wake up?

If I do, will I lose ... this? Whatever this is with Avery and Morgan?

As I climb off the bed and offer to make tea for these two, I can’t help but feel like the answer to that is a resounding *no*.

CHAPTER 26

Shannon

THE SUNLIGHT STRAINS THROUGH the slivers in the curtains and yet, I can't shake the feeling of eyes on me. Steam has long since faded from our mugs, my eyelids beyond drooping, but I refuse to fall asleep again.

It's unreasonable, I know that, but after hearing the rest of the story behind the legend of the Firebird, it's the only thing that made sense. At least ... until we find a way to break his focus on me.

Which requires one of two options: Either I give in and let him have me, or we find a way to kill it.

"You think he'll find something?"

Morgan sighs, the crackle of it just loud enough for my devices to pick up, and joins me in peeking out the window.

"I know he will, I just ..."

His gaze drifts somewhere behind me and a pang of jealousy slams into my chest.

Avery is slumped over his laptop, one eye barely open and hands clutching his mug like it's a lifeline. And yet, Morgan looks at him like he placed the whole damn universe, not just the moon.

They're disgustingly adorable.

I sigh and settle in next to him. "Okay, Sammy, what'dya got?"

He snickers and flips me a middle finger before turning the laptop between us. "He's the smarter of the two, so I'll take it. I have two

guesses?” His voice inflects like it’s a question and I raise a brow. “Either a tulpa—which would be hella hard to take down without somehow convincing the whole town of the same thing—or a version of a Bennu.”

“What? No.” A deity from Egyptian times? There’s no way. Every time I’ve seen him, he appears... I don’t know. Human? Normal? *Modern?*

My face must convey skepticism because Avery leans into his explanation. “I said a *version* of them, as in something similar. If legend says that he’s the reason for all these events over the years, imagine what things he did that we *don’t* know about.”

Gods, this conversation is making my head hurt as much as the hearing aids.

“So you’re saying he’s a... myth. But real. Like fucking vampires or shifters.”

Avery gaze flicks to Morgan for a beat before coming back to mine. “Something like that.”

Groaning, I slump back into the cushions and lift my glasses to rub my eyes.

Even if I did believe it’s real and not some figment of my overactive imagination—that this whole scene isn’t just some show I’m putting on in my head—what’s the worst thing that can happen if I lean into it? I look like a fool?

I already climbed that statue and spit on it.

But if Morgan and Avery are really here, and really believe this shit ...

“Then how the fuck do I get rid of it?”

“That’s the spirit,” Avery coos, leaning back into the couch to curl his legs under him and balance his laptop on his thighs. “Do you have anything made of iron?”

I look at him slowly, blinking. “Iron?”

“No? Okay, then I guess we’re setting a really big fucking fire.”

CHAPTER 27

Shannon

FIRE. ICE. IRON.

There's a whole list of things that Avery managed to find that might weaken what he believes is a god from the era of pyramids and pharaohs, but I got a glimpse of this screen a few too many times.

I don't really want to *hurt* the thing. I just want to be left alone.

It's the only justification for why it's the dead of night, and I—the jackass that I am—am walking into the forest.

Alone.

Nothing but my backpack and a flashlight accompanying me into the deep darkness.

Morgan and Avery demanded that I rest when they left to gather supplies because who the fuck has hot heat and anything made of iron sitting around the house anymore, but the second they were out of sight, I started scheming.

Besides, some fresh air and shit might do me some good.

Hiking up the trail I found online, surrounded by the wilderness, I find myself slowing my pace. There's bushes of flowers growing between the trunks of trees, filling in the space with crawling towers of deep colors among the green-spiked leaves.

They seem... familiar.

And the deeper I go into the woods, the thicker they become. It seems illogical because the canopy of trees grows denser as well, blocking out the moonlight that seems to still shimmer off their petals. The blooms are dark, maybe a deep purple, and I can't help but redirect the beam of my flashlight in a way that keeps them visible.

The air is chilled and carries with it the damp earthy scent that clings to my skin. It reminds me of the drive I took to get here, the summer months completely missed, and I force a breath.

I have no idea what I'm doing. Just as I didn't back then.

But the farther I trek into the unknown, the more I feel the pressure in my chest lessen.

It shouldn't be, but it is.

So here I am, following that invisible pull towards something that *feels* greater than anything I can comprehend, one step at a time.

Up ahead, the flowers part, their foliage making way for a fork in the path, and I just know.

Go that way.

Hitching my backpack higher on my shoulder, I carefully step through the greenery, taking care not to disturb the flowers too much. The last thing I want is to trip into some fae king lair or some shit and find myself ass up for yet another out-of-this-realm-being.

Imagine that. Being between two cursed fucks.

If I make it out of this alive, that's going to be the next plot I write ab—

"Oh, shit," I hear myself murmur, my own voice making me flinch.

There's a sudden opening in the woods, a pathway cutting up the middle, and beyond that ...

A sprawling mansion with a wraparound porch that looks like it belongs in a historic downtown—with the rest of the intricate buildings—and not smack dab in the middle of the woods. Alone—calling to me like I belong here.

The door is unlocked when I try the knob—*total white chick in a horror movie move, Shannon*—and I push my way inside.

Guess I'm dying first today.

The foyer lights up the moment I enter, candle-lined walls flaring with each step.

Cobwebs sear and float off in ash, fluttering through the air before disappearing completely. It's as if they were never there, leaving nothing

but a clean foyer in its wake.

Advancing down the long hallway, its walls and marbled floors glittering in the firelight, I notice the intricate detailing carved into the stone holding it all together. Pillars set into the walls every few feet hoist up the structure with flowers and flame-etched surfaces. Feathers and arching branches. I reach out and touch one, a tiny bird with incredible tail feathers flowing below its ass perched upon the branches, the faint markings of a mane etching chipped away by time on his head.

A stillness washes over me.

I should be terrified.

Embarrassed, at the least, having walked right into someone else's home so freely.

There's just something about it that feels like... *being* home. Like taking the first breath after having held it too long, the first sip of cool water on a warm summer day, cookies, fresh from the oven and still soft.

It's actually pebbling my skin, and my nipples.

A grand staircase curves up to the second floor on my right, a massive fireplace to the left, both of which seem oddly familiar.

Maybe they're close to settings I've used in my writing. Or maybe this is one of the places I've been in my dreams.

I don't have much time to assess it, because the scent of something freshly burned trickles up my nostrils.

"It's been awhile since I've had a guest."

Though faint, the sound of his voice still makes me jolt.

I whirl around, my hand clutching my pumping chest, and there he is.

Eyes of fire locked right on me, that jagged scar running down his face identical to the statue.

"I-Ilios," I choke out, my throat thick from lack of use.

His lids flutter shut and his nostrils flare. The groan that follows is nothing short of sinful and the tight buds beneath my shirt tingle.

"In the flesh, my beloved. Seems you've found me after all."

It takes everything in me not to tremble at the smooth, sultry tone of his voice, warm enough to turn me into a puddle right there on the shining floors.

The pull to him is so strong that I can't resist inching closer, even as I scowl at him. "What are you?"

That incinerating gaze tracks every step I take, no matter how small they are, a hunger hidden in the glow of his irises.

“Not like you,” he answers.

Snorting, I find myself closer still. Only a few feet separate us—a distance that my legs seem to want to close of their own accord. “Obviously.”

“You don’t accept this answer.”

“Ha!” I throw my arms up. “I do not. So what the fuck are you? What do you want with someone like me?”

His brows scrunch, pulling that scar taut across his face. “Someone like you?”

“Now who’s got all the fucking questions.” It comes out weak. Breathless. Barely audible for me, but there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s heard it. “I want you to leave me alone.”

A smirk tips up his lips. “Do you now?”

It’s like I’m under a spell, drawn to him in a way I’ve never felt before. A magnetic pull deep in my core that reaches out for him no matter how hard I attempt to fight it.

“What have you done to me?” I whisper, the heat radiating off him almost too much to bear.

“Shown you the truth, beloved.”

One clawed hand flattens against my chest, right over where my heart pounds wildly, the other caressing my jaw, sharp tips scraping tender skin.

“What truth?”

His eyes flare, shining back at me like flames flicking against the night sky, and I find myself falling into it. Ensnared by it.

There’s an answer in his words but they’re too warbled for my brain to interpret as the room around us spins and transforms, but I can’t seem to tear my gaze away from his. It takes him using his taloned fingers to turn my head for me to scan our surroundings.

“What the fuck is this?”

Smoke swirls around us, fogging over the floor and walls, encompassing the both of us, pushing us closer. His chest touches mine, brushing me with each of his long breaths.

It’s hypnotic.

Disorienting.

I hate it and love it simultaneously.

He rotates me by my shoulders until my back is to his front, and I suppress a shiver at the feeling of his talons gripping my hips.

It's not gentle when he yanks me back against him, the ridge of his erection pinned between us.

Teeth sink into my neck next, the sting radiating from the bite straight to my cock, and I hiss. My hands instinctively drop to cover his, but instead of tearing away from him, I hold him tighter.

"What are you doing to me, Ilios?"

The hum on his breath warms my entire back with its intensity, sharp fingers teasing below the hem of my shirt. He goes for my waistband next, dipping below it with a scorching touch.

A touch that feels familiar. Real.

And I *want* it.

But I *hate* it.

"Tsk tsk tsk," Ilios's voice clicks next to my ear where my hearing aids can pick it up clear as day. Maybe he's doing it louder than normal to make sure I do, and the thought of that... It makes my stomach flip. "It's not what I'm doing, beloved, but what I've *already* done."

A whimper presses from my lips, one I can't contain, like my body is no longer my own.

His hands are all over me next, a flurry of movement—some scathing, some gentle—that tears at my clothes and exposes my pebbled skin to the smoky air. To *him*.

To the firelight that roars to life in the fireplaces surrounding us, the candles that burn with wicks larger than their waxy bodies and leave trails of soot and singe up the walls.

A part of me registers how dangerous the flames must be, but a larger part can't possibly tear myself away from him.

"You came to me because you need me." His voice grates over me as we tumble to the floor, its frigid surface nothing against the heat rising between us. "Because you've *always* needed me."

His lips on my throat are like a brand, the weight of him settling over top of me.

I give little resistance to the hands that burn me and the talons that score me.

"I don't need anyone," I bite back, finding that little bit of fire in my belly, and grab a fistful of his flowing hair. I yank him back enough to look

in his wicked eyes. “Especially not *you*.”

Whisps of smoke curl around my wrist, increasing the pressure until it feels like a whole ass hand ripping my fingers from his hair and pinning my hands above my head.

“Ilios,” I growl, jerking against his hold.

He grins, another set of grey tethers sprouting from his hips and wrapping around my knees.

I’m spread open and held down, bare knees pressed to my ribs as Ilios settles between my thighs.

Fighting seems futile when I’m trembling *for* it.

“I know what you need,” he purrs, another feather light touch caressing my crack and pressing against my hole. “I’ve always known what you need.”

“I don’t—*ugh!*—” I yank against his hold, pulling through the smoke that tethers me to him only for it to reform and band thicker around my limbs. “I don’t *need* you!”

He leans in close enough for our noses to brush and when he speaks, his mouth doesn’t move a muscle.

“*Don’t you, beloved?*”

The sound of his voice penetrates my mind, clear as my own thoughts, and an all too familiar pain shoots across my forehead. I strain against it, unable to stop the cry that rips from my throat.

“This could be easier,” Ilios coos aloud, his words accompanied by a clicking hum in the back of my mind. “All you have to do...” Talons scrape down my neck, breaking skin enough to sting but not enough to put me out of my misery and I thrash against him. “Is just let me *in*.”

Pressure at my hole increases as he speaks, emphasizing his words, and my dick swells involuntarily.

Maybe he can sense it, or maybe I let out a sound I didn’t hear at the way he circles me, but his actual hand slips up my chest and wraps around my throat.

Gripping me roughly, his smoke holding me down, his body poised at my entrance, I can resist as much as I want to. But deep down...

I feel every bit of him as if he’s an extension of myself.

So close and yet not close enough.

It’s dark and dirty and fucked up.

But he makes me feel things. Shit I've never understood about myself rushing to the surface.

I tremble in his hold, a potent mix of adrenaline and attraction swirling in my gut.

Sweat coats my skin as I fight against him, yet it pebbles beneath his every touch. My nipples peak at his dominance, my hole clenching beneath his caress.

I'm not sure when the panic gave way to submission, but when his smoky extensions flip me onto my stomach, I don't even blink at the blunt pressure against me.

In fact, I'm *aching* for it.

He still pins me down, his smoke wrapping around my neck as he takes a fistful of my ass in each hand and spreads me open, exposing my hole to the searing heat of his cock.

And then he spits on me.

The glob smacks right over my hole and slides down my crack to drip off my dangling sac.

"That's for my statue."

My eye twitches at the shooting pain that fills my brow but he doesn't let me focus on it long.

His cock notches against me, hands hot against my arched up hips. His smoke swirls around my wrists and knees in near invisible restraints and *finally*, he sinks inside me.

My rim flexes around his massive head as he pushes deeper, popping him inside me. His girth feels like it's splitting me in half and I scream.

With one last Herculean effort, I rip my hands from him, nails digging at the marbled floor without purchase—but he's stronger, anchored around my lower half and taking me inch by delirious inch.

"You can fight me," he murmurs. *"But I know you can take it."*

And fuck if that doesn't have me collapsing against the cold floor to grasp at the sharp ache blossoming in my head.

But even as his smoke consumes me again, pulling one arm behind my back, I can't help but give in.

To submit.

To feel the breath of relief buried beneath the fight that my body finally sets free.

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CHAPTER 28

Ilios

I CAN FEEL IT.

The moment that my beloved relinquishes his resistance of me and presses his face to the floor.

His backside is arched up just for me, his body craving what only mine can give him, in the perfect offering.

My body responds in kind, leaking enough slick to ease my glide into his hot channel.

I drive into him until our groins meet, my ribbed sac against his smooth one, and euphoria ignites beneath my skin.

It tingles, both over my body and in my mind, sharpening my senses.

I can smell the musk of the floor as he does. Feel his hot skin against my palms. Taste the bitter smoke that laps at his spreading lips and slips into his mouth.

“*Gods,*” he chokes out around me, his hole clenching me tightly before relaxing. “I fucking hate you.”

Humming faintly, I withdraw to the tip of my length and fist the bare base. The barb sitting at the root is already peeking out of its home, aching and prepared to sink inside him and make us one.

But as much as I wish to take him, I believe he wants it more.

“Hate what you’ve done to me.” Shannon’s growls swiftly become moans as he arches over my tip, pressing himself onto my shaft instead of jerking

away from it. "Hate how you make me feel."

He takes several inches on his own, and I allow it even as he continues cursing me in his mind.

"You can't hide it," I tell him. "*Not from me.*"

His groan of pain at my tapping in his mind eases into pleasure, a moan escaping his lips and he bounces back on the half of my length that's still inside him.

"You make me feel crazy," he pants, rocking into me and taking more, his rim stretched tight around my length. "Like I'm losing my mind."

My lips stretch into a wide, breathless smile.

"I do not need you lucid, beloved. I need you *willing.*"

Stretching over him, I press his face to the floor.

"I got it," he growls, backbone arching. "*Let you in.*"

And with a guttural, growling moan, Shannon's hole swallows my shaft to the root.

Then he relinquishes his mind.

I feel everything and nothing all at once, like the stitching between galaxies that holds it all together with a show of power and force.

I am both stretched to the heavens and held down to the rings of hell.

It's torture. It's *pleasure.*

My barb shoots from the crease below my shaft to sink into the meaty flesh between his sac and where our bodies join together.

His echoed cries roll down my backbone, leaving canyons only he can occupy and I fill him with the essence of me.

"You are mine," I tell him as his hole contracts around me, his body succumbing to me. "Say it."

"I-I—" He cries out once more, his back arching and body twitching. "I'm coming!"

Fingers scrabbling for purchase, Shannon finds none to hold except for me, my smoke, as he convulses, his length drooling all over the floor.

"I fucking hate you," he finally says and I relish in the breathlessness of it. "I'll never be *yours.*"

"Your words mean nothing."

In time, he will see the consequences of his actions, the result of his existence. He will understand his life is tied to my own, our paths meant to cross at every possible opportunity.

He will be mine, wholly. And I, his.

“Rest, beloved. Time is short now, and my desire is long.”

Jerking against my hold, he hisses at the movement of my barb that pierces his skin. “I fucking can’t with you. What the fuck do you mean *rest?*”

Clicking my tongue, warmth explodes over my shoulders at his protest, and I fight the urge to fluff up in showmanship. Seems even the wings scarred into my back wish to have their go at him. To be seen and touched by him.

Another time, I coo mentally and will my smoke to release him.

He’s restless until I withdraw, wincing at the ache my body leaves behind.

“I’ll tend to this,” I tell him as I drag a finger down the new puncture in his flesh, mixing his blood with my release.

Shannon jerks away. “Tend to what?” His fingers flutter down to touch himself, feeling the evidence of our mating. My chest inflates, my shaft lengthening once more and yet I pause at his pained expression.

“The result of our actions. My saliva doesn’t heal like some of my brethren, but a salve will do.”

The beautiful rosy color drains from Shannon’s face, his legs clamping closed. “Brethren? There’s more of you?”

Pursing my lips, I climb to wobbly legs. “No. And yes.”

“Dear gods what have I done?” He hides his face in his hands. “I just fucked my nightmare.”

“You didn’t fuck me, I mounted you.”

“Jesus Christ.”

He tips off the spectacles perched on his face and pinches the bridge of his nose.

He’s irritated.

Nodding, I absentmindedly pet my smoke that curls between my fingers, its purr echoing in the back of my mind.

He will see soon.

With that, I leave him on the floor of my foyer to wallow, to process, in search of the salve for his aches.

He is gone when I return.

CHAPTER 29

Shannon

THE REMAINING SCRAPS OF my clothes catch on every branch, vine, and bush as my legs pump beneath me. I trip my way through the woods, feet catching on roots and rock as they pound the dirt beneath me.

Moonlight paints the brush enough to make the shadows seem deeper, scarier, and my heart thumps as hard as my footsteps. Sweat joins the dew dampening my skin, the wind whipping around me in chilled gusts.

This was all a terrible idea.

Coming out here alone, spitting on the statue. Going to the fucking bar instead of just staying at home with my characters, typing away when they choose to speak to me and hoping that this story is the one I'll be known for.

Moving to Bearcreek.

Coming here and pretending like everything is fine and that it'll all work out the way that I did...

It's all been one big fucking nightmare I don't think I'll ever wake up from. At this point, I'm not even sure I want whatever is on the other side of this fucked up turn of events.

Only the gods know what's waiting for me when I do.

And they are some angry, vengeful fucks.

A soft mist coats my skin, chilling me further and my throat's dry from the rapid breaths that scrape out from my chest.

It's been... *Fuck*... I'm not even sure how long I've been running for my life but the trees seem closer together. The shadows denser. The canopy above too thick for even the weak slivers of moonlight to penetrate through.

I can't slow.

My pace is the only reason I have the distance I do between me and whatever was waiting for me with the legend of Bearcreek, but my head start will only last so long. He's been resourceful so far, in my head, and fucking with me at every turn.

Like he's been two steps ahead of me the whole time, waiting for me to catch up, ready to go yet another round.

I'm not even certain this isn't part of whatever it is that he's been doing to me.

This game he's been playing with me.

Watching me from a distance, teasing me, terrifying me, and invading my mind.

My ass still aches from the way he claimed me, my taint smarting with each step that puts distance between us.

A distance that ... stretches taut in my chest and makes it harder to breathe.

Thick branches catch my arm and throws me off beat, slicing into my skin and I jerk away. The rocks below my feet are slick enough that my soles slip, my feet going different directions and despite my attempt to catch myself on anything I can get ahold of, I feel the bark and leaves slide right through my hands.

"Fuck!"

The world tilts, skies becoming the ground and rock faces reflecting the faint moonlight instead of the stars.

My side takes the brunt of the fall, knocking the wind out of me and stealing the cry from my lungs as my body glints off one surface only to hit another.

Then another.

Gathering my bearings is impossible as I tumble deeper into the forest's clutches.

This is fucking it. This is how I die.

No one will fucking find me out here.

Even the trunks of trees spread out enough that there is nothing to feel between my fingers, nothing but sharp boulder faces chipped away by time

and the elements.

My calf catches, the weight of me moving too fast, and I feel the snap before I can register what it means.

Body whipping around, the rock face releases its hold on me.

And for a moment, I'm suspended.

Nothing but me and the air to capture my battered body before the ground finally catches up, and I land with a splashing thud.

Water rushes over me, covering my face, with a promise to wash away the stain of me from its surface with a bruising force that bashes me into everything the river has already claimed.

I'm gasping, gulping for any chance at air and flapping my arms wildly to keep my head above the foamy tide that rolls and crashes, breaking only for the pieces of earth strong enough to stand against it.

Kicking my legs is like using a toothpick to stop an avalanche, my right gone too numb to know what the fuck it's doing and for a moment, I question what the fuck I'm fighting so hard for.

This life hasn't been anything I've ever wanted it to be.

There's no memories flashing. No good thoughts or hopes of making it home.

I never had a home.

Or a person worth making one with.

My family is all gone, in prison, or incapable of believing anything outside of the traditional dynamic is acceptable to live a full life.

The friends I once had left when I hopped into Henry's bed.

They told me, tried to warn me.

I wish I'd seen it then. I would have saved myself so much fucking time and pain.

Yet, I'm here, barely breathing and beaten to shit, washing up on the shore of some river in the middle of the fucking mountains. Alone.

Always. Alone.

I finally crawl onto the rugged bank with shaking limbs and collapse in a heap. My glasses are long gone, and one of my hearing aids is missing.

I'm trembling, the air too cold against my wet skin.

"F-f-fuck."

My teeth chatter, vibrating in my pounding skull as I drag myself out of the water the rest of the way and crumple.

I can't seem to catch my breath through the trembling, the cold only worsening with each second that I lay here in soaking clothes.

Tearing the rest of them away, not that there's much left to begin with, I get to my leg and freeze.

Jutting out from the side of my shin, through my pant leg, is fucking *bone*.

White and jagged, jarring enough that even through my shitty eyesight, I can make it out in the dark.

I lurch to the side and vomit all over the stones next to me.

And when the wave of nausea subsides, the spit I let fly only burning with the sting of leftover bile, my sight narrowing in on the *wrongness* once more, I scream.

It echoes back the pain I feel and then ...

The mountain screams back.

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CHAPTER 30

Shannon

WATER LAPS AT MY face and a ray of sunlight peeks through the gorge and reflects off the surface, a contrast to all the bullshit that landed me here.

Not once did I manage to pass out.

Even as I used what I could find to immobilize the fracture in my leg, it's like I left my own body and watched from the outside, guiding my hands to fashion the splint it's in now. It won't hold for long, the branches held together with my shoestring and thin roots.

Not that I could walk on it either way.

Gravity alone might cost me my leg entirely.

I checked for a pulse in my foot, something I know to do thanks to the research I did for one of my older books—one with an EMT main character—and nearly fainted from relief when I found one.

But I know that it's only a matter of time before that fades.

This is beyond bad.

“So very fucking bad.” Even my voice doesn't sound like my own. Monotone and out of any shits to give, even as I push myself to sitting.

Not that I could explain why I feel the need to. Anything I do at this point is just... prolonging the inevitable.

I am going to die out here.

Whether it's ten minutes from now or ten days.

I can't walk, let alone climb back out of this fucking gorge I've fallen into, it's endless appearance stretches for miles in both directions.

There's no one around to hear me scream. At least, no one that's close enough to come running so far, and no way to call for help.

My phone is lost to the forest, a sacrifice to the gods among the trees and rot.

I'll be next.

Still, instead of overflowing with fear, I find that I'm numb. Completely lacking in hope.

There's no profound meaning found in the calming rapids next to me, or radiating positivity from a poster on an office wall that comes to mind.

It's just this.

Moving waters and jagged rock faces, roots winding their way through the cracks in the boulders until they can get high enough to support the weight of their trunks and bodies that reach for the sky. High enough that I can't tell where the sun is, just that it's out now and battling the chill in the air.

It's losing.

Yet, I'm coated in sweat, my skin burning.

"Fever," I mumble and push out a sigh. Dragging in another takes a lot more effort than it should. "Or shock."

Neither is good news, and both mean my options are dwindling.

Do I care to try any of 'em?

The thought alone is enough to have my eyes burning from more than just the misty spray coming off the rushing waters.

Looking around, the scent of damp earth filling my senses, I let it all really sink in.

It would have been beautiful to find a place like this—strong rapids carving out a path just as every human attempts in this life, trees that reach for their dreams in the sky high above. Sharp rock walls a testament to what it took to make this place.

I wish I could make out more of the details.

See the place clearly.

Know that even though my life has been mediocre at best, there was still beauty to be found in it.

It's really the perfect place for it all to end.

Gods, I really wanted so much more.

I never got anything I wanted in this life.

I starved for my art that never got the chance to feed me, sacrificed for love that never came back to me.

Wetness tracks down my face, my chest tight with the sob that's lodged there.

This is my penance, isn't it? The price I pay for all the things I didn't do... All the wrongs I never made right.

My lip trembles with my shaky exhale.

Tears drip down my chin and splash against my chest as I look up in search of any speck of the great blue beyond that peeks through the natural canopy.

"I'm not ..." My voice is thick and dulled, cracking through the singular hearing aid I've got left, "I'm not fucking ready."

Flat hand rotating over my bare pec, one finger stuck bent and probably broken, I beg whatever higher power might be out there listening.

Please don't let me die yet.

Not like this.

I shouldn't have run so far in the dark, on my own and away from—

"Ilios."

His name is sharp and bitter on my tongue.

My lungs fill with what feels like the first satisfying breath I've taken since I walked into these fucking woods to find him. The rush of it leaves me reeling, and I fall flat on my back to stare up at the shades of green.

It's almost... comical.

The thing that I came here to let go of might be the one thing that can save me.

How the fuck did I end up here?

There's a disbelieving chuckle on my breath as I repeat his name, silently cursing him and myself as I dig the heels of my palms into my eyes.

All you have to do is let me in.

The reminder has me dropping my arms onto the pebbles on either side of me, opening myself up as far as I can.

I have no idea what it means, what he'll have access to in my head. *If it'll even work.* But I've got to do something. I can't just... rot here.

And losing a leg, even if I manage to get out of here, is not on my bingo card for this year if I can help it.

Which is exactly what will happen if I don't get this shit looked at.

Dragging in a deep breath, I scream.

His name, for help, for anything and everything I can think of to bring him to the forefront of my mind.

It's desperate and pathetic, and I'm admittedly terrified it's all been one big trip—that I stumbled out here on my own and imagined it all. That this entire thing has been one big ass hallucination.

Hell, I don't know how he'd be able to find me, or get to me, if any of this works.

Does he have super strength?

Fucking whatever, we'll figure it out if he shows up.

And judging by the searing ache that shoots across from one temple to the next, I won't be the forest's prey much longer.

Just a monster's instead.

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CHAPTER 31

Shannon

SWEAT COATS MY SKIN, and shivers wrack my body.

I'm somehow burning up and freezing at the same time.

"Gods, just let me pass out."

It would be better than laying here in the gravel of a riverbank with a busted leg and waning sunlight. It's been hours of begging, pleading for my life while my head feels like it's cracking wide open with the pain of it.

Long enough that my vision is swirling and my mind feels foggy, like I could lose consciousness at any moment.

The numbness started in the tips of my fingers and toes, and now has spread up my limbs.

It's only a matter of time now, and I'll be toast.

That's what I get for believing in fairytales.

"Ilios, if you can hear me..." Not that *I even* can, my lone surviving hearing aid died hours ago. "*Please.*"

Wind howls through the gorge that'll become my grave, rippling over the water and bringing with it a glow of sorts. Warm. Something close to how a hug feels after a long day rather than a physical heat. A coziness that has my eyes sliding closed and my body relaxing.

I'm still trembling, but less.

Embraced by the earth and what's probably the end.

If this is it, it's not a bad way to go.

Serenity settles in, easing the ache in my bones, and I am weightless.

Gusts waft around me, spreading that comfort, and I peel my eyes open one more time.

I'm greeted by a scarred cheek and glowing feathers.

Must be heaven.

An angel, come to rescue me from this mortal plane and carry me to what's next.

I never would have thought I'd make it past the pearly gates because I didn't believe in that stuff but... There's no mistaking it now.

Even if it's all just in my head. At least here, I won't die in the dirt.

Instead, it'll be in the arms of someone that has to love me and care for me as it's their duty.

"What's your name?" I feel the slur to the words, though I can't hear them and *shit*. That means I can't hear the answer either. But does that mean I'll still be deaf in the afterlife?

Too weak to ponder any further, I let myself go slack in the arms of my savior with a new hope blossoming in my heart.

Maybe the damned get a chance after all.

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CHAPTER 32

Ilios

HE SLUMBERS FOR DAYS.

My beloved is broken, his human body too weak, and a worry I have never experienced creases my brow.

He may not wake.

“Do not think such things,” I snap at the smoke collecting over my shoulder, observing as I do, though I feel the salivation in my extension’s presence. It’s a contrast to my own concern, embodying the growing hunger of my cursed nature.

He’ll not survive the night.

I rip my gaze away from Shannon’s limp body, from the site where I reset his bone, with a deep ache in my chest.

“Why must this offering be so *feral*?”

Resisting, running as he did is what destroyed his limb, made him sick.

You didn’t show him the way.

I slash my talons through the swirl of darkened air beside me, dissipating it only for it to reform.

Stop playing with my food.

The grit of my jaw and the grinding of my teeth do nothing to deter the thoughts from filling my head, reminding me of what must come.

You’re running out of time.

“Time is the only thing I have.”

Even as the cycle ends, I know it must repeat, time and time again until I sire an offspring to take my place or dismantle the cursed loop on my bloodline.

Pay the penance, or pay the price.

Raking my eyes over Shannon's body, the sheen of perspiration coating his sallow skin and dampening the curly strands at his temples... It feels like succumbing to more than the usual punishment.

I find myself more drawn to him than I already was, seating myself close to him, perching on the edge of the bed to be within his reach at every possible moment.

My fingertips tingle with the need to touch, to swipe away the droplet rolling down his brow and toward his ear.

He looks different without the spectacles resting on his nose or the devices behind his ears. The former I understand, the latter I do not. They seem to help increase his hearing, yet not always, and smell of electrical components.

They also bother him.

In his fantasies, he chooses not to utilize them, though he is always surprised when using his hands to communicate is accepted—as if it is unreasonable to his own thoughts that others would learn his ways.

I want to learn his ways.

His language is unlike anything I've seen before and I yearn to know it as he does, to show him how beautiful it is to witness.

Leaning over him, I press my forehead to his in a promise, an oath that can only be broken by time.

Once he wakes, I will let him teach me.

CHAPTER 33

Shannon

I WISH I'D BEEN hit by a semi truck.

It seems like that would hurt less than my body's current state—and it would mean I was closer to civilization. If there's trucks, there's humans. Gas stations. Warehouses and places to dump off the load it's carrying.

Instead, I'm in a bedroom I once made up in one of my many nights of unrest and staring at the deep red eyes of a monster.

I shouldn't even be lucid, all things considered, let alone being expected to do what Ilios is suggesting.

"The fuck do you mean *walk*?" I ask with as much incredulity I can muster up without hearing myself speak. I don't even care if it sounds thick or mumbled or forced. I've earned the right to be frustrated and at this point, Ilios has equally earned catching the brunt of my attitude.

He makes the same movement with his hands.

"Stand. Walk."

They're signs, clearly portrayed as if I'd taught them to him.

"No." The growl vibrates up my throat.

His scarred face falls flat, irritated. "Why."

"I need a hospital, not a fucking walker!" I yell, the words ripping from my throat and my hands in kind.

Ilios is completely unfazed by my outburst, almost bored looking as he watches my arms fling out to my sides.

“Human,” I sign, then point to my leg. “Broken.”

“Walking heals it,” he returns, again in sign language, and *fuck* I hate that watching his black-tipped talons for fingers flutter around in communication is kicking up a flutter in my stomach. I will not fall for it. He will not get to me this way.

“No,” I emphasize again and throw myself back on the bed. “I’d rather rot.”

“Maturity lacks.”

The cutting snipe echoes in my head, his voice replacing my own thoughts, and I don’t miss the fact that I no longer feel pain from his invasions. It’s just his words accompanying mine, tickling the back of my mind and settling into all the crevices left behind.

Lifting a hand, I flip up my middle finger at him.

I hate that he’s *in* me in that way. Seeing what I’m thinking and responding like he has any right to be in here rooting around. Making me see things and waking me when I’d rather be dead.

Should have rotted in that gorge.

Why did I have to bitch out and call for him? I could have figured it out. Crawled my way back if I had to or died there on the river bank where it was quiet and pretty. And why the hell did the angel leave me with him? Some savior that was, with his glowing wings and campfire scent.

His response shakes the bed I’m on and I roll my eyes.

“Get. Out.”

He only shifts closer, touching me in a feather-light way that has me moving just my eyes to look at him. He’s blurred, the hard edges of him fuzzy from more than just my bad vision, pieces of himself expanding, extending and leaving trails of smoke connecting between us.

Days ago—or maybe months?—I would have cowered in fear and questioned everything I’ve ever known as the smoke thickens around him.

Now? There’s no mistaking that this is real. His touch is tangible. The presence of him is palpable.

I could touch him back if I wanted, and remember it tomorrow.

This is what he was after all along.

Me.

My attention.

Acceptance.

“Why pick me?” I find myself asking in quiet signs and a thick swallow.
“Why me?”

Red eyes jump to mine, the tendrils of his smoke dancing across my skin in soft pokes, and he answers in every way. “You are mine.”

Maybe it’s some sick sense of validation or delusion, a testament to the trauma and blood loss I’ve been exposed to in the last however long, but I... My mind is soothed by his answer.

It’s innocent.

Fucked up word to describe a legend of the mountains, I get it. Though Ilios has never been malicious or had ill intentions. Not toward me, at least.

I don’t think.

It’s never been about control for power.

Instead, it’s protection.

He *cares*.

This is how he knows to do it.

Has anyone bothered to teach him any different? Or have they just been too afraid to get close to him?

Gods, I hate that I’m attempting to understand him.

My chest fills with something close to short-lived gratitude when I feel my leg twist and a howl of pain rips from my throat.

“You were distracted enough to reset it. Apologies.”

“Oh, *fuuuck* you!”

Labored breath scratches my dried throat and Ilios looms over me.

“*That is also on the list of desires.*”

“What? No.” He backs a hair away. “How are you gonna get my ankles above my head if my leg is broken?” I sputter and shake my head when his eyes light up. “No.”

Ilios keeps staring at me like he’d rather eat me alive and I internally curse the way my cock tingles as I push myself to ignore the pain. The shit is radiating up my thigh and settling in my lower back. How my brain can muster the gall to be fucking horny right now instead of passing the hell out is beyond me.

“New ground rules,” I muster, signing to him since he’s so keen on using it back. “No invasions—” I point to my temple, “—unless I invite you.”

“*How will I know it is acceptable?*”

Rolling my eyes, I imagine slamming a door in his face. His brow twitches. “You’ll know.”

Lips pursing, he responds with his hands. “Seems so.”

“How do you know these?” I ask, referencing the way he’s visually communicating and a black-tipped talon touches my forehead.

“From you.”

I swear, this man—*monster*—is going to have my vision permanently positioned in the back of my head.

“Of course you did,” I huff, pushing myself to sit again. “*Gods*, my fucking leg hurts.”

The radiating ache is only a reminder of the current situation with no seeming outcome aside from hopes and prayers and I never really have been the praying type.

“My leg needs a doctor,” I tell Ilios. “Or I’m going to lose it. If it’s not already too late.”

He stares at me for what feels like forever, eyes watching my hands move then idle. Long enough that I prepare to sign it again in case he didn’t understand without stealing it from my mind. But he just... stares. Eyes flicking from my limbs to my eyes, watching as I repeat it.

A sweat breaks out on my skin, the shivering following close behind.

“I will mend you,” he finally signs.

I’m shaking my head before his hands finish, and it makes me dizzy. “A *real* doctor. And antibiotics.”

Just as I’m not listening to his bullshit, he’s not listening to mine either, and I feel the pressure of his grip on my shin. The whole thing feels like there’s shards of glass beneath my skin, ready to bust through at any moment, and I can’t hold back the cry that wedges in the back of my throat. Tears spring to my eyes. My nose even runs.

If I could jerk away from him, I would.

But his hold is strong. I’m too weak, and that smoke that always seems to follow him around is right there. It curls around me in places, some restrained, but mostly... comforting.

I don’t want to focus on it, to lean into it.

Right now, I have no choice.

This... *extension* of him was in my nightmares. Forming into something more than a hazy essence.

This time it’s warm to touch, and almost soft.

Not nearly as terrifying now as it was then.

Fuck, I’m not scared at all.

Not of Ilios, at least. Or his smoke daddy attributes.

I'm more scared of the cold sweats I have and whether or not the shaking is an indication of an infection settling in that guarantees I'll leave this forest minus a foot.

If I leave at all.

I'm beginning to think the offerings and sacrifices that the town falls prey to is for more than just the show of it all. The legend to tell the kids that travels through the generations long enough to erect a statue in its honor.

Maybe it's not Ilios at all that's to blame for the bad shit that happened here, but the mountains. The forest.

I didn't pick Bearcreek, but maybe it chose *me*.

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CHAPTER 34

Ilios

THE HUMAN MAKES NOISES he cannot hear, his discontentment painted clearly on his pinched face.

“It is sustenance,” I press, both aloud and along the connection between our minds, though he resists me. Continuously. It has become infuriating. “Eat.”

His eyes dull even farther, his petulance ringing loud through his grunting noises and crossed arms. Defiance, if I have ever seen it, is a terrible color on my human. One that has an urge awakening inside me to force him into submission, though I resist it for the time being.

“You are weak,” I remind him and press the bowl closer to his face to which he scoffs.

Then flips his middle finger at me.

This one I have seen used by the humans before. It is not a nice gesture.

Curling my lip at him, I shove my fingers into the thick, sticky offering and scoop a hearty bite’s worth onto the tips of my talons.

I toss aside the bowl and grab my human’s jaw with my free hand, sharp-tipped fingers pressing into his soft, fleshy cheeks.

“Open.”

He clamps his lips shut and shakes his head as best he can with my unrelenting grip on his face.

The hummed response is clearly more rejection of me and my hospitality, and I find myself posturing, shoulders stiffening and skin tightening.

Patience waning.

He has no reason to fear my offerings and yet, he continues to do so.

Pressing it closer makes him squeeze his eyes shut.

"You need strength."

He hums again, shaking his head against my hold, pulling and yanking in an attempt to free himself. I hold him tighter.

"You must ingest."

"It's poison, I know it," he fires back, spreading his lips with barely enough space to get the words out, and I take the chance to shove the bite between them. He chokes, sputters, and spits it back in my face.

The scent of honey coats me, stickiness sliding down my nose and plopping onto my leg.

"Petulant."

His fingers pry beneath mine to shove me from his face, and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand to rid himself of the mess of his own making "If it's not to kill me, then you eat it."

For a moment, my gaze follows the path of his hands as he tells me this, the fluttering of his limbs distracting me from understanding their meaning.

"You. Eat," he repeats, his signs more forceful than before, and I understand this to be more intense. As if the human is elevating his tone. Yelling, perhaps.

Snarling at his demand, and exhausted from this battle, I swipe the remaining streak of honey from my cheekbone and shove it between my own lips.

I suck the digit clean, then retrieve the bowl of berries coated in more of the nectar.

"Not poisoned," I tell him aloud, sneaking the words past his metaphorically closed mind.

He stares at me, top lip curled up in what I would suggest is disgust, except he cannot hide the rush of color to his face. The reaction that tells me he does not find my actions truly grotesque.

A gap opens in his mind, letting me slip past his barricade once more.

"You find this attractive."

Jolting as if I'd slapped him, my human's eyes flare wide and that gap in his mind slams closed.

"No. Stop. Don't do that."

Simple. Concise. Direct. The signs on his hands are jerky and singular as he conveys this.

However, his face betrays him once more by tinting a rosy red over his cheeks.

It has my smile widening, and I dip my talon into the bowl meant for him once more, coating myself in the mixture of berries and honey that will heal him, and bring it to my lips.

I do not find it difficult to part my own, flicking my tongue out to receive the golden sweetness along my tastebuds.

His breathing intensifies, laboring as he observes me.

Cleaning my talon under his supervision only serves to make my own groin ache with need, one I cannot address until he obeys me.

"I hate you," he pants out with his lips and his hands in kind.

My low laugh is one I allow to travel over our connection to ensure that he understands it, and his lips part once more.

Tongue poking out, I follow his silent command to feed him.

This time, I use the utensil to scoop a bite and place it between his spread lips.

The moan that radiates up his throat as he swallows is one that I feel in my gut and down to my tightening shaft, one that I am certain he did not intend to make aloud as his tongue darts out to lick his lips.

His eyes are hooded when I feed him another bite, then another. Still, as I crawl closer to his frame and grip his face once more, tilting the edge of the bowl to his lips. He permits the remainder of the meal to slide down his throat with large gulps, barely chewing the coated fruit as it occupies his mouth, and never once shying away from me.

My shaft pulses in acknowledgement of his actions, and I find myself ready to dismiss his injuries for the sake of addressing what this human does to me.

A need from deep within my core erupts, spreading beneath my skin like wildfire as I empty my hands and stare at him.

Slowly, so very slowly, I crawl down the bed, careful of his bound leg.

He watches each movement, enraptured as I secure his bad leg to the bed with my smoke, then lift his good one to make space for me between them.

"More healing," I tell him as I curl my talons around his waistband and tug.

Just as he is in slumber, he is soft. Pliable. Willing to do as I command as his length bounds free from the confines of his clothing.

It is stiff and thick, pointing straight up his belly to his navel, and I wrap my hands around the base to squeeze.

His gasp is audible, lips parting with the sound as I stroke him.

I easily work him over, my motions gentle.

"Fuck," he mumbles, his hands flaring in unreadable forms before they finally settle in my mane. He tugs the strands, directing me closer to the plush crown of his leaking shaft.

My intentions were already set, even if he didn't wish them so.

I would take this from him, whether in slumber or consciousness, as it is what his human body needs to survive. Food, slumber, and to mate—the core things *any* mammal needs to survive.

Allowing himself to feed me his length only serves to make it easier than taking it on my own.

The soft flesh of his tip drools as I close the distance, a shining bead of his pleasure ripe for my taking as I unfurl my tongue and lap at the drop before it can roll down his shaft.

"Jesus Christ," my human snaps, breathless from merely a touch, and tightens his fist in my mane.

His face is the shade of my tailfeathers in full form, red and shimmering in the faint candlelight of the room as I flick my tongue over his round tip. It flexes beneath the touch, begging for more, and I oblige by curving my tongue around him.

He pants heavily, his chest heaving, and his length pulses out another drop of his pleasure.

I take it willingly, lapping at it, pointing my tongue to dip it into the slit at his tip to collect it all.

His length merely produces more of it for me to take, the taste of *human* explosive in my mouth. Like salt and dew and musk. Yet somehow sweeter than the honey I consumed.

Like the cookie.

A mix of all the delicious things humans have created.

I must taste it all.

Encouraged by his sounds, I take the tip of him fully into my mouth and suck.

"Oh, fuckkkkkk," he moans, voice cracking and fingers flexing against the crown of my head.

He presses hard, the demand of me to accept more of his length into my mouth evident, but I resist obliging him.

I want this as it is.

His flavor coats my tongue and his hands plead for more of me.

It is enthralling to hold all the power, even from this angle. To know that retreating would disappoint him, and advancing would excite him. That no matter the direction I choose, I get to coat my mouth with his essence by sundown as my reward.

My barb throbs at the prospect, ready to engage in anything that I give it permission to pierce, and I find myself rutting against the soft bedding below me in search of relief. There is only enough friction to drive me mad as I lap at my human's length, my own weeping for attention.

Still, I suck on his tip, pointed tongue petting the sensitive underside of his length, and pulling the most deprived sounds from his filthy, human mouth.

"Gods, gods ..."

Humming against him in agreement, I take the chance to tap at his mind in the hopes that he would not notice my presence.

If only to see what he feels of me between his legs, his length in my mouth.

Does he wish to bury it in my throat?

My gut twists as the thought rings true, his buried desire a visual of himself rutting against my face, and I oblige by taking him into the back of my throat without warning.

"Fuck!"

His length throbs along my tongue, blunt head ramming into the back of my throat, and with a gulping gasp, my human finds his release.

Rough cries explode from his tongue and echo off the walls, his fists tight to my head.

All the while, I relish in the flavor of every drop he gives me.

It covers my mouth as I had anticipated, and I swallow the sticky slickness with greedy pulls.

I am almost... high off it as he finally stops spurting, his shaft softening between my lips.

"Okay, okay..." he whimpers, slurred, and cups my chin to release himself. His length flops lazily to the side, twitching under my stare.

Already, I feel the urge to take it. Him; mount his hole and claim him as mine. To mark him with the barb that rests below my own shaft and demands a taste of his soft, human flesh.

I must... I must.

His brows pinch as I rise, standing over him with every intention of finding my own release.

The feel of it swirls in my gut, warring with need and desperation to mate, to take what is owed to me. For him to repay my graciousness with his own sacrifice.

My pants are too tight as I arch over him, my essence expanding to shroud the room in a darkness that will certainly steal all of the pleasure my human has taken from my mouth.

Candles snuff out, the darkness taking hold and I release my length to the blackened room.

Stroking myself, I finger the barb at the base of my shaft, pulling a moan from my own throat.

I wish to mount him, to make him mine.

Instead, I resist the urge to flip over his feeble human body and claim what's mine to have, and I pull my release quickly.

It barely scratches the surface of my desire, shooting from my body in angry waves.

"Why must you be so *difficult*," I pant out, knowing he cannot hear.

The veins below my skin respond in kind, pulsing with a glow that I cannot stop as I find my finish in the darkness.

My breathing is labored as I pull the shroud back, calling my smoke to withdraw from the room and revealing the light once more.

And when it does... My essence ... It is sliding down my human's face in thick streaks of white.

Serves him right.

CHAPTER 35

Ilios

THE SALVE HAS RUN its course, bone regrown in a matter of days, but the human expresses concern at using his injured limb for its intended purpose.

“S-T-A-N-D,” I spell out for him in the hand letters I mimicked from his memories. It seems to have a heft to the message if it’s conveyed in this way, accompanied by a deeply drawn brow.

He crosses his arms over his chest defiantly. “You’ll have to carry me.”

“That can be done.”

He arches his brow, a challenge to my words, and I feel the heat blossom along my shoulder blades in response. My wings, seared into my back and buried beneath my skin wish to answer his request, despite the cramped interior we reside in. There’s no need for them, no space to spread them out, yet I wish to show them.

Would Shannon find them as... *useful* as I have?

Clenching my teeth, I reach for him, my talons clasping along the column of his throat before he can retreat from my reach.

His lips turn down, though his eyes betray him by dilating.

He likes this.

I tighten my grip and watch the joy in his expression war with a tinge of fear.

“You like this just as much,” I vocalize, voice not much more than a purr that he watches form on my lips.

The column of his throat bobs beneath my palm with his swallow, his mouth working around the restricted air.

I squeeze tighter.

He emits nothing more than a squeak.

Pulling him close, noses brushing, I press harder along the veins feeding his head the life force it needs to function and it's then that the darkness of fear finally takes over. I watch raptly as the humor bleeds from his irises to make way for the panic.

Survival instinct is what drives him to grab my wrist, clawing at my skin with his blunt human nails, his breath faintly wheezing past my grip.

The power of it ripples through me and despite his instinct to fight me, I can see the truth he attempts to bury deep within himself.

His grappling wanes, the scratching lessening until he's barely holding on, clinging to me. Waiting, savoring each morsel of breath he can muster beneath my strength.

Finally, his eyelids began to sink, threatening to conceal his glazed over irises.

The fight in him relinquishes to me in that moment, submitting to my whim, and the power of it radiates through my being. It settles in my shaft, hardening it enough to have the slit around my barb pulsing with desire.

No, *need*.

To engage in flesh and feel the primal connection that only mates will ever know.

I resist the essential. It proves difficult, but I must pry my hold from Shannon's neck for his own safety—and mine.

These urges... They're massive in the face of my human, dangerous for my beloved to experience so soon.

He needs more faith in himself.

Loosening my grip, he gasps in his first full breath, a moan following close behind.

It's a delightful sound, one I cannot wait to hear him make freely once more.

Releasing him is like the highest of torture, but I must if I am to care for him.

I stand, pulling back the fabric that covers him.

“Come with me,” I tell him in his language. “You must excrete.”

I do not know the way to say the last word with my hands so I spell it, and he jolts.

“Say again.” His brows slam low over his wide eyes. “Repeat.”

Sighing, I turn to him fully and spell it once more. “Excrete. I have fed you, watered you, and you make waste. You must remove it.”

A reddish tinge colors his cheeks and he looks away from me, the blanket clutched tightly to his chest.

What a shame that he forgets the access to himself he’s grated me, of which I will gladly remind him of, piece by piece. He cannot hide, even if he wishes it so.

I click my tongue, tscking both aloud and along the connect he willingly grants me to his mind, and his head whips to me with a scowl painted on his face.

He imagines another slammed door, a projection I can see as clearly as if it were my own thought, and my lips spread.

“I have seen your bones, cleaned your wounds. Claimed your hole. You are *mine*, human, and you will not look away in shame.”

The glaze takes over his eyes once more, his lips dropping open with his labored breath.

Be it a rouse I’ll gladly fall upon for his sake, I shove a talon into his mouth, the nail gnashing over his teeth. His tongue is warm as I pet it, wet and begging for my caress with each stroke over the smooth surface.

It makes my groin ache, my barb throb.

Then, he closes his lips around me, suckling enough to nearly make me release without touching myself.

It’s unlike any experience I’ve ever had. The connection is fierce, the pull too strong as he stares back into my eyes.

Maybe it’s not myself that holds the power after all.

But this human.

My beloved.

Those glazed eyes shift, something I can’t follow as he sucks harder on my talon.

The sound that escapes me is unruly and wild. A call of mating.

He takes me deeper into his mouth, lips wrapping around the flesh that meets the hard nail and for a moment, I see what the great beyond must feel like.

The existence after this one.

It explodes beneath my skin, fluttering like feathers teasing, and I bask in the glow of what's coming.

My release is on the horizon, cresting close enough to taste in the smoky air that I gulp down like a creature deprived and—

He bites me.

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CHAPTER 36

Shannon

I MAY HAVE JUST made the biggest mistake of my life, but I couldn't resist dishing out some of the bullshit that Ilios keeps peddling to me.

His mind meld shit has become too close to pleasurable that I had to do *something*.

Now he's howling loud enough that it hits my chest like a wave, the front of his pants darkening with what has to be cum and gripping my face right back.

The tips of his nails are sharp, though he's managing to not puncture the skin of my jaw and neck despite how hard he's holding onto me.

He convulses, hips jutting into the air.

I've definitely done it now.

Releasing his finger, his arm drops to his side and I inch towards the opposite side of the bed. Maybe he won't open his eyes or notice if I jet outta here. I flick my gaze to the open door, the one I've yet to see the other side of since I was brought in here.

At least, not while I was lucid.

My leg twinges when my feet touch the floor, the ache through my shin making me sink my teeth into my bottom lip to swallow the sound. I hope. It seems to do enough of the job because Ilios hasn't moved. Hasn't stopped humping the air.

Fuck, if that isn't hot.

Examining that thought is for later; now is for escaping.

It's only been a few seconds, but he'll come down any minute and realize that I'm making a break for it—again.

Clearing my mind and forcing a breath as silent as I can muster, I vault off the bed and toward the exit. It hurts to run, and it's probably doing more damage than good, but I can't stop.

I can't stay here.

Not with him, or *anyone*.

I'm a magnet to the toxic, destined to be alone for all eternity or else it'll wreck me.

And Ilios? He's going to wreck me.

For the first time in what feels like months, I let myself remember.

The floodgates open, blocks removed and I *remember*.

All the fights and all the problems I had with Henry rush to the forefront of my mind, building heat behind my eyes.

My own father glowering at me when the tests came back *profound*.

Friends leaving.

Siblings choosing distance.

I deserve better.

One wayward thought and I'm stumbling through the foyer like my life doesn't depend on reaching the exit. I'm near bawling as I rip open the front door that Ilios has carried me through multiple times now. Gasping with a pain so deep in my chest that I might never take another breath again when I hit the tree-lined pathway that leads to my getaway.

And yet, every piece of me screams to turn around and give in to Ilios; to succumb to the fantasy of what he's given me.

He's saved my life.

Learned my language.

Read my thoughts and known what I've needed even more than I, myself, have.

Never once made me feel... *less*.

Which is exactly why I can't stop.

Glancing over my shoulder, the sunlight baring down on the glowing landscape, I see him following me. He's big, bigger than he was just minutes ago, and... *morphing*.

He clears the porch on a leap, wings exploding from his back with sparks flying, and he lifts into the air. It's effortless. Beautiful.

I stumble.

Barely catching my footing, my heart pounding in my chest, I sprint towards the direction I came when I first found this place. It all looks so different now, glittering in the light of day, with a winged creature hot on my heels.

A heat I can actually *feel*.

I have no idea what he'll do if he catches me this time.

The idea terrifies me as much as it excites me.

But do I let that stop me? *Absolutely not.*

Hauling ass, I aim for the path with the flowers that I know will lead back to my truck that I left behind when I wandered in here. If I can just make it there, I can leave and gather my bearings. Go home and shower and do just about anything without the eyes of a monster searing into me.

Just a little farther...

My body halts, legs still kicking except there's nothing to push off from. Air fills the space beneath me as I'm lifted clear off the ground, the gusts of flapping wings disrupting everything around me. It's like a wind vortex leaving everything below me swirling and spinning into oblivion as Ilios lifts me higher.

Talons the size of my head—*bigger*—wrap around my arms, holding me steady despite my swinging. The claws are terrifyingly sharp, and tight around my biceps as he takes us higher and *higher*. So far that my adrenaline bleeds from my being and makes way for the very real possibility that if I fall from this height, it'll kill me.

Maybe that's been his plan all along?

I find myself clinging to him now, my throat vibrating with my shouts, as he flies us just beneath the canopy of leaves and branches, expertly maneuvering us between obstacles.

Everything seems so much larger from up here, mostly wide open for him to navigate through.

Except for a few thick branches he goes through instead of around.

My heart is racing, my throat dry.

Instinctively, I curl my legs up close to my body and make myself smaller. When we finally land, it's on a branch big enough to stand on, maybe even sit, but so high above the forest floor that it makes my stomach turn.

The familiar hum of Ilios's presence tickles the back of my mind as I cling to the branch with both arms.

He doesn't speak—or think, I guess—as he guides my legs to hold on, too. I oblige willingly. I'm a pliable mess, too scared of falling to my death at the hands of my nightmare.

I'm shaking when I feel those same hands shred the shorts I'm wearing and expose my ass. I shiver when I feel the soft, blunt touch of something on my puckered hole.

The bark digs into the skin of my arms as it enters me, slowly stretching my rim in a way that almost makes me forget we're so high up that the air is thinner up here.

I'm engorged by his length, talons digging haphazardly into the flesh of my ass, my hips. It's like I can feel every rigid inch, each ribbed imprint as he takes what he wants from me. What he *needs* from me.

I am helpless, suspended between reality and my worst fear, impaled by this monster.

And I'm dizzy.

From the panic hovering just beneath or the way my spine tingles, I can't tell.

This is... hot. Feral.

Reckless.

The desperate, untamed urge to *fuck* has me meeting each of his thrusts with as much force as I dare, my mind spinning. Fingers clinging. Bark digging into my nails and hands and arms and I—

I come.

The rush of warmth inside me follows, the vibration of Ilios's roar shaking the forest around us.

A pinch I was half expecting engages under my sac, some part of Ilios piercing me like last time and I find that instead of flinching, it's almost... *relaxing*.

It's not nearly as painful as I recall, though there is some burn as he practically *barbs* me.

In the taint.

Again.

With his talons sunk into my ribs, holding me in place.

And I *sigh*.

A full body, melting into the bark, completely forgetting that I'm dangling above the forest floor, breath I didn't know I'd been holding onto.

Slowly, he releases me, withdrawing from my clenching hole, my smile spreading at the same speed as his retreat.

But then he has to go and ruin it by poking into my mind and saying the only thing I've been fucking asking to do since I found him.

I will take you home now.

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CHAPTER 37

Shannon

TRUE TO HIS WORD, Ilios carries me to my truck, stealing the rest of my orgasm high when he leaves me on the bench seat and disappears into the night. His wings even glowed and I'd watched them until he was nothing more than a streak of light across the sky.

I have no idea how long I sit there, half naked and dripping things I don't want to think about on my leather.

When I finally fish my spare glasses from the glovebox and pull the truck from the space, it feels like I'm ripping away a piece of myself, leaving some part of me behind in the woods.

Watching the trail shrink in the rearview mirror has me rubbing at the ache it's leaving in my chest.

I can't, I tell myself over and over.

It's a fairytale.

It'll never be more than that.

I don't deserve any more than that if all I ever do is run away from it. If I can't accept it, how could I possibly ever ask anyone else to? Worse: How do I ever face the real world if I'm carrying around make believe?

Maybe I don't wanna face it anymore.

Using the back of my hand, I swipe away the collection of tears from my face and pull into my driveway a lot faster than I realize. I'm just here...

with another car parked in front of me... the grass mowed and porch light on.

Like I was never really gone.

Or maybe I was never really here to begin with.

I throw on an old hoodie from the truck and lumber up the stairs, considering knocking on my own door just to be certain it's not another ruse. Though, I don't.

Instead, I push my way inside and I'm rushed with warmth. Familiarity. The scent of burnt and sweet slapping me right in the face.

And then it all goes stale.

Henry and his weakly masked grimace is the first thing to compute as he approaches me, hands up like he's going to touch me.

My stomach churns and I jerk away.

His mouth moves like he's speaking and the energy it takes to muster up a response drains quickly. "Hearing aids dead."

I have no idea if the words were audible or comprehensible, but I've lost the ability to give a shit.

My shoulders are slumped when I turn away from him, my steps slow, to find Avery and Morgan sitting on my couch—the one I don't remember buying—and watching it all unfold.

Avery's eyes are wet, his hands moving in words I can't focus on, and his husband looks an awful lot like he's pissed, but not at me. Morgan's sharp stare is aimed at my ex.

Huh.

That's the first time I've thought of Henry in that way, like he's officially passed the point of attempting to respect him by saying things like *former partner*. Or still calling him my current one, even when we weren't.

He was never really my partner at all. He was simply someone along for the ride, using up every part of me that I willingly handed to him.

The truth of it tastes bittersweet on my tongue as I turn back to him, his hair perfectly coiffed and his clothes neatly pressed. Just like always. Like he had no qualms about keeping himself presentable while I was *missing*.

I don't even know how long I've been gone but if the lines of concern etched into Avery's face and the tears in his eyes are anything to go by, it's been long enough that the person I was aiming to spend my life with should be bawling by now.

Did he even try to look for me?

Lifting my hands, I finally sign the words I've been dying to for much longer than I ever realized.

"Stop pretending like you love me and leave. I don't have anything left to give you."

If he doesn't get it, it's on him. Maybe Avery will have mercy on him and interpret for me, but I don't wait to find out.

Instead, I limp my way to my bedroom, where I collapse on the mattress with visions of singed wings fluttering in my mind.

The feathers fall like snow, drifting slowly through my psyche, and a purr fills the back of my mind.

Maybe I choose the fairytale after all.

Exhaustion pulls at me, ready to lead me into the land of dreams only to be interrupted by the weight of another human sinking the mattress beside me.

Cracking open an eye, I find a blurry Avery grinning down at me.

"Henry's gone now. Morgan helped him out."

He's grinning, shaking the bed with his giggles and I can't help but reach up and place a hand on his chest to feel the sound. It feels good to see joy for once. Nice. *Human*.

Flipping him a thumbs up and a botched *thank you*, I let my arm drop back down.

It's like I can feel his eyes on me when I close mine and *hell* if being watched doesn't soothe something in me. I'm so fucking used to it now that it's comforting, even if it is distracting.

I lift my head and blink at him.

"You need a shower," he tells me with his hands, "and then to tell me what happened."

The snort I let loose is automatic and makes Avery grin at me. Then he slaps my ass and climbs off the bed to leave me be.

He may think I've lost my mind once I do tell him, but I can't say that there's not a slight thrill in my stomach as I oblige his demand to wash up. It's the quickest shower I've ever had, the knowledge that I have a friend waiting to hear my stories too encouraging to waste any time.

"I'm so glad you're here," I sign to him on my way to grab a fresh pair of hearing aids. They're my backup set and not as good as the ones that I lost but they'll allow me to converse easier with Morgan around. I'd hate for him to feel left out or for Avery to feel like he has to interpret everything.

Gods, just them being here feels like a weight lifting from my shoulders.
I made friends after all.

It feels so good to know that despite everything with Henry, Ilios, and whatever feverish illusion this may be, I found them.

But as I regale my tales of everything I can recall, from delusions to real life, their faces fall, and Avery's eyes grow wide.

"What? What is it?"

They share a look, and then...

"We called the sheriff when you went missing. She's on her way here."

Blinking, I take a seat on the coffee table in front of them, my knee bouncing.

"Okay, and?"

Avery's swallow is visible, his shoulders slumping in, but it's his husband that responds.

"Once you were found, she says she got orders from the state to remove the threat."

My heart sinks clear through my torso and out my ass. "What's that mean?"

"Backburning the forest."

"But—uh." Words stick in my throat, and I can no longer sit. I'm back to pacing, my mind rolling through all the research I've done over the years for different storylines. "There's no wildfire."

Morgan flits another glance towards an abnormally quiet Avery. "One started about two hours north of here the day you left."

Ringling explodes in my ears and my head spins.

"It's threatening the park," Avery adds softly. "And part of the Oberson territory."

Slowly, the dots start to connect and with each one that does, I get sweatier. More nervous.

I just came from the north.

Anxiety ripples beneath my skin, a renewed wave of restless energy making my fingers tremble.

I may hate how he's affected me, how unnatural it's all been, but ...

"We have to stop them."

CHAPTER 38

Shannon

THE TRUCK ISN'T EVEN in park when I dive from the backseat, the door swinging behind me as I bolt over the pavement towards town center.

Toward Ilios's statue.

His offerings.

The very fountain he resides in that's summoned a crowd of people that look far angrier than I anticipated.

Torches light up the mob in orange dots, bodies packed in tightly enough that it takes pushing through them, stepping on toes and elbowing my way around, to get anywhere near the center where I spot the slicked back pony of what has to be the one in charge.

The sheriff is pointing, a map in her grip when I all but crash into her, interrupting the orders she's barking out.

"I'm Shannon. I'm not missing." It comes out on a pant, my heart in my throat as she pauses on me.

Her light eyes assess me, brows pulling low. "You?"

"Yeah, yeah," I rush out. "You don't have to do this." Gesturing around at the throng of angry townspeople surrounding her and what has to be her deputies judging by the matching brown uniforms, perspiration blossoming on my brow, I all but beg her. "Please. He didn't do anything wrong."

"He?"

The nod of my head is so enthusiastic that my curls fall into my face. “He. *Ilios*.”

Her brows hit her hairline and she does nothing to contain the burst of laughter that escapes her thin, pale lips. “And here I thought that we were naming wildfires after where they originated. Calling them “she” after the amount of damage they leave behind.”

I blink at her, my own brows pulling down tight. “You can’t backburn the forest. There’s a—*something*—that lives in there.”

She doesn’t bother to hide her eyeroll, either. “Son, these parts are full of stories, animals. All kind of nature. Ain’t a single one of ‘em worth losing our town again.”

Again...

My stomach bottoms out, palms slicking as she whirls away from me and starts barking more orders to the overly eager deputies. Two of them break off and disappear into the crowd, and my stomach knots.

“Ma’am, *please* listen to me.”

Grabbing her arm makes her freeze in place, gaze locked on where I grip her elbow. I drop it immediately. The last thing I need is to be caught up behind bars while there’s a wildfire raging out there, while *Ilios* is all alone and has no idea that the town he’s been a legend in for gods know how long is planning to take everything from him.

Maybe even him with it.

“Please,” I ask again, hands signing out of habit. “There’s someone out there, living in the woods. We have to make sure he’s out.”

Shaking her head, the sheriff sighs. “We’ve already evacuated the area because of the smoke. I’m sorry, son. There’s nothing else I can do.”

Time slows to a crawl as she pats my arm apologetically before folding into the moving crowd. Bodies flow around me, leaving me standing next to the marble version of the monster that’s been everything I ever wanted.

The man.

The one I ached for much longer than even I knew.

I can’t lose him, not like this.

I’m running before Avery can stop me, my feet beating the ground with each step like it deserves the punishment. The fear that’s unleashed inside me sticks in my throat, choking me.

Not like this.

My shin burns, another reminder of Ilios and his care that kept me alive when I was ready to hang it all up and let the mountains have me just like they had him and isn't that the crux of it all?

Find the thing you need and let it destroy you.

And Ilios is exactly what I needed.

Somehow, among the daymares and mind poking, I found the voice I'd lost a long time ago. The ability to shut him out when I never could cut off anyone that didn't instigate it on their own.

I run, not just toward the intentional brushfire being set, but to the version of myself that only someone like Ilios could have mined from beneath the depths in which I'd buried it; to him and his flaming wings formed of seared feathers that carried me home.

Never once did he make me feel like I couldn't compare. That I wasn't good enough to chase or stalk or watch.

"To him, I was good enough."

A wave of heat rushes me, the night sky alighting in a sickening orange that leaves me coughing from more than just the smoke that trails ahead.

Like a moth, I flock to the flickering lights that draw me in, waiting for their chance to take their licks at my skin.

Emotional. Irrational. Illogical. It's everything that Henry had called me, yet is exactly what's driving me to walk right into the flames overtaking the forest around us. I'm just... ready. Let the heat consume me. It's the only thing that's ever made any fucking sense.

To recognize the difference between feeling the burning and being on fucking *fire*.

And being with Ilios... it's set me ablaze.

Scorching me until there's nothing left except for the ash to rise from again.

Better. Stronger.

In love.

And isn't that worth igniting for?

EPilogue

Shannon—18 months later

WAKING UP ON AN ordinary Tuesday, alone and in my Chicago apartment, probably shouldn't feel as freeing as it does.

But my smile is wide as I stretch out the rest from my limbs and pad across the studio I call home with my phone in hand. On it is the email I've reread probably a hundred times by now, a contract already signed, and my future laid out.

It feels good. Right. To finally have the thing that I didn't believe would ever come.

Almost a year ago, I put pen to paper and wrote down everything that happened to me when I was in Montana. From the barb to the wings, the fire to the friends. It all went into the story of a man that falls in love with a legend of the mountains that all ends in a pile of ash. It was completely off genre for the readers I started out with and lacked the happily ever after that's required to call it my usual, but posting about it went viral, demands for the story too big to ignore, and I published the book when I made it back to Chicago.

Though that's not the only thing that clicked into place when I came home.

My phone buzzes with a reminder that has my cheeks aching from the smile I can't seem to tamper.

Coffee, 9 am.

That left me just enough time to shower, dress, and comb my hair back before heading out the door to meet up with a former school pal of mine. She's an independent author, too, and there's been talks of a cowrite that has excitement buzzing beneath my skin.

Avery thinks it's a great idea and swears he'll read it.

It even starts around a campfire, stories of the legends we never knew being passed around between pals.

And after that, I have a weekly call with my sister. Turns out, being in a relationship with a piece of shit will cause more trouble than you could ever realize and sticking with said POS puts a real hindrance on the people that do care about you. *Who knew?* I'm still working through some shit with the rest of my family, but I can at least count on my sister to be supportive.

I missed her more than I let myself realize.

Which is just another thing that I've learned does no good when it's bottled up and held so tightly: Not even the person with the feelings knows what's going on.

Ilios taught me that.

A sharp pang tweaks in my chest, and for a second, I let myself feel the pain with my head tipped back and my eyes closed.

It makes me feel like he's still around, even if it's for the briefest moment in time. *Somewhere*, beginning his cycle all over again. Waiting for the right moment for me to find him in the next phase.

Glancing around my apartment, I can't help but sign the ache out loud.

"I wish you were here."

I blink, clear my throat, then toss a jacket on and head out the door.

The walk to the café for the meet up with my new-old friend is short and brisk. It's Fall, and I feel like I can finally enjoy one of my favorite seasons for the first time in a decade without the weight of judgement pressing down on me. There's no ex to sneer at me or fake acquaintances to judge me.

Pumpkin spice flavored everything and apple picking is all in the very near future for me. Hell, I've even got a new cookie recipe tab still open in the background on my phone, just waiting to be tested out. It's a cranberry, white chocolate kind that sounded incredible. Anything except chocolate chip.

There's even a load of autumn and Halloween decorations on order. Just a few on their way to me since my apartment is so small and it's just me, but

I'm fucking excited.

Nervous ... but excited.

Steeling myself with a deep breath, I head into the café and go straight to the counter. There's a text on my phone from my pal telling me she's running late and to order without her, which is totally fine. I could use the hit of caffeine to wake myself up a bit before we dive into working out the plot lines we've discussed.

I would have to say that I'm genuinely... *happy*. Whole. Cracking into a version of myself I never thought I'd live long enough to actually see, let alone feel. Don't get me wrong, I miss the shit out of being creeped on and I'd rather not be eternally single, but I'm good.

Armed with a PSL and a chocolate croissant, I find myself a standing table with a view of the entrance to set up shop. The place is small, quaint, and makes a solid cup of joe that has gotten me through a lot of all nighters in the past few weeks. It's got a vibe similar to Avery's bakery that makes me miss him, and I shoot him a text telling him as much. That he should come visit soon. His reply is almost immediate but it goes unanswered when the entrance opens and the back of my neck tingles from the shift in the air.

It almost feels charged.

Thick.

Like smoke.

But it's not.

My stomach clenches out of habit.

And the person that walks in is just some guy in a hoodie who's face I can't see from here.

The breath I let loose is heavier than I was expecting, my shoulders slumping too easily as he makes his way to the counter without bothering to remove his hood.

Shaking myself out of it, I wrench my gaze away from his back, returning it to the tablet I'm setting up for when my pal arrives.

At least, that's what I pretend to do, all the while glancing up to see if I can catch sight of something familiar on the new patron.

There's only a few others that were in here when I arrived, most since come and gone, but there's just something about *him* that's got me on edge and tingling.

That feeling in the back of my mind just refusing to let it go.

The familiar hum sitting backseat to the memories that still haunt me occasionally.

My phone vibrates against my arm, the flashing light reflecting off the table and tugging at my attention. Torn between ignoring it in favor of watching the stranger's back as he moves to the pick up spot at the end of the counter, or pick it up and risk missing any chance I have of verifying that what I feel isn't what I think it is, I flick my gaze from one to the other. With my lips pressed into a flat line, the phone wins and I pick it up to find a message about a rain check from my author pal.

Train's late. Not enough time.

The relief that washes over me has my thumbs stumbling over the keyboard, forcing me to type the same "no worries" text three times before it's legible enough to send.

Trembling still when I drop the device to the table. It must make enough of a clatter amongst the general noise of the café because when I finally glance up, he's turning around.

Oh, fuck, he's coming closer.

Bright red eyes lock on mine, wisps of red hair peeking out from beneath his hood.

The scar I'd recognized anywhere is right there, lighter than last I recall, but sure as shit trailing from beneath his eye to end right above his mouth.

"This seat taken?"

I read the spoken words on his lips clear as fucking day because I'm staring *right at them*.

His head finally tilts when I lack all response, my brain too fried to do anything but flounder, and I feel the vibration of my discomfort radiate up my throat.

"Sorry," I sign. "I'm Deaf."

The softening of his features comes only a moment before he sets his cup down on my table, tilting his hood back enough to show a messy bun of blood red hair and points to a familiar bud in his pierced ear.

My stomach swoops right out my asshole.

Then he lifts his hands to respond.

"I asked if this seat was taken?"

EPilogue 2

Ilios

MARBLE PILLARS STRETCH TOWARD the sky, towering well above the heads of patrons that come to drop their trinkets and gifts. The pillars are as wide as ten men each, erected with enough strength to withstand the gods it houses, and trail along mosaic tiles that go as far as the eye can see.

There is no part of it that does not reflect the brilliant rays from the sun and the mist of the morn, glistening in the early light of day like the surface of the water solidified.

It is a sight I would consider beautiful on an average day; far more worthy of my attention than the meager sacrifices placed at my feet.

Pieces of meat, hunks of cheeses, gourds of honey and goblets of Ambrose I fully intend to partake in once the sun settles beyond the horizon.

None of them draw my eye this day as they have for all others.

Thus, my gaze is upon the being that places fresh ones there as if he is one of them. There is nothing familiar about him or his gait as he leaves the food before me. Nothing that suggests he is of the same kin.

His robes are slightly disheveled and ill fitting, swaying around each of his steps to collect the dirt in his path. They're unwashed and unkempt.

He reeks of peasant and yet, I sense he is not one.

The hair upon his head is as wild as the gleam in his eye when he catches me staring.

Where one might cower, he does not.

Others may scamper away, deflect my pointed gaze, or voice an apology.

This one does nothing of the sort.

Merely, he stands taller with his body squaring as if to prepare for more than just my gaze upon him. He straightens as if readying himself for a fight.

“What is your name?” I ask him, voice thundering about the great hall I call my home.

My guest tucks his woven basket beneath his arm and holds his hands before him. Dangling. Innocent.

His voice conveys none such things. “I am from the outer lands. I have no name.”

Narrowing my gaze upon him, I crook a finger in his direction to summon him closer, though he does not follow the instruction. “You bring offerings with no name?”

The blue of his irises, the kind that rivals the evening sky, dips momentarily to the bench littered with everything a man could wish for on his darkest night. Enough food to feed armies and plenty of drink to imbibe for weeks on end.

With a flare to his eyes and a bravery to his step, he approaches on his own terms. “You bring them peace. I do not judge.”

“Lies.”

He quickly brushes his bristle aside, though not quick enough to be missed. He masks it with nonchalance, making the air surrounding him that much sweeter. A treat to the senses, his scent, like fire roasted desserts.

“I was told I must,” he offers instead, quieter now than before.

Quite honest of him to say these things directly to me without fear, and I find myself drawing toward him. The form of it on his tongue leaves a tingle to my groin, one I do not intend to ignore.

He is unlike any mortal that has graced my hall before him.

“At will, you bring these things to me, yet they are no different than the others.” I gesture to everything along my altar, his items appearing lost to the collection, though I could pick them in a beat of my heart. “Why bother?”

For a moment, he falls silent, contemplative as he stares at the floor. Then his shoulders square and his blue eyes lock on mine. A challenge swirls in

them, calling to me with something grander than his voice. "I was told this would be enough to satiate you."

Humming, I rise from my throne, the gold adornments reflecting more of the early light and casting a long shadow across his face. Slowly, his features soften, then fall, at the realization of my ever-growing size.

He blanks altogether when I straighten to my full height, wings fluffing up and flaring out to stretch, blocking out the light completely. Darkened by my shadow, it is the first time the mortal appears to find his nerves. He does his best to dampen the trembling, but I see it. I see everything.

"There is no food or drink that can sate me, mortal." I tell him with a rumble. "Only flesh."

Once more, he astonishes me.

Most humans would start running, collapse to my feet with pleas screaming from their lips, or perhaps purge themselves on my marble floors out of pure fear.

Not him.

This one... He withdraws a blade from his belt and drops to his back foot, assuming guard. "Challenge accepted."

My smile spreads, feathers ruffling at my back. "Indeed, it is."

The brawl in his blood drains expeditiously despite the contact he makes to my face. It's his only attempt that lands, the slice splitting my skin from brow bone to lip. The warm trail of my essence leaks down my chin, staining my smile.

What a grand smile it is.

The human looks worse, I can guarantee.

Despite the darkness blooming across his exposed skin in spots the size of my fist and his panting breath, the clear defeat before him, he refuses to submit.

"Interesting," I chide, circling him on light feet, my wings pointed and prepared.

Not once does he let me out of his sightline, tracking me over his shoulder and back around to his front.

His robes have torn, exposing his sun-warmed chest and the muscles he was hiding beneath. The skin appears smooth and I find myself itching to touch it. Lick it. Mark it with more than my deflection of his blows.

"Not interesting," he snaps out, raising his blade once more, preparing to battle despite the wear upon his face. "Anything but interesting."

My breath expands my chest, my lips spread wide. “Oh, what fun I will have with you.”

Tipping the blade my direction, he taunts me. Encourages me. He should do no such thing.

I launch for him, my talons hooking and squeezing his feeble throat.

The glint of his blade echoes off the tile at my feet, forgotten to the assault of my hands that make his eyes bulge.

Nerves returned, he grips me.

I feel it in my loins.

And then he speaks, lips glinting off mine with their proximity, his blue eyes alight like the flames that warm my chambers.

“Do your worst.”

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Bear With Me ...

If you enjoyed Avery and Morgan, and peeped that sideways look, check out their low-angst, bear shifter romance only available on my site [here](#).

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Recourses

IF YOU OR ANYONE you know is experiencing anything like what Henry put Shannon through, please know that you are not alone. Partners of any kind should never get a pass to treat anyone with anything less than respect, for any reason. Below are a few recourses I hope you never need.

US [National Domestic Violence hotline](#) 1.800.799.7233

US [Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#)

And for other resources, check out places like [PELAG](#) or [The Trevor Project](#) for a wide variety of support.

Many states in the US have local shelters and charities that are only a google search away. But if you are in immediate need of help, call 911 in most places, even outside of the US or 988 (the suicide and crisis lifeline for the US).

Your life and happiness matters.

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AFTERWORD

ITS FINALLY FUCKING HERE!

Seems so odd to say that after waiting so long for this book to release. It has been quite the trip to write with so many twisty turns and teeth and talons. Did you catch the Easter eggs? Could you tell when Shannon was dreaming vs not? This book was quite the mindfuck and I hope that you enjoyed every second of Ilios toying with all of us.

If there are any mythology buffs in here, then you may have caught the super loosely inspired elements of Apollo and Hyacinthus. The jilted lover of the prince that killed him out of jealousy and rage, causing Apollo to turn his lost lover into the flower that's suggested to be the hyacinth we know today. While Henry was not as successful in his attempt to off our baby Shannon like Zephyrus was, the healing and obsession of Ilios was largely inspired by that story. The flowers outside the mansion in the woods were hyacinths. The dream woods that Shannon kept falling into was the covered with them.

Apollo is also the where some suggest the legend of the phoenix began—hello god of light and healing. And while I didn't want this to be a retelling exactly of the many Greek Apollo myths, there are definitely elements that are reflective of those tales if you look hard enough. Like that statue in the middle of town. The Ambrose at the end ...

And well ... I'll leave the rest of the interpretation up to you ;)

If you loved this book (or even if you didn't) please leave a review. These help other readers that might enjoy the book find it and mean the world to indies like me that rely mainly on word of mouth to get our books out there. And if you *did* like the book, my writing style, please take a look at my backlist! <3

As far as acknowledgements, I want to thank the Mayhem crew for letting me come back, and for being amazing to work with. To Bree for always being a good listener and pal. To Rob for making sure Shannon was a good representation of the HoH community, and to Sarra and Rae for helping me make this book what it is.

And to Danny for always being there.

Thanks for reading <3

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This is a *monster romance* with dark themes, heavy topics, and meant for those over the age of 18.

The following may contain spoilers. Read at your own risk.

- Domestic Abuse
- Verbal Abuse
- Isolation
- Noncon / Dubcon
- Somnophilia
- Mentions of fire & wildfire
- Mentions of cheating (NOT between MCs)
- Gaslighting & manipulation
- Fear Play
- Forced amnesia / memory blocking
- Lapses in time
- Pain and trauma surrounding hearing loss / hearing devices

- Nightmares / daydreams
- Monster & Human pairing

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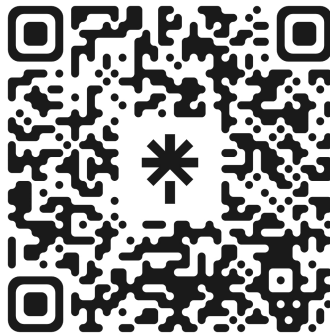
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rae absolutely hates writing in third person about herself, so if I'm not writing, I'm probably at a concert with Mr. Stone. Or building a playlist. Or buried in ploy bunny hell, and it's totally fine because I never want to come out.

Wanna connect? Find Rae on socials, and all of Rae's books, by clicking or scanning below!



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